

Managing and controlling wild cycling trails

Introduction - the scope of this guidance

This guidance covers the management of areas of forest, woodland, heath or open space where unplanned and unauthorised mountain bike trails or features have been created. It considers the complex issues involved and offers various strategies for managing them. It forms part of guidance for managers on planning, constructing and managing mountain bike facilities.

What are 'Wild Trails'?

'Wild trails' are defined here as unofficially constructed cycle trails established without the permission or knowledge of the land owner. Often, these trails have been created on land owned by the Forestry Commission, which has taken the lead in developing guidance to help in managing the issue.

Wild trail problems are increasing in some parts of the UK and in many instances no group or individuals can be identified to take responsibility for these sites. Where significant development has not been challenged early on, the land owner has had to take on responsibility for the facilities when they have become well established with users. Such facilities may create an additional burden for the land owner, as well as increasing the risk of injury and claims inherent in such provision. This sort of activity usually increases in spring and school holidays and may need more resources to deal with it during these times.

However, removing these facilities may be equally burdensome and may prompt users to start building trails in areas of forest or woodland previously free of wild trails and potentially less suitable or more sensitive than the original site. Removal carries reputational risks as users become more vocal in the media, on the internet and by phone/e-mail. Dealing with complaints can be difficult, diverting and demoralising and takes up valuable staff time.

Examples of wild trails:





Why can wild trails be a problem for land owners?

There can be many reasons:

- it is illegal to interfere, alter or construct on land assets that are owned by others without their consent;
- it may have an adverse effect on the property, for example by altering land drainage patterns or causing damage to trees;
- it may cause damage to habitats or disturb wildlife in sensitive sites;
- it may cause damage to archaeology or cultural sites;
- it can disrupt routine management practice;
- it may be a hazard to others – staff, contractors and other legitimate visitors; or
- it may pose risks to those building or using the unauthorised trail and its features.

For land owners and managers, the main duty of care is to people who unwittingly wander into an area of an unauthorised trail, whether on foot, bike or horse. However, trying to stop this type of activity may drive it further underground, making it more difficult to manage and much more dangerous for those taking part.

The first step is to establish whether you have wild trails on your land. Your staff may already have a good idea where these trails are, but they can also obtain useful information from

other land managers, local mountain bikers, and clubs or bike shops. It is useful to note down all of the information obtained together with dates and any immediate actions taken. Always map the location of these areas so that others can see and use the information.

Your policy towards wild trails

You need to decide what your policy is if you find unauthorised wild trails on your land. You have the option to ignore their presence or to remove them, but there are likely to be problems with either of these courses. This guidance assumes that your general approach is to accept that wild trails need to be managed, and explains how this can be achieved.

Remember that you have a duty of care to your visitors, and you need to consider how they can be affected by the use of unauthorised wild trails. Your duty of care is arguably greater to visitors than to anyone intentionally using the wild trail. It is more important to protect the walker, cyclist or horse rider who may be hit by a speeding or uncontrolled bike than to protect the bike rider, who is generally understood to have accepted the inherent risks of the activity. Your duty increases if the visitor is using a facility that you have provided, for example, if the walker is on a way-marked trail.

There are several different ways of dealing with unauthorised trails, and there is no single right answer. A logical process is helpful when making decisions. Once you have accepted the need to manage wild trails, there are several practical steps that you can take:

- arrange, if possible, to meet the builders and users to try and assess their views;
- decide whether you want to stop use of certain trails and features and whether this is possible;
- decide how sites will be managed;
- implement a management strategy;
- monitor the effects.

You need to be positive in your approach. You may need to say 'no' to further new 'green field' development and to adopting trails of this type, but you need to base this on a reasoned approach and consider whether this will be achievable. From experience (particularly with the Forestry Commission), the cost of preventing development is often greater than the cost of managing it. You need to take a strategic view, and decide whether your organisation has the resources to manage more of these trails on your land. You should be prepared and able to show why and how you have made the decision to say 'no'.

The first step is to assess both supply and demand. Look at where facilities are currently provided or being developed by other organisations, your partners or informally by other groups. Also, look at the scale of the activity, where the work is being completed and the nature of the volunteer group. You may need to be flexible since demand will change over time, and the ability of voluntary groups will also ebb and flow. In some cases you will have to take a robust line and say 'no' to all development.

