

Updates

2015 NorAm Nordic ski race

The January 2015 NorAm Nordic ski race in Banff National Park marked one more in a long line of commercial enterprises proposed by Parks Canada in our National Parks which take no heed of the irreplaceable natural values of the park. Increasingly it seems that the “ecological integrity” role or purpose for our national parks is being lost in a headlong rush to exploit them for their business potential.

Comments were invited in November 2014 on the 2015 NorAm test event which was “intended to evaluate the course for its appropriateness for a FIS level event proposed for 2016.” The full race in 2016 has apparently not yet been approved, and will be subject to a Detailed Impact Analysis, but Parks Canada’s recent track record suggests that anything other than full approval would be surprising.

In a December 2014 letter, AWA wrote to Parks Canada to express concern with the “ongoing and deliberate efforts Parks Canada is taking to commercialize Banff National Park.” The 2015 planned NorAm race was, in AWA’s opinion, “another in a series of events and developments that should be taken to the gateway communities outside the park leaving and ensuring Banff National Park truly is protected with wild spaces and the wildlife it is intended to support.”

AWA expressed its grave concern with “the precedent being set by siting events such as this race within a Declared Wilderness Area and the Fairview Wildlife Corridor, disrupting those areas with extensive impacts from not only the race itself, but spectators, infrastructure, support and logistics-related activities.” AWA believes that such activities are entirely inappropriate in our national parks and are not driven by any public demand but simply by the commercial interests of private companies. Parks Canada’s response that “less than 25 trees will be removed, most of which are

only several metres tall,” did little to dispel the concern.

The NorAm event was by no means the first such event to take place in our national parks. Former Banff National Park superintendent Kevin van Tighem has expressed similar concerns on many occasions previously. “We are on the verge of losing twenty years’ worth of hard and principled work by public servants to respond to broad public concern by establishing firm limits on commercial development,” wrote van Tighem in 2013, in response to proposed management changes in the park. “There is absolutely no public support or demand for these developments - they serve only the commercial interests of private companies who have access to senior politicians.”

Such activities are often justified by Parks Canada as “improving visitor experience,” though, coming hot on the heels of the recent laying-off of on-the-ground National Parks staff, this is hard to accept! Other recent developments in our national parks include:

- A resort lodge planned at Maligne Lake was turned down in July 2014.
- In February 2014, Parks Canada changed the lease area of the Marmot ski hill in Jasper, despite opposition from its own scientists and from environmental groups. The changes were discreetly (some would say deviously) hidden away in a bill establishing the Sable Island National Park Reserve off the coast of Nova Scotia.
- In January 2013, plans were announced to allow summer chair lift operations and tourism into formerly secure grizzly habitat in Banff National Park, despite previous promises that this would not happen.
- The Banff Marathon was held in the Bow Valley Parkway in 2013 and 2014, despite safety concerns for both racers and wildlife.
- Parks Canada ignored enormous public

opposition to approve Brewster’s proposed glass walkway in Jasper National Park. Bow Valley Naturalists at the time described this example of commercialization as a “contrived thrill-seeking development.” The structure was opened in May 2014.

- In 2012 AWA opposed the planned Grand Fondo bike race in Banff NP, commenting: “Such events are inappropriate in that they do not interpret park values and are incompatible with a mandate to protect and interpret natural systems.” Sure enough, the 2012 race was turned back because of a family of grizzlies feeding beside the Bow Valley Parkway. But this did not stop the event being run from taking place in 2013 and 2014.

- Nigel Douglas

Commercial Fishing in Alberta: It’s History

All lakes in Alberta were closed to commercial fishing on August 1, 2014 following a rigorous third-party review on the long-term viability of the province’s commercial fishery. In 2011, ESRD contacted Dr. Peter Colby, a fisheries management expert based in Ontario, to conduct an assessment of 12 commercial fishing lakes in northwest Alberta to determine if commercial fishery management practices were scientifically judicious and consistent with internationally-recognized sustainable practices. In addition to Colby’s 2012 report, provincial biologists assessed the remaining lakes (approximately 100) in the province that were open to commercial fishing. The reports concluded that Alberta’s commercial fishery practices were unsustainable due to: habitat loss, overharvesting, management costs exceeding commercial catch values in many locales, and conflicts between fisheries managers and different groups of anglers.

