

# DIRECT ACTION: AWA's 2012 Bighorn Monitoring Report



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“Is that a solar panel on your pack?” asks the lady on horseback as we step aside to let her and her companion pass.

We are five kilometres up Canary Creek from the trailhead at the Bighorn's Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area: not the first place one expects to encounter solar panels, or two tablet computers, for that matter. However, on this day they suit AWA's purposes perfectly. They are ideal recording devices, allowing us to update our trail recreation monitoring observations for the 2012 season.

Originally, I was going to entitle this piece “Technology in the Wilderness,” and I had planned on spending some paragraphs discussing how the Bighorn Wildland Recreational Monitoring Project was turning to these tablet computers and other technology to aid us in our work. (I'm writing this article on the trail on one of the tablets. All the photos in this article are also taken with the integrated cameras.) That article, as it turns out, will have to wait for another day...

The two equestrian users are the only other human beings we have encountered on our three days on the trail. We have otherwise been left to a peace marked only by the sounds of the sparrows and babbling brooks.

This is a decidedly mixed blessing: the reason for the solitude is that almost the entire trail system included in AWA's trail monitoring program has been closed to all OHV traffic since July 3. While the signs posted at the trailhead hinted at the reason, we shortly encountered it for ourselves:

The upper reaches of the access trails have been so badly affected by erosion from this year's runoff that they have caved in, becoming impassable to all but the more determined foot users. In the worst stretches, OHV riders have attempted to bypass the damage by creating braids; only to have these erode away as well. This is in addition to the extra vegetative damage and rutting the braids cause to the terrain that they cross.

Is this an issue attributable solely to higher-than-normal runoff? I don't think so. The problem is that these trails should not be here in the first place. The terrain in many places (including where we are observing the worst of the erosion) is boggy, porous, and at the end of the day simply unable to support this type of development or use. The wet weather is not a problem itself, but rather exacerbates an existing problem. When high water flows cause impassable wash-outs, this is merely a highly-visible symptom of the damage that has already been occurring.

We saw this in 2006, when similar cave-ins occurred where the trail circuit reaches the Ram River valley. The problem was at that time “solved” by rerouting the trail to bypass the problem area altogether, creating an ad-hoc extension straight through old-growth forest.

We are now seeing the same thing again in 2012. This time the damage is so bad that, rather than closing a single stretch of trail, the entire trail network has been closed. What will be the “solution” this time? How many extra kilometres of vegetation will be replaced with newly-created trail as a band-aid patch over the glaring fact that these trails should simply not be here?

For over a decade, AWA has expressed this view. There are perhaps some areas where the soil and the ecosystem are able to handle trails of this type. The Onion Lake road is a hard-surfaced OHV road that suffered little erosion; it is the only trail in the circuit that remains open as I write this. However trails such as those that go up the Canary and Hummingbird creeks, as well as the pristine valleys behind them are not appropriate and need to be closed – permanently – to motorized traffic.

As recently as last August, AWA wrote a letter to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development (now merged with the ministry of the Environment to become ESRD) and urged the government to close the trails, especially those in the Critical Wildlife Zones,

before the erosion – already visible then – became irreversible. Regrettably, this did not happen, and what we feared has come to pass. The erosion has become so extreme that Mother Nature has played her hand and forced the trail closures that AWA was unable to effect.

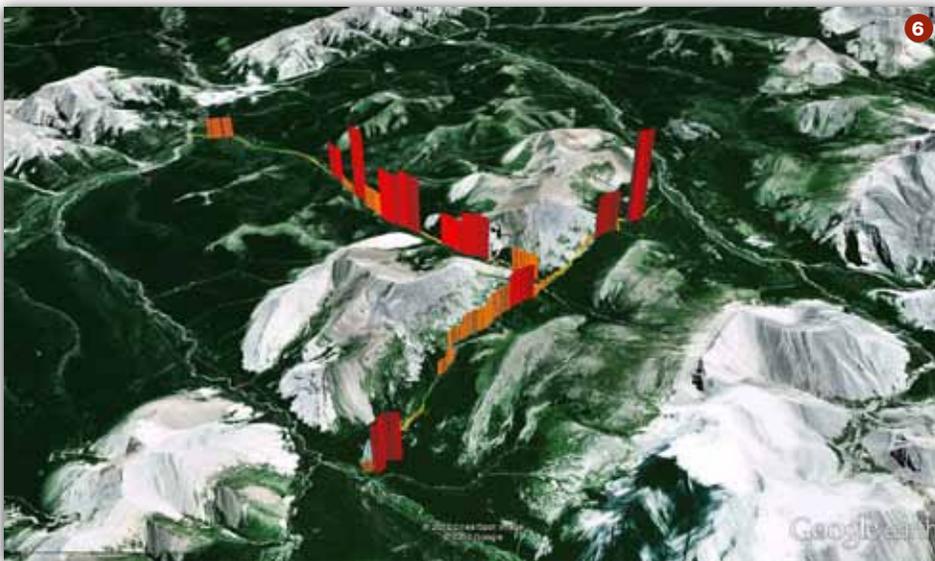
So for now, the trail circuit remains closed. I sit at our campsite at the top of Canary Creek, listening only to sounds of birds and water. A little while ago I watched a playful hoary marmot bouncing around on the rocks by the creek crossing, blissful in his reprieve from the roaring of engines straight through his playground.

How long will this reprieve last? We are hopeful – ever hopeful – that ESRD will use this opportunity to take stock of the natural treasures of these valleys, of how threatened they are, and will decide to close the trails for good. 🍀



Trail closure signs posted at the Hummingbird Creek trailhead.

PHOTO: © S. NICHOLS



- 1** Many of the damage sites that have not yet completely caved in are on the verge of doing so. In 2005-2006, 144 damage sites were originally recorded on the stretches of trail monitored on this trip. This year, an additional 146 damage sites were added to that tally, showing an increased rate of trail degradation over the last half-decade.
- 2** Large sections of the trail have become so eroded they are now impassable to all but foot traffic. Even the equestrian users we encountered were forced to turn back by these inhospitable sections.
- 3** Attempts at “stewardship” such as dropping this tree in a hole to warn future users do nothing to mitigate the damage caused.
- 4** The erosion at this damage site has created a trench up to 175cm deep.
- 5** Trail users often react to damaged sections of trail (such as that on the right) by creating braids and secondary trails to bypass the obstructions, causing further damage to the vegetation.
- 6** Erosion Event distribution on OHV trails. Height and colour of 500m trail sections indicates the total length of eroded trail within each section: no eroded trail = green, 1m-10m eroded = yellow, 11m-25m eroded = orange, 26m-100m eroded = dark orange, greater than 100m eroded = red. (Background map courtesy Google Earth)