

A positive approach to trail advocacy



By Glen Mumey

Our family travels trails by foot, ski, and snowshoe – we are foot-propelled (FP) trail users. Naturally, we view with interest the extensive policy discussions in Alberta – especially regarding the southwest corner where we live. The general policy approach from organizations that represent FP users is a negative one – exclude off-road vehicles from our pathways. As things stand, though, there are many gasoline-propelled (GP) users, and we live in a democracy, so these recommendations often do not succeed. Either by permission, or by default through lack of rule enforcement, the quads and snowmobiles remain a substantial presence.

Our provincial government is elected to look after matters that the citizens cannot look after individually. Trails located on public land owned collectively by all of us are one of those matters. To make decisions on trails, we would expect government to weigh the number and commitment of different sets of trail users who are expressing preferences, the money that must be taxed away from others to provide benefits to these users, and any effects of the trail use, positive or negative, on those who do not use the trails.

The GP users are a pretty committed group. Most of them have spent 5-figure money for an off-road vehicle and its accoutrements. What they want from government is permission to ride on public lands. Their vehicles can quickly move them to their favourite areas, so pre-existing primitive logging roads or less are good enough for their needs. Where modest trail

improvements are desired, the GP users often provide them through volunteer work. Their case with government rests not only on the pleasure they provide their users but on the assurance that their use does little or no harm. To this end they may promise to protect streams with bridge crossings, to encourage GP users to avoid environmental damage, and to endorse some government control of their activities (though they normally do not lobby for tough law enforcement of trail rules). Their focus on permitted passage on public land is self-reinforcing – the more access available, the more GP users.

FP users are many but disparate. They are not sifted for commitment with a 5-figure ticket. Some may spend much of their free time on trails; others may just take an infrequent break from car sight-seeing with an easy hike on a national park nature path. Their advocacy is likely to take their own permitted passage for granted, perhaps by ancient usage, and to strongly demand exclusion of the GP group from public lands. They do this by stressing the harm done by that group, through damage to the land, air, water, and wildlife. Few would dispute that GP travel is more environmentally disruptive than FP, but policy makers must think about quantity of harm.

There are several weaknesses in this negative advocacy by FP groups. Systematic proof of major harm is difficult and complex to establish. Additionally, positive public benefits from FP passage may be neglected. Moreover, any success from the advocacy does not have a simple nexus of self-reinforcement.

A positive position for the FPs could take two parts – stressing public benefit from their activity, and encouraging improvements to the trail system that would recruit more FP users. One benefit beyond the pleasure of the users relates to health. With the public paying the medical bills, getting people engaged in outdoor exercise has a policy-making appeal. Extensive scientific research supports the benefit of exercise, and thereby, could develop into a quantitative case for the positive contribution of FP activity to medicare savings.

If FP activity can be demonstrated to save public money, there is a case for using some public money to promote this. Anyone who has used trails in the U.S national forests or the Canadian national parks will have observed attributes that draw people to FP trail use. They are good access roads to trailheads, well-marked trailhead areas with developed parking space, well maintained trails, and easy-to-understand route information. When any one of these conditions is deficient, FP use is discouraged.

Well-marked trailheads with good parking are practically non-existent in the extensive Alberta public lands not in parks. Signage is not expensive, and can both invite people to try trails and allay concern of getting lost. Some attractive outdoor destinations are too remote for someone who has only a half-day or a day for hiking – they might require several hours travel on an old logging road to reach a feasible starting point. FP use could be encouraged with selective access road development.

If a good FP infrastructure is in place, marketing of healthful outdoor activity

with public funds also makes policy sense. Better infrastructure would also reinforce school outdoor programs. Without the infrastructure, promotional programs can be promising an experience that turns out to be unappealing to many.

FP users could also learn from their GP counterparts on one important item, trail maintenance. Their organizations could commit that if the government does its share through infrastructure development, they would raise funds and labour for keeping trails in good condition.

Positive advocacy could also include recommending better enforcement of back country trail rules. This is an endeavor that might be joined by at least some GP users, who want trails used responsibly. Back country policing is not easy, but its cost can be kept down by recognition of a simple equation: deterrent effect = X (probability of getting caught) x Y (consequence of getting caught). X requires costly surveillance, but addressing Y with meaningful fines and vehicle seizures can both reduce the need for surveillance and

pay for some of it.

A positive approach in FP advocacy has an obvious self-reinforcing aspect. Recruiting FP users by encouraging their activity increases the future clout of the FP group. The more of us there are, and the more committed we are to trail use, the more we may be listened to by policymakers. ▲

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