There is a growing recognition that there needs to be a strategic approach towards providing facilities within a particular area, for several reasons:

- locally conceived, volunteer self-build trail projects can be time-consuming for an organisation to manage;
- you may need to prioritise your time and investment;
- they can divert maintenance resources from other recreation facilities; and
- it may be better to concentrate your activity in a specific area rather than have lots of smaller facilities.

You need to harness volunteer resources to get the best possible facilities for bike riders. Also, where land managers have made provision for these activities, users and outside agencies have welcomed it.

Deciding which areas are priorities

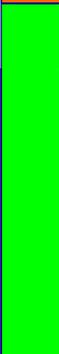
The priorities should be where unofficial trails impact on:

- way-marked trails;
- roads;
- public rights of way.

There are often hidden hazards in unauthorised bike areas that may cause problems for others who wander into the area. Table 1 below will help you set your priorities.

Table 1 - Identifying priorities for management intervention

		Level and scale of unauthorised activity		
Escalation of activity				
		Low unauthorised use	Moderate unauthorised use	High unauthorised use
		<p>Few man-made features</p> <p>Earth, pits and jumps are shallow and visible</p> <p>Natural hazards are not severe and are obvious</p> <p>Route crosses any type of path but visibility for all users is good and/or cyclists are not going fast and/or there is little other use apart from the cycling activity</p>	<p>Some man-made structures, but generally built of earth</p> <p>Pits or jumps are shallow and visible</p> <p>Natural hazards are fairly obvious</p> <p>Routes cross well-used local paths or tracks or less well-used forest roads, rights of way or way marked trails Cyclists will be travelling fast and for one user visibility is poor</p>	<p>Many man-made structures, with hazardous materials such as metal and sharp wood</p> <p>Hazards, stone features, deep pits and jumps are hidden</p> <p>Trails leading to natural hazards may not be obvious – overhangs at the top of steep banks</p> <p>Route crosses well used forest roads, way-marked trails or rights of way. Visibility for both walker and cyclist is poor. Cyclists will be going fast. It may not be obvious that this is not part of your network of trails</p>

		Level and scale of management intervention				
						
 Level of general activity on site		Heavily used area	Low unauthorised use	Moderate unauthorised use	High unauthorised use	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> major recreational site considerable public access, e.g. public right of way other operations / uses urban forest 	Talk to users, alter route or improve the visibility Remove dangerous structures Monitor use during rec. inspections	Talk to users, alter route or improve the visibility Remove dangerous structures Monitor use during rec. inspections	Talk to users, alter the route or improve visibility Remove dangerous structures Monitor use during rec. inspections	
		Moderate / low use				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> some recorded activity and access other operations and uses on going rural forest 	Talk to users, alter route or improve visibility Remove dangerous structures Monitor use informally	Talk to users, alter the route or improve visibility Remove dangerous structures Monitor use informally	Talk to users, alter the route or improve visibility Remove dangerous structures Monitor use informally	
		Very low use				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no recreation facility no right of way no other activity remote forest 	Monitor use informally Remove hazards and dangerous obstacles and structures	Monitor use informally Remove hazards and dangerous obstacles and structures	Talk to users Remove hazards and dangerous obstacles and structures Monitor use informally	

Remember to consider the wider aspects of land management when setting your priorities. Whilst the needs of visitors and site users are important, consider other issues such as:

- the environmental impact on the site;
- the effect that allowing the development will have on your management and visitor safety plans;
- car parking – is there enough space and a suitable site?

Deciding how sites will be managed

The Forestry Commission has identified four basic management strategies:

- Land owner / manager takes over management and adopts and develops the facility – in the case of large organisations, managing it to national standards (1)
- Land owner / manager and local group set up an operating agreement (1)
- Tolerate and monitor (2)
- Remove (3 and 4)

A summary decision flow chart is included on page 12.

The different management strategies

1. Adopt and develop the trail; land owner/manager and local group set up operating agreement

This action is taken when your local assessment suggests that the trail could be managed and you decide that staff time spent adopting and managing the trail would be less or would produce a better outcome than not adopting it.

Inspections should be made at least quarterly with photos and records of work recorded in a file for the trail.

A combination of dialogue (it's useful to keep notes) and written operating agreements should be used to convey a code of conduct to trail users. The trail assessment may need to be repeated every two years to confirm the effectiveness of management measures and to take account of changing trail features, location and user group composition.

