

Space — A Frontier No Longer?

By Lorne Fitch, *P. Biol.*



Outer Space may still be a frontier, but the space we call wilderness, a place to recreate in Alberta's Eastern Slopes is getting increasingly crowded. The refrain I hear, from people who remember the Eastern Slopes from a previous era echoes Yogi Berra's enigmatic statement that "no one goes there, it's too crowded." I know I'm reluctant to visit there based on my memories of a place much quieter, with less traffic and fewer people.

Some might retort with some accuracy this is typical complaining from an old grump. There is though a yin and yang aspect of growing old. On the minus side is constantly forgetting where you left the car keys. On the plus side are vivid memories of the "good old days" which form a significant benchmark against which to measure changes.

My formative years were spent in the Rocky-Clearwater and Bow-Crow forests, from the late 1950s through to my entry as a biologist in the early 1970s. During family excursions on the Forestry Trunk Road we would rarely encounter another vehicle. When camping at Ram Falls, we mostly had the place to ourselves. As I started independent hunting, fishing and hiking journeys it was similar—few other people and you could scan for game from the middle of the road without getting run over. I thought it was paradise.

That might not have been evident to Henry Stelfox who immigrated to Alberta in 1906 and became a conservationist and unpaid game guardian based near Rocky Mountain House. He would have found the Forest Reserve in the 1970s crowded by

comparison to his earlier memories. Stelfox roamed the upper Clearwater watershed when caribou were still present, prior to the construction of the Forestry Trunk Road in the early 1950s. The Eastern Slopes might have been described as the "Big Empty" in Stelfox's time. Without benchmarks the sense of paradise shifts and paradise erodes imperceptibly to a shadow of a former time.

History teaches lessons in limits. Alberta has been through an earlier era of abundance; we are now in an era of over-exploitation. We need to move the dial to an age of prudent conservation and protection of what's left.

It's said, with evidence, that "the army of ecological destruction comes by road." It might be just as evident that the decline in recreational quality does so as well. Crowding, noise and declining fish and wildlife populations have those of us with long memories sensing the balance has tipped, or is close to it.

At least 20 cumulative effects studies of portions of the Eastern Slopes by government and arm's length organizations provide a compelling picture that road density and the logging footprint will shortly reach or has reached/exceeded ecological thresholds and the risks to water quality, hydrologic response (including more and bigger floods), threatened trout species, and several wildlife species are clear.

It's also clear that recreational interests are at odds with one another. We can't continue to do everything, everywhere, all the time, any time and not start running over each other, literally and figuratively. It's time for a day of reckoning and that includes all of us

who recreate in the Eastern Slopes.

Space, once abundant and taken for granted has shrunk, to the point the Eastern Slopes are not the place to "get away from it all" but rather the place where "all have come to get away." AWA's Ian Urquhart sums it up with, "To boldly go where too many go now."

Added to a very busy landscape of logging, livestock grazing, petroleum development, gravel mining, coal exploration (and a few struggling coal mines) are random campers, off highway vehicle users, mountain bikers, e-bikers, hikers, anglers, hunters, geocachers, climbers, cross-country skiers, equestrian riders, paddlers, wildlife viewers, photographers, snowmobilers and drive-through tourists. The landscape is crowded and if the Covid years are any indication, our love affair with the Eastern Slopes isn't over, it is just beginning.

When I started my rambles in the Eastern Slopes Alberta's population was 1.3 million. Now it's 4.4 million with an average annual growth rate of 1.4%. That sounds low, but the math tells us that in another 25 years an additional 2.0 million people with economic and recreational interests will make Alberta home. Like the principle of compound interest, if the Eastern Slopes are busy now, imagine the future.

Fire marshals set capacity limits for buildings, restaurants can only serve those who can find tables and chairs and there are only so many seats on the bus. There is a direct parallel to the Eastern Slopes—it is not an expanding universe, like Outer Space. It is a fixed one with only so much room for our economic and recreational pursuits. The



Random camping in the Castle CREDIT: CASTLE CROWN WILDERNESS COALITION

more we ask to do and the more of us doing it in the Eastern Slopes, the less able these landscapes are to provide watershed function, a haven for fish and wildlife, and quality recreational opportunities. Recreation management is not about adding more to the Eastern Slopes but increasing the quality of recreation by resisting the things that will diminish the experience.

All of us have experienced the frustration of a decline in quality whether from a product, a service or an experience - such as a poorly designed coffee mug that leaks, inept, unhelpful sales clerks or too many bad trips to the Eastern Slopes because too many people got there before you. It leaves us feeling cheated somehow, that things could be better. But as quality continues to decline, we realize that without an intervention it's just going to get worse.

