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Whitehorse Wildland Park and Cheviot Mine: Exploring Issues and Options

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Cardinal River Operations (CRO), operated by Elk Valley Coals, started in March this year to push its huge haul road from the Luscar Mine site up the McLeod valley toward the old mine village of Mountain Park in the middle of its Cheviot Mine permit area. This haul road is a different proposal from the initial plan.

The original corridor, which was approved after the EUB/CEAA Environmental Impact Hearings in 1997, was to have had three separate components: a rebuilt railway to haul processed coal from the mine site, an upgraded public road to accommodate all mine traffic as well as public vehicles, and an additional right-of-way for the power line. The current proposal will leave one large scar on the landscape, with heavy truck traffic 24/7, but there are a few points in its favour, compared to its predecessor.

The haul road should have less impact on the McLeod River than the railway line, which would have required major disturbance of a considerable amount of the river banks. The haul road corridor is being built further up the hillside, with wider bridges, rather than culverts, over the main creek crossings at Whitehorse and Prospect Creeks, which should minimize the concerns of DFO and the fisheries and harlequin duck experts; also there will be "water management structures" to prevent run-off into the river.

Secondly, it is all in one disturbed corridor (and it is a large one!) with the haul road parallel most of the way on the uphill side of the rebuilt public road; there will be less traffic on the public road, as all mine traffic will be on the radio-controlled private haul road. The power line will be incorporated in the same footprint, rather than a separate disturbance area. Last but not least, there will be no large processing plant at Mountain Park, which means no associated tailings ponds etc., and most of the regular mine traffic will go directly to Luscar. Also, as far as the Cadomin residents are concerned, the haul road and truck noise will be over the hill away from the village almost entirely, rather than moved to its back doorstep.

But, and there is a very big BUT, what will the grizzly bears and other wildlife think of it? There is no doubt that the constant heavy traffic day and night will constitute a major deterrent to wildlife movement through and across the very narrow McLeod corridor. Parks Canada, wildlife biologists, and many others have expressed considerable concern. What is sometimes referred to as a "high speed" road is actually "high speed" for 300-tonne trucks – that is, about 35 to 45 kph. So while speed undoubtedly kills wildlife, this is referring more to highway speeds over 70 kph. According to the mine people, grizzly bears and other wildlife have become habituated to similar traffic at the Luscar Mine site.

But there is the additional hazard in the McLeod valley of the adjacent public road, separated from the haul road itself by one-and-a-half metre-high earthen berms (by regulation, half the height of the truck wheels), with gaps for drainage and to allow wildlife escape. The traffic on the gravel public road will be faster (up to 90 kph) and more irregular, but also compounded by the fact that the County now allows off-highway vehicles to use it. As a result, there has been a big increase in OHV traffic in the area. Unfortunately, no reliable traffic figures are available as no adequate monitoring was done before the road closure. All this unpredictable traffic will also contribute to wildlife habitat avoidance.

What happens next?

CRO has applied for a License of Approval for its first pit at the old Cheviot Creek West Pit site. They hope to get approval soon and to start active mining toward the end of the year. Once mining starts,





access to the west of the Grave Flats road will probably be restricted north of the old Mountain Park townsite. The public road should be open by that time, allowing direct access to the Cardinal Divide and Mountain Park OHV Staging Area. There will still be access, by foot only, along the west ridge of the Cardinal Divide and along the base of Tripoli and Cheviot Mountains, as this is within the Whitehorse Wildland Park (WWP) boundaries.

The whole question of access, apart from obvious restrictions at active mining sites, is to be reviewed soon by a regional access management committee. Decisions regarding OHV access during and post-mine reclamation is going to be the next big concern.

What can we do?

Assuming there are no further delays (depending on Ben Gadd's appeal for an EIA) and active mining starts, the best thing to do is to keep a close eye on the mine and make sure it lives up to its commitments. As stewards of the WWP, this is one of the roles that the Alberta Native Plant Council (ANPC) and Edmonton Section, Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) have been playing for several years now – but that could be the subject of another whole article!