2. Tolerate and monitor

This option is suitable where users have not constructed any permanent built features but are merely exploiting the natural landforms at the site and creating desire lines for others to follow.

Some soil and rock features may have been created but no timber structures. In such instances there may be little intervention possible. You should record details, capture pictures and record your actions.

3. Remove unsafe built features and monitor

The construction of jumps, usually of soil or rock, or erection of "North Shore" style (elevated sections made of interconnecting bridges, logs and woodwork) will usually need to be challenged. Where the construction is not to an acceptable standard, you should aim to remove the features soon after the inspection. If the facilities represent a significant risk to other forest users, such as a built jump crossing a forest road or public right of way, action should be taken without delay.

At an initial inspection where you decide removal of features will need to take place, ensure that a notice is placed on site to inform the users/builders of the impending action. Your site inspection should also record the action taken and pictures of the site

before and after removal of built structures. Ensure that you keep the inspection record.

4. Substantial intervention / removal and monitoring

There will be instances where it is obvious from the first inspection that the problem is unlikely to be removed by one simple intervention, or where the scale of the facilities requires substantial expenditure. You will probably need to refer this to your line manager and seek advice and opinion from colleagues. All interventions should be fully recorded. Substantial intervention may involve, for example:

- **Forest operations:** Bringing forward felling / thinning plans to disrupt use of the site and assist in removal of the unauthorised facilities. Often, heavy thinning may result in growth of ground cover to deter use.
- **Site signage:** Erecting signage at persistently used sites to discourage use of unauthorised routes and to explain the reasons for the removal of dangerous structures and routes which are unsafe for use.

Reactions

The loose affiliation of cycle community groups can be very fragile, and can in some instances be ineffective at controlling others within the group. So, although you may agree standards, designs and the size of the facility, any agreements you come to with the group may not always be complied with by individuals.

These are examples of what can happen:

- you will find unsafe structures and take them down and they will reappear;
- structures appear without approval;
- you will struggle to maintain effective communication with groups;
- groups will come and go, together with the strength of interest.

You will need to be firm in your dealings with the groups. They need to understand what constitutes effective communication and consultation, and you need to make it clear that if structures and jumps appear that don't conform to your agreements, or haven't been discussed and approved, you will have them removed.

Contact

If you are leaving notices/business cards asking the builders to contact you, you must state that if they are under 16 years of age they should get their parents' or guardian's permission before they contact you.

Last resort

As a last resort, consider taking formal action to prevent trail development. Only do this after detailed consultation within your organisation and with your line manager. Make sure you have all the facts and need to take this action.

Planning permission

You may need planning permission to develop or keep this type of facility. However, for small informal facilities it is unlikely that you will need planning consent, and many local authorities do not require planning permission for what are often considered temporary structures. As a rule of thumb, if it is a small project, part of an existing trail or only consists of

temporary structures, you will not require planning permission. You should consult within your own organisation and/or with your local planning authority. Each planning authority will have its own website with comprehensive information and guidance to help you lodge planning applications.

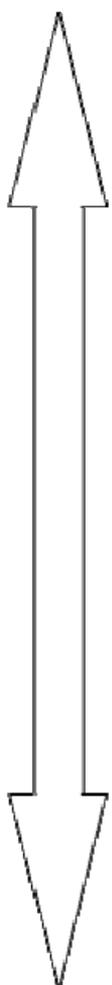
Managing the site

When assessing the action to take, you should take into account four main factors:

site characteristics
trail location

user group
trail features

These are set out in the grid below with example scenarios across the range of suitability.

Suitability	Site characteristics	User group	Trail location	Trail features
<p>Likely to be manageable</p> 	Stable, freely draining soils, wind firm trees, well thinned, mature and accessible, e.g. pine and larch	Identifiable group of adults who communicate regularly and offer to help and take on monitoring responsibility	Isolated from other users Away from public roads	No built structures Some built structures but only using locally won soil and rock
		Various people including adults of all ages, never any consistency or stable members	Some low usage permissive paths through site	Significant built structures but made to high standard using sawn timber, local soil and rock Occasional built structures using round timber from the forest
	Poorly drained soils, watercourses, unstable crops with significant standing dead and windblown trees, unthinned and poor access	Various children under the age of 18 using the trail in the holidays. Usage fluctuates with time of year	Adjacent to public road, formal recreation facility and with medium to high access by other users	Significant number of built structures made from round timber from the forest, high structures and jumps
Not likely to be manageable				

Site rules and agreements

Consider the following options:

1. Agree site rules with the users.
2. Develop an operating agreement for the site. You may need to consult within your organisation. Where there is no formal group to work with, and no likelihood of one being set up, there are some simple site rules in Table 2 below, which can help you to manage the site, the activity and the users.

