

Trail Rehabilitation in the Castle

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During the 2013 floods in Alberta, many trail systems were washed out by overflowing rivers and creeks. In order to help restore and repair these backcountry trail systems, \$10 million from a federal disaster relief fund was allocated to establish the *Backcountry Trail Flood Rehabilitation Program* (BTFRP) in 2014. The program is intended to run until March 2017.

The mission of the program is as follows: “Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, in collaboration with users, will restore priority recreational trails on Public Lands that were damaged by the 2013 flood event to ensure sustainable trail access is restored for user enjoyment. At the same time, environmental conditions in and around the flood damaged portions of these trail systems will be maintained or improved. [...] It is acknowledged that

“The left hand didn’t seem to know what the right hand was doing”

- Peter Sherrington, Vice-President of the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition

while the Backcountry Trail Flood Rehabilitation program is a discrete program with a defined end date, this program will inform the long term management regime for trails and recreation on Public Lands. “

It is indisputable that the intentions of this program are positive – who isn’t in favour of helping to re-establish washed out trails so that Albertans can sustainably recreate outdoors? Problems arise though when decisions to create new bridges or rehabilitate trails are made without consid-

ering the future plans for an area, and when there are no checks and balances to determine whether there should be a trail there in the first place.

In the Castle, the flood trail rehabilitation program has spent considerable resources, with projects *still happening* to repair and/or construct motorized vehicle trails. This is despite the fact the area has been newly designated as a Castle Provincial Park and Castle Wildland Provincial Park.

Currently, designated trail networks within the two proposed Castle parks total more than 500 km. In 2011, overall linear disturbance in the Castle Special Management Area Forest Land Use Zone totaled 1,283 km, for an average density of 1.3 km/km². This density is *more than double* the scientifically-established thresholds of 0.6 km/km² recommended in the grizzly bear and westslope cutthroat trout (WSCT) recovery



Many ATVs don’t fit ATV bridges. Trying to do right thing, this one got stuck. After backing out, he forded threatened cutthroat trout designated critical habitat during the spawning period when eggs could have been incubating in the gravel at this site. PHOTO: © D. MAYHOOD



Freshly-used OHV ford over Lynx Creek, within designated westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat, immediately beside a brand new OHV bridge. PHOTO: © D. MAYHOOD

strategies for the survival of those species.

For specific populations of westslope cutthroat trout and grizzly bear to survive and thrive in the Castle, the extent of the OHV trail network needs to be drastically reduced and in many cases eliminated. These trails have multiple impacts on the forest ecology and the resident plant and wildlife species. Trails disrupt and fragment habitat, provide a vector for the introduction of invasive plant species, and bring increased human use deep into the backcountry where conflicts can occur with existing wildlife populations.

In the Recovery Plan for westslope cutthroat trout (WSCT), for example, “forest harvest, linear disturbance, grazing, OHVs, recreational access, instream construction, municipal runoff” are documented to contribute to sedimentation and therefore adversely affect WSCT habitat. Bridges do not alleviate erosion and do not prevent damage to native fish from the sediment that the trails themselves deliver to streams. Although bridges may reduce sediment delivery at ford crossings, they do not reduce sediment delivery on either side of the bridge and elsewhere along the stream.

Sediment can harm WSCT and other native fish by causing direct mortality. Even small amounts of suspended sediment can kill eggs and larvae if the low concentrations are sustained for periods as short as several days (less than 1 week). Sediment

that settles out can suffocate eggs, larvae, and small juveniles that may be overwintering among cobbles and large gravel on the stream bottom. It can embed and cement in the bottom gravels. Sediment also threatens cutthroats by reducing habitat and food availability.

The recovery plan for westslope cutthroat trout emphasizes that “the focus of recovery efforts should be on protecting habitat of existing pure populations.” In order to protect the remaining habitat of pure WSCT populations, all motorized trails and roads that have damaged, are damaging, or threaten to damage WSCT critical habitat need to be closed – permanently. No new development (e.g. roads, trails, transmission lines, pipelines, well sites, buildings, fences, bridges) should be allowed in areas that may damage critical habitat. Reallocating funds from trail rebuilding to trail restoration would make a significant contribution to protecting habitat.

AWA remains concerned that BTFRP work is going ahead in the proposed Castle Provincial Park and Castle Wildland Provincial Park before management plans for the parks are in place. Repairing trails to enable access is not an efficient use of resources when the question of whether or not those trails will be closed in the Castle Parks has not been answered by an open and transparent public consultation. Taxpayer dollars are being spent repairing

and upgrading trails in what is to become a provincial park, for vehicles that should not be allowed in any of Alberta’s provincial parks. A large number of trails will have to be removed, now at even greater expense and environmental damage. These resources would be better used if they tackled erosion control and the removing and rehabilitating of trails that have damaged the post-flood landscape.

We should be concerned that building these trails will further entrench and legitimize motorized recreation on the landscape before it has been determined whether these uses are even scientifically sustainable on the landscape. In the case of the Castle, the science is pretty clear that motorized recreation cannot be sustainably managed.

The Castle is over-loaded and over-developed; today’s landscape damage is the result and the area is in dire need of restoration. This restoration is vitally important and must be a primary focus of management planning.

In the future, careful reconsideration has to be given to rebuilding any trail that has failed because of flooding and heavy rains. The ecosystem’s integrity and the security of our headwaters and our watersheds must be considered first; only after priorities are safeguarded is it appropriate to decide what types of recreation should occur and where they should be allowed on the landscape.▲