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YA HA TINDA – OUR NEXT NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA?

By Dr. Herbert Kariel, AWA Director

A few weeks ago I was dumbfounded to hear that the 3,945 hectare Ya Ha Tinda Ranch might be sold or transferred to the Alberta government and that changes in its horse breeding program are being undertaken. It struck me that the Ranch, located along the Red Deer River and immediately outside the eastern boundary of Banff National Park, instead of continuing to be valued for its ecological and aesthetic significance and used to breed, train and overwinter horses for the Warden Service of western Canada's National Parks, might instead be "developed."

When I checked on this situation, Greg Kingdon, Senior Communications Advisor Western and Northern Canada Parks Canada, said that Parks Canada has no intention of selling or otherwise transferring ownership of the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch. It is his understanding that in an effort to reduce some of the costs of operating it, Parks Canada is ceasing its horse breeding program and will instead purchase horses each year. Wintering of horses will continue.

He commented that talk of selling or transferring ownership of the Ya Ha Tinda crops up from time to time, apparently because some individuals would like to see this valuable property placed in private hands. As with any natural area, whether the Ya Ha Tinda will be maintained in its present state or developed is never permanently laid to rest until development occurs.

Alberta Outdoor Adventures' Web site proclaims: "The Ya Ha Tinda [area] is probably the most beautiful country in the Rocky Mountains. It is a large valley surrounded by high mountains. Because of its natural wild grasses, wildlife abound here. On any given day we can witness elk herds numbering in the hundreds feeding on the valley floor, Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep feeding on the grassy hillsides and deer feeding alongside the bushes. It is a paradise, with two creeks passing through the valley pouring into the Upper Red Deer River."

Yet conflicting land uses for the Ya Ha Tinda area have been suggested, including a camp for underprivileged children, Boy Scout camps, special quarters for high ranking politicians, golf courses, motel lodge complexes, and ski and other major recreational developments. In the 1970s a paved highway following the Red Deer River Valley, to connect Red Deer with Lake Louise and Banff was proposed. The region has also been proposed for oil, gas, and coal extraction.

Proposals for a land exchange with the Province of Alberta continued even after 1958, when the Ranch's legal status was settled. In 1988 an official land exchange request was made by the Deputy Minister of Forestry, Lands and Wildlife, Mr. F. McDougall, on behalf of the Alberta Government. This exchange was extensively discussed by provincial and federal governmental senior and field staff.

In August 1989, Parks Canada decided against trading the Ranch. The following month, the new Alberta Acting Deputy Minister of Forestry, Mr. C.B. Smith, wrote to the Director General of Parks Canada, Western Region, "seriously asking" her to reconsider the decision" (Morgantini, 64-65).

An e-mail from Charles Zinkan, Executive Director Mountain Parks, Parks Canada, August 2003 states, "I can assure you that there are no such discussions (to dispose of the Ranch). We are examining strategies to reduce the operating costs of horse support but that is the extent of what is being considered. Any mention of sale would only be speculation by an uninformed source." Unfortunately, even if true now, this situation can easily change rapidly.





Because funding for the Ya Ha Tinda, as for the rest of Parks Canada, has not increased since 1996, there has been an effort to cut operating costs of horse support. Horses need to be retained for backcountry patrols because no substitute has yet been found that can handle trail maintenance, assisting people, monitoring wildlife, and other backcountry work as well as a warden with a horse. According to Ian Syme, Chief Warden, Banff NP, wintering of 170 to 200 horses would continue, while the breeding of six or seven colts a year would cease and horses would be purchased annually.

To raise these colts as replacement stock requires a herd of about 35 horses year-round because there would be nine brood mares, nine colts, seven to eight two-year-olds and seven to eight three-year olds being raised and trained at any time. Ranch staff will gradually begin purchasing horses and continue to train the colts to pack and saddle and to be usable by wardens with different horsemanship skills in rugged backcountry conditions. The valuable stallion, a purebred quarter horse, will be sent to the Bar-U Ranch, where it will be welcomed and possibly used for breeding. Based on average hay, veterinary and other operating costs, the plan will save about \$30,000 annually.

