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**The Tiger’s Trap:  A Cautionary Tale**

The temperatures are warming and the snow is almost out of the woods.  We are all itching to get out there for our first hike or mountain bike.  Not so fast!   After all, it is mud season in Vermont.  Even after the mud has retreated from back roads, trails will still be muddy.  For those of us who are mountain bikers, it is tempting to engage in the childlike delight of getting good and muddy.  If you are tempted to unleash your inner child by splashing through the mud, one simple rule: don’t do it!  You might find yourself up to your hubs in a tiger trap; you know, that bottomless pit of mud that masquerades as an innocent puddle but swallows your bike whole.  You will be doing real damage to the trails not to mention risking costly repairs to your bike.  Similarly, hikers may discover a stream of water running down the middle of their favorite trail.  As tempting as it is to bypass that stream by moving to the side of the trail, one simple rule: don’t do it!  Skirting to the trail’s edges may keep you dry, but you’ll also trample vegetation, widen the trail, and cause more environmental damage.

Mud season generally spans the 6 weeks between snowmelt and Memorial Day and at higher elevations, can last into June.  If you have ever been caught in a tiger trap, you know that mud is not a durable surface.  Super-saturated soils can cause deep and wide mud puddles to appear, sometimes taking up entire sections of the trail.  Foot traffic and bike traffic will cause soil compaction and reduce the ability of the soil to absorb water.  Long term, this degrades the quality of the trail causing erosion making it difficult for vegetation to grow, and leaving rocks and roots exposed.  This, in turn, can increase the likelihood of flooding later which may require costly maintenance to repair or worse, permanently damage the trail.

Such is the paradox of spring in Vermont; it can be both alluring and deceptive.  We want to get out and enjoy our trails but be warned that you may find yourself caught in a tiger trap.  Worse, you will damage our beloved trails.  If you are leaving a footprint or a bike track deeper than a half inch, turn around!  Better yet, know before you go.  Most trail advocacy organizations post notifications about trail closures and conditions.   You can check out up-to-date mountain bike trail conditions at <https://www.trailforks.com/region/mad-river-valley-18994/>.  For hiking, go to <https://www.trailfinder.info/vermont-mud-season>

Remember, most trail maintenance in the MRV is done by your friends and neighbors. Many thanks to everyone who keeps our trails in good shape! Do your part, stay off trails in questionable conditions and honor their volunteerism.

This is the first column in a series authored by the Mad River Valley Recreation District.  Stay tuned for more “Recreation Life in the Valley”

Alice Rodgers, Mad River Valley Recreation District, Chair