For decades we have set limits on livestock grazing on public lands through assessments of carrying capacity. If we can do

it for cows, we should be able to tackle human carrying capacity in the Eastern Slopes although it would seem easier to describe the limits for cows instead of people.

Recreational carrying capacity is concerned with determining the number of users that can be accommodated by a given area without loss in the quality of the natural environment and/or the recreational experience. It is challenging, but not impossible to integrate human values into resource management decisions.

Other jurisdictions facing human population pressures have addressed how to protect landscapes and essential ecological functions while at the same time providing quality recreational experiences. A spectrum of options has been used but the consistent theme is that other jurisdictions treat recreation as a land use requiring planning, management, evaluation and enforcement.

While there is no magic formula for setting recreational capacities, the beginnings

might be found in the policies that initially set up the Eastern Slopes into Forest Reserves, national parks and provincial parks and protected areas. Watershed protection, either explicit or implicit, leaps to the front as a priority in all these areas, in spite of repetitive resource management decisions that run counter to the good words and intents. What we need the Eastern Slopes to be and do should be the foundation, not just satisfying every want, often at the expense of sacrificing our needs, like protecting water.

If we can agree there are ecological capacities that shouldn't be exceeded, there is a starting point. That is a big if, since some refuse to acknowledge their recreational pursuits diminish environmental quality. Paradigm shifts are hard because Albertans seem hard wired to view use of the Eastern Slopes as an entitlement. Despite this, we have been given the gift of a common problem, how to effectively manage the Eastern Slopes.

To a degree the argument might hinge on how one defines “quality.” Recreational quality can be related to perceptions of crowding, or exceeding physical capacity. It can be tied to facility capacity, as in what amenities like campgrounds, parking lots or restrooms are available. How one defines quality is also tied to social capacity, freedom of choice or how one reacts to crowding, competition, noise and possibly the perception of threats or danger from other recreationalists.

To some, a Dogpatch-like accumulation of recreational vehicles scattered over every level piece of a stream-side meadow, at the hub of a spider’s web of muddy off highway vehicle trails, with random firepits, hacked off trees and no toilet facilities might be considered as a quality recreational experience. This does not meet the test for environmental quality because of compacted soils, loss of water infiltration, erosion and sediment additions to streams, displacement of wildlife, loss of riparian vegetation and possible contamination of water quality from no toilet facilities.

Since this is an issue of regional planning, where is the Alberta government headed? Only two of seven regional plans have been published and there are glaring deficiencies in these. The rest are dead in the water and indicate an antipathy to regional planning,

the logical place to have discussions on a variety of land uses, including recreation.

In southern Alberta, the Livingstone-Porcupine Hills (L-PH) Land Footprint Management plan plotted a course to deal with a very busy landscape that, like a boiling kettle, was screaming for attention. The issue of road and trail density was addressed with a line in the sand threshold. This was subsequently blown out of the water with the Alberta Energy Regulator approving new coal exploration roads which now exceed the thresholds for linear density. The recent *Trails Act* is a blatant attempt to circumvent the ecological thresholds for road density and jump over a subregional plan that had broad public involvement and consensus. Promised, in the L-PH plan was the setting of spatial footprint thresholds to deal with industrial land uses like logging. Three years later there is no indication that the spatial footprint is being addressed. Continual failures to address carrying capacity compound over time.

For recreation the direction seems oblivious to the existing and future recreational pressures in the Eastern Slopes. It’s hard to see clearly when there are loonies over your eyes. A government funded study by the Tourism Industry Association of Alberta (2021) had six recommendations about growing recre-

ation, but made no mention of how to manage growth to protect ecological values or how to maintain recreational quality. We have yet to learn that more is not better.

Would limiting recreational use to enhance recreational experiences be easy to implement in the Eastern Slopes? Hardly! Given our tendencies of redneck freedom, this would not be viewed as visionary, but rather of overreach and too restrictive. However, if we took a clear view of crowded parking lots, increasing levels of frustration and anger between recreational interests, biodiversity concerns, an increasingly trashed landscape and a decline in perceptions of recreational quality we might at least be moved to start a conversation.

The reality, with population pressures and expectations is we are not going backward to an era of abundant empty space and fewer people. What we can do is start, with vision and restraint, on a way to salvage recreational experiences in the face of increased population pressures. It’s not too late, but it will be soon. If we don’t acknowledge the trends, the fear is we will kill the goose (the Eastern Slopes) that lays the golden eggs (quality recreational experiences). ♣

Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife Biologist and a past Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary.



Robert Frost
“The Road Not Taken”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.