Alberta Wilderness Association congratulates the Government of Alberta on its

undoubtedly difficult but environmentally responsible decision following the report's findings. Last fall we spoke to Dr. Mike Sullivan, Provincial Fish Science Specialist with Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division of ESRD about this policy change. He said that decisive actions such as this one are needed from the government. "Closing the commercial fishery is an unfortunate casualty of development in Alberta," Sullivan said. "It's unfortunate, but we are now on the road to recovery." Sullivan also noted that the circumstances leading to the decision were sad. Lakes and fish have traditional, economic, and social values, all of which were compromised as a result of the situation before the closures.

Colby interviewed a number of scientists and stakeholders in preparing his report. Provincial biologists expressed frustration over the amount of resources going into dealing with recurring issues related to commercial fishing practices when there were other pressing issues such as mitigation or recovery of habitat destruction from industrial development.

Commercial anglers were generally frustrated with the situation as well. With their businesses experiencing problems as a result of quota changes, seasonal closures, and gear regulations, many commercial fishers reported that they were nearly bankrupt and desired compensation for costs associated with management conflicts and time spent at meetings and consultations. Colby cited this as evidence of an unsustainable system. Sport fishers were sympathetic to the commercial fishers' situation, but shared a common sentiment with First Nations: fish catches were declining and management should have changed to reflect that. They also reported that distrust of commercial fishers toward regulatory agencies and conflicts between all angler groups were rampant. Domestic and First Nations fishers said there was an urgent need for a stakeholder advisory group, for a neutral party without "axes to grind."

Will this decision be permanent? The report stated that sustainable management of fish stocks would be possible at many

of these lakes, but would require stable fish populations, elimination of gill-net fishing, strict enforcement of regulations, and formal binding agreements to ensure cooperation among all fishing groups. Sullivan suspects that it will take decades for lakes to return to an ecological equilibrium. Even then, considering how many changes would have to be in place compared to previous practices, we likely would not see a "reopened" fishery.

- David Robinson

AWA attends workshop on NSRP Environmental Management Frameworks

The process for the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan (NSRP) continues deliberately. A series of workshops on the associated Environmental Management Frameworks were held in central Alberta cities through February. AWA staff participated in the workshop held in Rocky Mountain House on February 12 where we provided input on the three frameworks being drafted for inclusion with the plan.

Those three frameworks are a Water Quality Management Framework, an Air Quality Management Framework and a Biodiversity Management Framework (BMF).

All three frameworks are conceptualized around a set of measurable indicators, each one having a threshold level that, once surpassed, will trigger specific management action. That management action should investigate the cause of the indicator passing the threshold and propose specific efforts to bring it back to nominal levels. Beyond the initial "trigger" thresholds, there are further "target" and "limit" thresholds: the attempt will be to keep the indicators' measurements below the targets; the limits represent the points at which environmental quality has become unacceptable.

While specific lists of indicators are already outlined for the Air and Water Quality Management Frameworks, the BMF remains in a preliminary form with the indicators yet to be drafted. Discussions still appear to be underway regarding the approach to take to choose indicators. (For example,

should they be based on specific species, or should composite indices be used?) It is noteworthy that even though the last Land-use Framework Regional Plan (that for the South Saskatchewan) has already been released, its associated BMF still remains on the horizon and is no closer to completion than the one for the NSRP.

At the workshop, AWA registered concerns regarding how the various indices are measured and whether their proposed designs would truly be able to capture the environmental state of the region. For example, the Water Quality Management Framework only proposes to place permanent long-term monitoring stations along the river's main stem. This might mean that local threshold excesses in the tributaries that could be devastating for fish spawning would be diluted (or rendered negligible) by the time they reached the main stem monitoring station. Necessary action wouldn't be triggered.

AWA also pushed at the workshop for tighter monitoring standards, standards adequate enough to ensure that such local deviations would be detected.

- Sean Nichols

Stop Ghost Clearcut

A group of landowners in the Ghost Valley are extremely concerned about the rapid clearcutting in the Ghost River watershed & Bow Basin (see the article by Gord MacMahon and Robert Sandford in this issue of WLA). And they have become very vocal and active in recent months. These residents no longer wish to take a backseat in the land-use decision making that directly affects the community they live in. As their name suggests, the StopGhostClearcut coalition is calling for an immediate moratorium on clearcut logging in the Ghost Valley. Similar to AWA, this group is not anti-logging but does not agree with the ecologically damaging logging practices currently taking place and the lack of transparency in what passes for a planning process for harvesting timber in important headwaters. They would like to see science-based explanations for clearcut logging the Ghost area

since this area is critical to clean water, flood mitigation, and wildlife habitat.