One night, while wondering about the future of the Ya Ha Tinda and those who follow the beat of the drummer that says, "Develop the Ranch and land surrounding it," I woke and watched the constellation Orion. I recalled the zodiac and the ancients who devised it. I thought about how they had personally related and regulated their life and the care of their land to what they directly observed in nature – that is, they adapted their philosophical outlook and actions to what takes place in nature or the natural environment.

Continuing this line of thought, I was struck by how far removed our civilization has become from natural phenomena. We now worship and believe in technology, science, and progress, and believe, in our hubris, that we through them and by having given them human traits, can solve and achieve anything.

In our haste to pursue an easier or more pleasant life, or perhaps simply to consume or have "more," we forget or do not care about the impacts upon either the environment or other individuals. By not caring about others' feelings or about virtually anything except ourselves, we are bound to destroy close relations and the natural environment and to lose because it is by helping others we care for ourselves.

Over time, our civilization has produced an ethic of greed and conquering, subduing, or using (pick your verb) "nature," the planet earth and all that is found thereon for human use, putting humans above other living and non-living things – to control the universe. This ethic has been accompanied by a view that considers land and nature as a gift, not free or deserved, which is accompanied by certain conditions required to maintain it.

Wendell Berry's seven conditions, based on nature (ecology) and human nature, concern people's motivation and intimate knowledge to care for the land. His seventh condition states: "A nation will destroy its land and therefore itself if it does not foster in every possible way the sort of thrifty, prosperous, permanent rural households and communities that have the desire, the skills, and the means to care properly for the land they are using" (Berry, 195-96).

Ultimately we do not live as isolated individuals. We depend upon our environment and each other. As social beings we exhibit certain social ties and traits. We must be neighbourly, just and kind to one another, generous to strangers, and honest in trading, and we must practice good husbandry.

After all the facts are in, what we do – that is, whose tune we follow – becomes a matter of values. A mountain view, a sunset, the presence of native plants and animals in an area all have values that cannot be measured in monetary terms. Those who would exploit our planet by developing every area as much as possible are often motivated primarily by selfishness and greed. Others believe that we need to take





responsibility for preserving and caring for nature rather than despoiling it, and thus leaving it as untouched as possible for future generations. The argument is not only one of aesthetics, but also a matter of health of the planet itself, which ultimately determines the fate of all life on earth.

By nature and history, the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch has been entrusted into the hands of Parks Canada, to which it owes its present relatively unspoiled state. Clearly its ecological and historical significance transcends alternative short-term goals. Although the Ranch is not under the jurisdiction of the National Park Act, Parks Canada is widely considered responsible for its protection and sound management.

The unique mix of wildlife and horse stock and the significant increase in recreational use makes it a management challenge that requires a regional approach, an understanding of the ecological, historical and recreational value of the ranch, and a cooperative effort by all the federal and provincial agencies with jurisdiction in the region.

How long the Ya Ha Tinda will remain in its present state without widespread support or a change in society's ethic of greed and conquest of nature is a good question. Possibly now is the time for Canadians to take action on behalf of this largely unknown gem and designate it a National Wildlife refuge.

Some of the philosophical material is based on my understanding of Wendell Berry's book, The Art of the Common-Place, Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint. Most factual information is based on or quoted from Morgantini, L. E., 1995, The Ya Ha Tinda: An ecological overview, an unpublished report prepared for Canadian Heritage, Parks Canada, Alberta Region, Calgary. I thank Martha Kostuch for suggesting that I check on the validity of the story that the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch might be sold or transferred to the Alberta government, Parks Canada staff for the information provided and Brian Horejsi and Pat Jackson for their comments on a draft.

