



Wild Lands Advocate 12(1): 21, February 2004

Helicopter Restrictions a Victory for the Bighorn

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In December 2003, the Clearwater County upheld their decision to restrict helicopter activity by Rimrock holdings Inc. in the Central Alberta Eastern Slopes and Rocky Mountains. AWA has been campaigning for formal protection of the Bighorn area for more than 30 years and is pleased to find support from Clearwater County. This decision is a positive step in the realization that these intrusive activities are not compatible with wilderness value or experience.

In Fall 2003, Rimrock Holdings Inc., who operates Icefield Helicopters, applied to the Municipal Planning Commission of Clearwater County for the removal or relaxation of condition 13 (a), which restricts the number of helicopters the company uses to three, six-passenger aircraft.

Following deliberations, the planning commission refused the application. Reasons for the refusal included concerns over the potential negative impacts that increased flights may have on wildlife, the environment and recreational users. It seemed that the Bighorn had been granted a reprieve from inappropriate helitourism activity.

In late November 2004, Rimrock appealed the County's decision. The appeal hearing was held in Rocky Mountain House by the Subdivision and Development Appeal Board (SDAB). In support of the county's initial decision, AWA submitted a written letter to SDAB outlining AWA's position on helitourism over wilderness and strongly urging and recommending the County uphold their decision to restrict helicopter activity in the area. Fortunately, the Board upheld the County's decision and Rimrock was given notification in December 2003 that their application had again been denied.

Icefield Helicopter Tours is located between Jasper and Banff National Parks on the David Thompson Highway (Highway 11). Their activities operate over the wilderness of the National Parks and in the heart of the Bighorn Wildland, AWA's long-standing area of concern. AWA and local tourism operators want increased restrictions placed on helitourism operations over wilderness areas especially in the area of Bighorn Wildland, one of the last great wilderness areas in this province.

Helitourism has no place in wilderness. Noise from helicopters can have negative impacts on wildlife through disturbance, stress and displacement of wildlife populations, particularly during sensitive seasons and at certain times of the day. Stress to wildlife is a concern in that helicopter activity may cause species to abandon preferred habitat out of fear or irritation and subsequently lead to long-term population declines. Studies have shown that animals such as the bighorn sheep and grizzly bears have their feeding, breeding or other habits suddenly disrupted from approaching helicopter. Some birds have been found to flush when disturbed by helicopters, which may cause the abandonment or displacement of nests.

Helicopters also disrupt the solitude of the wilderness experience of backcountry users and diminish its value. Noise from helicopters can negatively impact the recreation activities of those expecting a quiet setting away from the hustle and bustle and noise of urban centres. A local survey found that a large majority of users of this area think that helicopter tourism of wilderness areas is inappropriate.

AWA knows first hand the disturbance air traffic can have on backcountry experience. The Association has been conducting monthly field studies in the Bighorn area over the last year. The roar of passing domestic/international air traffic over the area is a common daily occurrence. In a wilderness where you can travel for up to 10 days without encountering any sign of civilization, and drink directly from the streams, the sound of engines day and night offers little hope for a genuine wilderness escape. The area





is already under threat from the recent legalization of motorized activity in the area, as well as the selling of oil and gas leases. An increase in helicopter activity would only further negatively impact biodiversity, ecological integrity and backcountry recreation in this magnificent area.