The Ghost Valley lies in the Bow River Basin and includes the headwaters of the Ghost River and Waiparous Creek in the west, Joshua and Jacob Creeks in the south, and the Atkinson tributaries draining into the Red Deer River Basin in the north. Significant clearcut logging is currently ongoing throughout the entire area. Some compartments have already been logged intensively; others are included in planned upcoming harvests.

One major catalyst for the birth of StopGhostClearcut was the discovery that the South B9 Quota harvest plan, part of Spray Lake Sawmills' Detailed Forest Management Plan, allows them to condense a 20-25-year harvest plan of 900 hectares (5,300 truckloads) into potentially three years! Surely ESRD must have a good reason for allowing this acceleration, right? ...Nope. This group had to dig to get even a rudimentary explanation from ESRD; the department's reasoning remains inconsistent.

StopGhostClearcut has raised the alarm to the fact that the forest hydrology data supporting the forest harvest plans were completed in 2004... prior to two major flood events in 2005 and 2013. The Ghost Valley, as some would have seen firsthand on AWA's Ghost hike last June, has many natural springs and wetlands essential to the storage, filtration, and slow release of water downstream. It is irresponsible to threaten the Ghost Valley's natural capacity to mitigate flooding and this race to clearcut the Ghost could have negative consequences in the future years for Albertans downstream. StopGhostClearcut is a pointed reminder that the era of managing Alberta's forested headwaters for timber rather than for ecological function needs to end immediately.

- Brittany Verbeek

Calgary Ring Road Should Leave Room for the Rivers

The Calgary Ring Road is nearly complete. Alberta Transportation's next stage of development for the road is the southwest portion that will cross several important

natural areas: the Weaselhead, containing conifer and mixed forests and a delta where the Elbow River slows upstream of Glenmore Reservoir, and the west end of Fish Creek Provincial Park, where Fish Creek meanders eastward across its floodplain upstream of its confluence with the Bow River.

AWA learned last September that the current southwest ring road construction concept is to cross the Elbow River and Fish Creek valleys using a 'cut and fill' method: the road would be built upon an earthen berm across the river valley that will require realignment and hardening of river channels at the crossings. At the Elbow River crossing upstream of the Glenmore Reservoir this will narrow the river valley ten-fold; from approximately one kilometer to just under 100 metres wide and create a significant barrier across the Elbow River valley. At the Fish Creek crossing, the current 37th Street bridge (see photo) will also be replaced by shorter bridges over armored channels. The creek west of the crossing will be realigned with some additional hardening.

AWA's concerns with the cut and fill method (and associated realignment and bank armouring) include disruption of wildlife corridors leading to increased wildlife-vehicle collisions, loss of riparian forest and aquatic habitat, and reduced flood attenuation capacity by narrowing the floodplain. The ecosystem's resiliency will suffer. These

designs will presumably save on upfront costs of building longer bridges, but will pose multiple concerns for flooding and river corridor ecology. Will they be costlier to maintain? We don't know. The construction will be prone to flood damage and will disconnect the rivers from their broader natural floodplain, actions which seem to ignore risks from recent dramatic flood events. In addition, the current plan appears to run counter to statements in the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan, such as: "Land use decisions should strive to reduce disturbances on Alberta's landscape."

An early October community information forum on the proposed ring road river crossings, co-hosted by Calgary River Valleys and the Weaselhead / Glenmore Park Preservation Society, drew over 300 citizens. The project's design contract will be awarded in Spring 2015. AWA is urging Alberta Transportation to revisit the current proposed plans and to choose a more sustainable design that increases the length of the bridges to span the natural river corridor, thereby maintaining the natural floodplain and river valley ecosystem. Despite the slump in oil prices the capital plan contained in the March 2015 budget estimates that \$667 million will be spent in the current fiscal year on the Calgary and Edmonton Ring Road projects.

- David Robinson



We know how to leave room for the river: the current 37th St. bridge across Fish Creek leaves a natural floodplain and wildlife corridor relatively intact. PHOTO: © E. MCMAHON