

CROSS-COUNTRY SKI TRAILS IN THE THOMPSON OKANAGAN

USING DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT TO EXPAND VISITOR DEMOGRAPHICS

The Thompson Okanagan boasts several ski resorts and nordic centers that offer access to some of B.C.'s most beautiful landscapes. Recently, the Larch Hills Nordic Society and Overlander Ski Club received funding through the Province of B.C.'s Targeted Regional Tourism Development Initiative to improve trails and add lighting, with an eye towards expanding visitor demographics and bringing in more people at night to cross-country ski.

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OVERLANDER SKI CLUB | Photo: Steve Riffel

Larch Hills Nordic Society boasts over 170 kilometres of ski trails, and 17 kilometres of snowshoe trails. The society used the funding to build out a 6.5 kilometre trail illuminated with approximately 140 lights, including high-efficiency LED lights placed every 50 metres to reduce energy and costs.

The Overlander Ski Club has 60 kilometres of cross-country ski trails—including 5 kilometres of dedicated dog-friendly trails, and 20 kilometres of snowshoe trails. The funding allowed the club to light all the trails to allow for more nighttime adventuring.

Both organizations faced similar challenges when upgrading and lighting their trails for nighttime use.



PROJECT CONSIDERATIONS

Weather is always a challenge when maintaining and improving outdoor trails, and this was no exception. During trail upgrades and lighting installation, work had to be paused several times due to inclement weather.

In addition, ski clubs and groups are primarily supported by volunteers. Undertaking such large-scale projects adds a huge amount of responsibility and work to people who rely on their day jobs to make a living.

Finally, before work began, the teams had to develop a detailed plan and perform archeological and environmental assessments, then apply for and obtain a permit—all of which required time and patience.



PROJECT RESULTS

Larch Hills Nordic Society and the Overlander Ski Club have shared that the upgrades and addition of trail lighting have notably improved their offerings. Several night-skiing groups have started at both ski clubs, and they regularly promote events such as women's ski nights and ski clinics.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

One of the core findings of improvements to the Larch Hills Nordic Society and Overlander Ski Club cross-country trails is the importance of community engagement. Both ski clubs found it critical to reach out to Indigenous Peoples, residents, and club members and address their feedback and concerns, to gain widespread support and buy-in for the project.

Another learning is to take the additional time to understand what target audiences and visitors expect and desire. In this case, the ski clubs understood that the upgrades needed to cater to a range of cross-country abilities, from novices to experts.

It's important to make the most of a recognized opportunity and in recent years, both clubs have seen a boost in the number of people interested in cross-country skiing. Recognizing the knowledge that being outdoors and connecting with nature provides physical and mental health benefits, destination development initiatives have strategically welcomed newcomers to outdoor sports like cross-country skiing to broaden their visitor base and boost the local economy. Additionally, adding or improving existing lighting so people can night ski encourages more people to ski after their workday, ultimately bringing in more traffic than ever before.



OVERLANDER SKI CLUB | Photo: Charlene Eden