You should also consider these points:

- Who will cut down trees if required?
- Who will provide materials or tools? and
- Who will plan the site?

You can post these rules on the site and agree them in writing at a formal meeting.

Table 2 – What should be agreed with users

Site rules	
Essential (what should you include?)	Desirable (what could you include?)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Type of construction that is acceptable or unacceptable• Different grades of route/jump (plan for progression within the facility)• Location of pits and jumps• Spread of the site – define the boundary• Warning signs around the edge• Controlling litter• Avoiding damage• Don't leave tools and equipment lying about on site	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safety rules – like helmets and gloves• Inspections – users to help• Accident reporting• Providing material or machines• Conflicts or hassle with others• Mentoring – experienced riders help inexperienced riders

Monitoring the site

It is important that you monitor the effects of your management. Depending on what you do currently, this may mean informal or formal checks on the site.

Monitoring is a key part of demonstrating you are doing all that is reasonable as an occupier of land to prevent harm coming to users of your woodlands and open spaces. Once sites have been notified and inspected, monitoring will be a key part of demonstrating competent management and defending any claims.

- **Adopt and develop:** The site should be monitored as a recreation facility at regular intervals (a frequency of every 3 months is suggested). Each visit should be recorded and a record kept of any actions, maintenance and work completed.
- **Tolerate and monitor:** Where this management action is deemed appropriate after initial inspection, you should carry out follow up inspections (an annual frequency is suggested).
- **Remove unsafe built features and monitor:** You should inspect the site soon after the removal action (within the month). Thereafter, assuming no rebuilding, the site should be monitored at least annually.
- **Substantial intervention and monitoring:** Following a substantial intervention, the site should be monitored regularly (a quarterly frequency for 12 months is suggested). After the first 12 months, site monitoring can be reviewed against use of the site. Where the site has been abandoned, annual monitoring should be sufficient; where use persists quarterly monitoring would be appropriate.

Inspection protocols

The recommended position is that the users/builders of the site should carry out the inspections and record keeping for the site with the land owner/manager checking that the inspections are being done and recorded. Wild trails should be inspected by walking and should only be ridden after being first walked, and they should be specifically risk assessed before each ridden inspection.