One of the major factors considered as contributing to the cumulative effects of the mine at the 1999 Hearings was that of OHV access, the need to protect the land adjacent to the mine as a buffer between the mine workings and Jasper National Park (JNP) and concern that OHVs would be displaced to this and other more sensitive areas, such as the Cardinal Headwaters.

The Mountain Park area at the centre of the Cheviot Mine permit is at present a great playground for OHVs, as it is crisscrossed by old mining roads, exploration trails, etc. – “pristine” it ain't, as some would have you believe! I should perhaps clarify that in addition to the Mountain Park staging area for OHVs, Mountain Park is the recognized old mining village site on the Grave Flats road and includes the recently refurbished local cemetery, where the Mountain Park Environmental Protection and Heritage Society has been putting in a lot of hard work. The village site and cemetery have been recognized by the mine as a valuable heritage site and are not included in the mine workings. So I find the term used by some of the environment groups of a new Mountain Park or Mountain Wildland Park a bit confusing.

In addition, the presence of the existing Whitehorse Wildland Park has been underestimated. This extended the previous Cardinal Divide Natural Area, as recommended by the Panel in 1997, to provide an essential buffer between the mine and JNP. (Cheviot Mine is not “adjacent” to JNP as is frequently stated – the Whitehorse Wildland Park is!)

A Forest Land Use Zone (FLUZ) is also in existence, extending from Highway 16 south to the Brazeau river, along the borders of JNP and basically all the Prime Protection Alpine Zone 1. It includes the Luscar and Gregg Mines as well as Cheviot, so legislative means of controlling OHV access already exists. Between the Whitehorse Wildland Park – where a large number of the significant plant species are already protected, the Mountain Park heritage site, and the FLUZ, we already have substantial protection for some of the land of concern to environmental groups.

But, and again a big BUT, there needs to be effective control and limitations on OHV access in these sensitive areas. The Cheviot Mine held a stakeholders access management plan meeting recently, the stakeholders being almost entirely those with an interest in motorized recreation access. As a steward of the adjacent WWP, I had requested to be included, but unfortunately I was unable to attend, so I sent in a written submission.

I pointed out the various recommendations and conditions that are required to be met – in particular, the need for better regional access planning, taking into account all the cumulative effects of roads for oil,





gas, forestry, and mines, as well as OHV recreation. As a result there is going to be such a meeting, but details are not yet available.

More local and non-motorized recreation groups need to be involved who are willing to stand up against the very vocal OHV lobby groups. Whitehorse Wildland Park needs your help to maintain its conservation character and more public awareness of its important role as a buffer for the mine. And we need to find a more acceptable place for OHV recreation and a new OHV staging area that do not impinge on these sensitive ecological areas. The FLUZ covers approximately 1,000 sq km (mostly inaccessible mountains), while the whole Coal Branch Integrated Resource Management area is roughly 8,400 sq km, so there are many alternatives for OHV users.

I am looking to the future, when the Cheviot Mine workings to the west of the Grave Flats road are reclaimed using the best techniques available, becoming a showpiece for mine reclamation for plant and wildlife diversity. By excluding OHVs, legislated through the FLUZ, this could become a very valuable addition to our future protected areas, along with the existing Mountain Park heritage site and Whitehorse Wildland Park.

This, I feel, is a reasonable and readily achievable prospect, as many of the pieces are already in place and would have a lot more local support (apart from the OHV lobby!) than a hypothetical completely new "park." A Friends of Whitehorse Wildland Park has recently been formed for local people to help with particular projects in the WWP. But the more support, the better!

For more information, or offers of help, contact Alison Dinwoodie, (780) 437-7183 or Lara Smandych, AWA, at (403) 283-2025 or 1-866-313-0713.

(Alison Dinwoodie has been a spokesperson for the CDNA / WWP Stewards for over 20 years. Alison notes that "this article was supposed to have appeared in the June WLA, but due to human error (mine!) it missed the boat! But it can now be updated a bit more.")

