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## Direct Action In The Bighorn

By Dr. Ian Urquhart, AWA Director

"Direct action" is a term I usually associate with environmentalism's dark side. It describes the activities of a monkeywrencher, a founder of Earth First, a Wiebo Ludwig. It usually calls for sabotaging or vandalizing property – its proponents justify themselves with the hope that destructive behaviour will lead those who abuse nature to mend their ways.

In late June I participated in part of AWA's campaign to give direct action a more positive face – the Recreation Use and Impact Monitoring Project in the Bighorn Wildland. AWA designed this rigorous study to document the impact of recreational activity (including quads, horses, hikers and snowmobilers) in the Bighorn Wildland, one of Alberta's few remaining large, intact, unprotected wilderness areas. AWA's objective is to give the provincial government the data needed to craft policies to protect this landscape.

After my week in the Bighorn I have no doubt that this project may prove to be very valuable. It promises to give AWA the data the government claims it needs in order to strengthen its protection of this area. When we were there the signs of illegal OHV and on-highway vehicle use were as obvious as the peaks of the Ram Range rising to the southwest of the study area. While we were gathering data we encountered a handful of people violating the area's various vehicle closures. Two fishermen drove their trucks up the trail to chase cutthroats in Onion and Hummingbird Creeks – in blatant disregard of the government's roadside sign prohibiting travel towards Onion Lake.

A third encounter proved more troubling for me. It took place near the end of our second day as the group was returning to our base camp from Onion Lake. We met two men on quads who were headed to the lake. After exchanging greetings, Tamaini asked them if they had seen a government map of the Bighorn and if they realized that the trail they were riding on was closed to OHVs until July 1st. They pleaded ignorance on both counts: they had not seen Sustainable Resource Development's (SRD) map or the sign at the parking lot, and they said they thought the trail was open to OHV use. To their credit, when they heard Tamaini's news they turned their machines around and headed back to the staging area's parking lot.

Given that they turned back, you might wonder what I found troubling about the situation. I think it highlights well how Sustainable Resource Development effectively has abdicated much of what I regard as a government department's most basic responsibility – ensuring that the public has the information needed in order to stay on the right side of the law. Unlike the bald warning to on-highway vehicles noted above, the main trail does not have sufficient signs outlining when OHVs are allowed to use it. The only mention of OHV seasons is buried on the main information billboard – a good distance from the trailhead itself – at the staging area.

While ignorance is not a defence for breaking the law, surely government has a duty to make it abundantly clear when and where certain activities are permitted. SRD has failed the public miserably in this respect when it comes to outlining trail use regulations in this portion of the Upper Clearwater/Ram Forest Land Use Zone.

This failure may be interpreted in many ways. But given the government's dismal track record on wilderness preservation in the Bighorn, you do not have to resort to cynicism to see a pitifully weak political commitment to strictly enforcing SRD's OHV access regulations. And in light of such a weak political commitment, AWA's positive version of direct action in the Bighorn may prove even more





valuable. It may well help AWA build the lever needed to push a reluctant government towards preserving what remains of the wilderness in this magnificent slice of Alberta's Eastern Slopes.

The birth of this project arose out of the Association's growing frustration with the provincial government's profile on this wilderness protection issue. In 1986 the provincial government sketched out the Bighorn Wildland Recreation Area – an area the government promised to protect from industrial development and OHV traffic. But like many a New Year's resolution, the commitment needed to give this promise meaning never materialized.

This failure to pass the required legislation foreshadowed subsequent government decisions. The most damning of these was the provincial decision last fall to give OHVs access to previously protected areas of the Eastern Slopes Prime Protection Zone. Trails up Onion Creek, Hummingbird Creek, Canary Creek, the Ram River and elsewhere – longstanding victims of illegal OHV traffic – have been opened up officially to OHV use.

Frustration over this situation only intensified when AWA participated in "stakeholder" consultations with the government and OHV user groups over what policies should guide human use of this area. In these forums the concerns of AWA staff were effectively dismissed. They heard claims from OHV users, claims never challenged by the government, that OHV use was not degrading the Bighorn's landscape.

This argument is absurd. Anyone who travels in the Bighorn will see the damage OHVs have caused when they "frolic" in fens alongside the Onion Lake trail or on the hillsides surrounding Onion Lake itself.

The primary goal of our June visit to the Bighorn was to gather baseline data on trail conditions before "Quad season" officially began on July 1st. The beautiful warm weather that welcomed the first team of the season did not greet us when we gathered at the Hummingbird Equestrian Staging Area to start this second phase of the study. For the first four days of our trip the weather was pretty grim. Rain, wet snow, hail – we saw all manner of precipitation during those first four days.

Yet even when I wondered why the weather would not be more cooperative, I could not ignore how even bad weather can look good in the Rockies and foothills. Waves of wet snow sweeping down rocky, windswept ridges, shroud-like clouds lingering just above the valley floor, hail doing the jitterbug to impress alpine buttercups – all deepened my appreciation of what nature has to offer our senses.

Over the next six days we accomplished most of the objectives set by Tamaini Snaith, Lara Smandych, and Laurie Wein, the AWA staffers who led the trip. We catalogued a number of trails into analytical units. We photographed these trail segments and recorded their characteristics (such as signs of use and extent of damage).

I think AWA members will be impressed by the quality and professionalism of the Association's recreational use study. Its designers canvassed the conservation literature extensively in order to develop a fitting framework to rank and evaluate the impact of recreational use on the landscape. By combining photo-documentation with extensive, systematic data collection, the study design promises to give the Association objective terrain damage data. This combination also will enable AWA staff and volunteers to replicate the study from year to year, further strengthening the reliability of our assessments and arguments.

*(Dr. Ian Urquhart is a professor of political science at the University of Alberta. AWA expresses thanks Alberta Ecotrust, LaSalle Adams Foundation, Shell Environment Fund, Suncor Energy Foundation, Y2Y and Wilburforce Foundation for their generous support of our work in the Eastern Slopes and our Alberta Wilderness Watch projects.)*