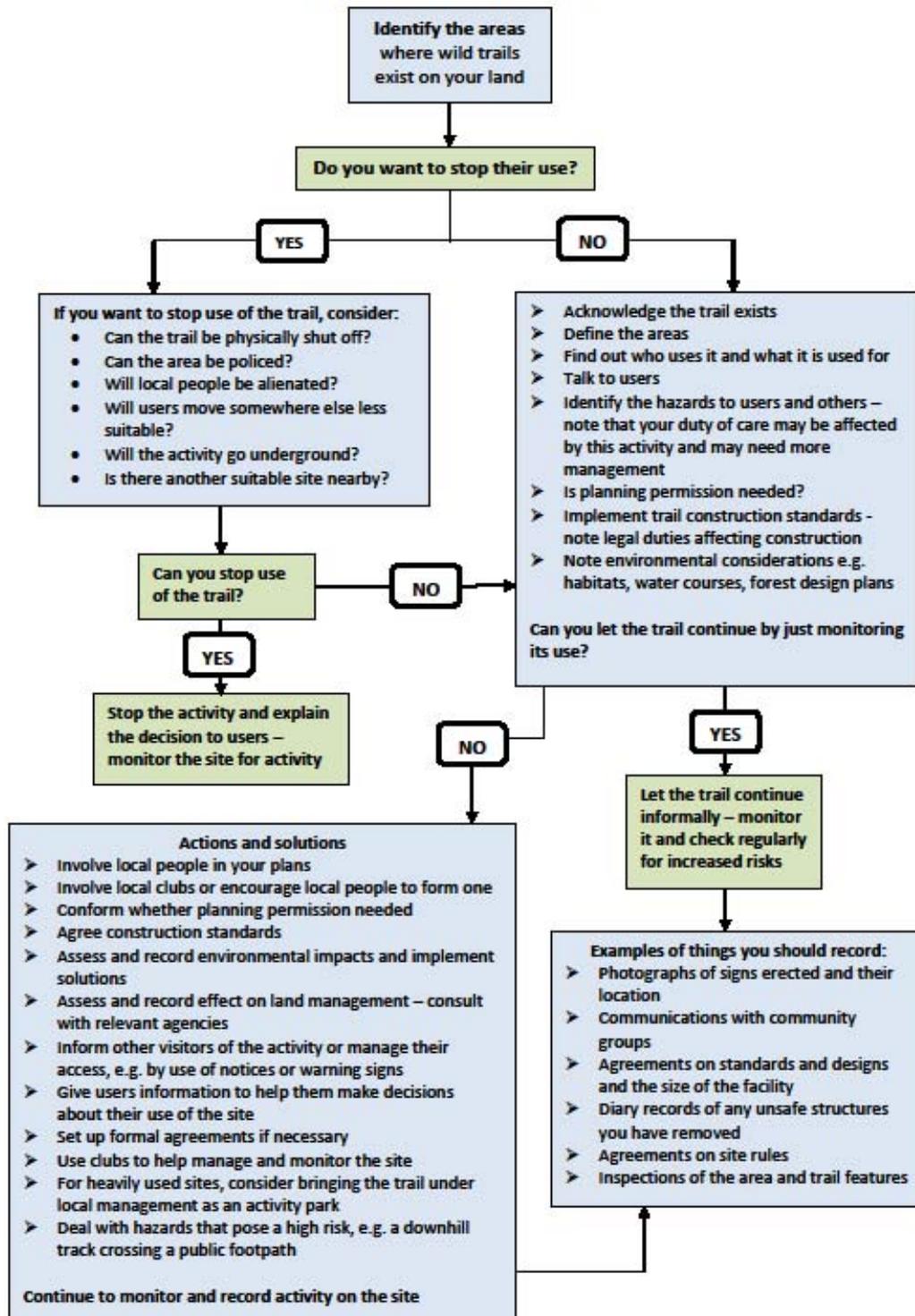
Formal checks with users present

- Regularly check any constructions and obstacles on the site for wear and tear – replace damaged and worn sections (it must be clear who will do the work).
- Check that no one has built any other obstacles that are not part of your agreement.
- Check that users are recording accidents if you have an agreement for completing an accident book.
- Each year review your plans for the area with the group that uses it.
- Regularly hold meetings to make sure the site is running well.
- Check signs to make sure they are still in place.
- Make sure you keep a record of all visits to the site.

Informal site visits

- Regularly check any constructions and obstacles on the site for wear and tear.
- Talk to those who use the site.
- Make sure you keep a record of all visits to the site – even for informal sites in case something goes wrong.
- Check signs to make sure they are still in place.

WILD TRAILS DECISION FLOW CHART



Closing the site

Planning and preparation

Closing an unauthorised site requires as much thought and planning as opening up a new trail or park. This is because these features and trails are important to the people who have built and use them. The builders have assumed ownership and have invested their time and even money. Any changes to trails, including closure, may have an impact on the feelings of people in the community – on their sense of place and motivation - as well as an impact on individual builders and riders.

Planning to remove trails will require tact and diplomacy to keep everyone on board with the process, if not the outcome. Land managers must be confident about why they are closing the site. You must be well prepared to discuss and explain the rationale for your decision. You should set out the case:

- for change or removal;
- the advantages and disadvantages; and
- the costs and savings, fully, clearly and openly.

The reasons are likely to be:

Safety

If this is your reason, do you have records and evidence of hazards, and reports of accidents?

Internal needs

- it does not fit with strategy / planning
- it is disruptive to management of forest or woodland
- it is causing damage to habitat or the environment
- you do not have the resources to manage the area
- it is diverting maintenance funds from other recreation facilities

External needs

- complaints have been received from the public, neighbours or others
- planning permission may be required

The consultation process

Effective consultation is key to this whole process. If the process gains respect then, for the great majority of people, so will the outcome. There is no legal requirement to consult, but it is good practice. You can achieve this by:

- posting information on site and in local places to help people know what's going on or is planned for the trails;
- offering the chance to get feedback and ideas from those affected by decisions;
- finding out what are the views of other organisations and potential partners – are they supportive, neutral or against it?

