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Trail Damage in Bighorn Needs Long-Term Solution

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Significant trail damage and continuing illegal OHV activity were found in the second season of monitoring recreation impacts in Bighorn Wildland. Over the past year, I have met with members of Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) and written many letters requesting that they take immediate action to better enforce access regulations, to restore damaged areas and improve management efforts in Bighorn Wildland.

We felt that an increase in officer presence, timing of patrols in the area, trail closures, and clear and concise signs outlining regulations and penalties for non-compliance must be implemented for effective long-term management. Although some small mitigative steps have been taken, the larger problem remains to be resolved: how to prevent the damage occurring now and in the future.

AWA has identified several damaged trail sites that are in need of immediate remediation attention to prevent further environmental degradation. These sites constitute some of the worst damage and violation of land use regulations within the area surveyed. Many of these areas need to be closed, revegetated or reclaimed and signs placed to remind users to stay on designated trails.

Trail braiding from OHV and equestrian use was the most common type of damage observed in both forested and meadow habitat. Braiding produced intensive and extensive damage to soil structure, and vegetation through off trail use. We observed that the main reason for braiding was to avoid large, water/mud holes formed within the centre of the primary trail. In wet periods, these mud and water puddles, in many cases, dominate the designated trail and force users, including hikers, to go off trail.

After meeting with SRD and sending letters of concern regarding improved management of the Bighorn including the need for improved signage, and trail closures, we got a glimpse at progress. On our September monitoring trip, we were pleased to find that SRD had erected a number of new signs, had undertaken some reseeding, as well as trail closures. Monitoring will continue in 2005 to measure the effectiveness of these efforts. We hope this maintenance activity will continue throughout the area.

There are varying opinions as to the best solution to deal with the degradation caused by recreational activity. SRD has two main priorities: enforcement and maintenance. Since they are the only body who has the authority to enforce regulations in the area, much of the maintenance responsibility has been placed in the hands of local stewardship groups. Although we recognize the efforts of these groups to attempt to repair trail damage, one of our concerns lies in the lack of training and supervision of the work being undertaken. All work within the Wildland should be conducted by qualified individuals, with the most natural, preferably local, materials. Simply owning large equipment does not constitute an ability to properly maintain an area.

We need to ask ourselves whether we are prepared to accept a continued degradation of our wilderness areas with attempts to mitigate the symptoms rather than the underlying problem. Do we really want a medley of continuously patched ruts, mud holes and eroded streambeds on our trails? As wilderness continues to experience increased pressure from a growing number of recreationists, long-term solutions must be sought rather than short term band-aid solutions. AWA continues to call for legislated protection of Bighorn Wildland and protection from poorly regulated and poorly enforced recreational activity.





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