Experience and 'good practice' in community engagement show that it is important to consult well and widely. Community decisions are important. A wide range of people, from motivated professionals to disadvantaged young people, can be involved in the building of unauthorised areas and cycle routes. You need to include them all in your approach.

Some useful questions:

- How are you going to implement the consultation process?
- What scale is required?
- Who needs to be involved?
- Can any other group or organisation help with the process?
- Do you have support from an existing cycle partner?
- Can the experiences of other organisations help you to communicate better? For instance, local authority agencies such as community development departments can provide good advice.

It is vital to make a clear commitment to talking to all the groups, riders and the wider community before sending in the demolition crew or removing way marking of a route. The consultation process requires a great deal of time and effort to be effective.

Taking the final decision

If after consultation the site cannot be improved, made safe or managed in another way, then you will have to take the final decision to remove the features. There may well be poor publicity from your actions, therefore it is advisable to involve your manager in the process, and brief your Press Officer if you have one, to help them prepare for any press interest.

The final decision may be one that is unpalatable to the local builders or community – it will rarely please everybody. But as a land manager you need to reach a decision, which takes account of and balances all the complex and sometimes conflicting factors about the particular site. In this way you will fulfil your statutory duties and other responsibilities.

The removal process

The process of removal also needs to be well handled. Assuming the trail has to be removed, make sure that you:

- do it to a high standard;
- leave the site safe for those who may try to visit and use the site;
- clear any debris quickly to show positive management of the site;
- post information about the removal on site, including:
 - the reasons why it was done;
 - refer to alternative facilities that are available nearby;
 - who removed it and when; and
 - give contact information such as a telephone number, name and address.

It is important to monitor the effects of your decision. Depending on what you have done, this may result in informal or formal checks on the site, looking out for new construction and changes to the site, and being flexible enough, if required, to review your plans.

Dealing with dangerous features

If you find something that you think is dangerous you should do something about it. Your action will depend on whether you want the site to develop and where the site fits in:

If it is a fairly small site with low use and no formal agreement or site rules, then the sensible approach will be to remove the dangerous feature or materials. If you are concerned about other visitors being frightened or injured, it may be enough to put up a simple warning notice or improve visibility.

On a site with rules or an agreement, or at least plans to achieve these, you will want to talk to the people using the site and try to agree with them what should be done first. If you find something that is very dangerous, cordon it off with 'hazard tape' until you can speak to the site users or take further action.

Examples of poor quality "North Shore" construction:



Technical construction techniques

Building and riding on technical trail features constructed out of timber is a style of mountain biking that was developed in Canada. Originally using fallen trees to create features on trails in the forests, the style has developed into using built features such as ladder bridges, balance bars, seesaws and wall rides. This style has also emerged in the UK and is increasing. The same principles apply for managing these as we have already suggested, but there will be more timber features within the trail.

You can find more information at:

Western Canada Mountain Bike Tourism Association - www.mbta.ca, including the Whistler guide to trails standards at http://www.mbta.ca/assets/pdfs/trail_standards_first_edition.pdf

North Shore Mountain Bike Association - www.nsmba.bc.ca. Follow the links to Trails > Building tips.

International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) has a wealth of resources on its US pages here - <http://www.imba.com/resources>. The UK site is at - <http://www.imba.org.uk/>, including "Guidelines to assist landowners in the management and/or development of mountain biking trails and facilities" at <http://www.imba.org.uk/uploads/papers/GuidelinesForLandManagers.pdf>

Paths for All, a Scottish charity, has useful downloads on various subjects, e.g. path survey, design and construction. See http://www.pathsforall.org.uk/component/option,com_docman/Itemid,166/dir,DESC/gid,57/limitstart,16/order,date/task,cat_view/

This guidance cannot give you all the answers, but should help you to consider all the relevant issues. Acknowledgement goes to the many experienced staff in the Forestry Commission and private forestry sector that helped develop this guidance.

Further guidance:

Forestry Commission Operational Guidance Booklet No. 37 – Cycle trail management. 2008.

Visitor Safety in the Countryside Group (VSCG) web site – www.vscg.co.uk.