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Coal Mining on Caw Ridge: An Unwanted Legacy

By Lara Smandych

We are standing with Gene Wusaty and his colleagues on the lip of one of the great black coal pits on the top of Caw Ridge on a cold April day. It is one of several pits that pockmark the delicate alpine meadows, still snow-covered. Large numbers of bighorn sheep were killed in this very area by hunters. The sheep had grown accustomed to humans when the McIntyre and Smoky River Coal mines were operational and never thought of running away. It was one of the many lessons learned in the unexpected and unwelcome legacy of surface coal mining in our wild places.

Wusaty is the vice president of operations for the Grande Cache Coal Corporation (GCC), the mining company currently operating on Caw Ridge, 20km from the town of Grande Cache. He is taking Christyann Olson, AWA's Executive Director, and me on a tour of their current operations in the No.12 Mine South B2 extension pit.

We survey the scarred valley. There is a mountain created by the spoils dumped by the continuous exchange of trucks with \$75,000 tires that carry 300 tonnes of unwanted rock and soil with each haul. Wusaty shows us the grade of the roads, the extent of the pits, the differences in the stages of the excavations and talks of their plans to someday mine the entire extent of Caw Ridge.

There is more than 30 years of coal mining history on Caw Ridge and adjacent areas. AWA has opposed coal mining activities on Caw Ridge since mining began with McIntyre Mines Ltd. in the early 1970s. The mining history has been volatile due to fluctuations in global coal markets. GCC's CEO Robert Stan has been in the forefront with the media for his success in negotiating record prices for coal, that is in large part destined for the Korean market.

Caw Ridge is a majestic alpine ridge of provincial and national significance, stretching over an estimated 21km² area, and lying adjacent to Willmore Wilderness Park. The Ridge has been described as the Serengeti of Alberta, an area for Watchable Wildlife, and has been noted as being one of six remaining unprotected biological hotspots in the Rocky Mountain region. Of particular concern for the area is the fate of one of Alberta's largest populations of mountain goats and the already threatened Redrock/Prairie Creek caribou herd.

As we make our way up the winding, muddy mine road into the B2 mine pit area, I question the impact the mine is having on the caribou herd and what their monitoring is revealing.

"We have some confused caribou," Wusaty acknowledges, pointing out the complex maze of barriers these animals must negotiate in order to survive.

In addition to GCC's operations, Weyerhaeuser has large tracts of forest on the chopping block and plans for a large access road to the north. Talisman has also recently proposed a 70 km pipeline that transects critical caribou range. The cumulative footprint within the entire area is huge. It is an indicator of government's failure to regulate activity within the ranges of Alberta's dwindling caribou herds.

But Bighorn sheep adapt well to coal mining operations. Not only do sheep adapt to the noise and human presence of the disturbed area, they also are attracted to the salt left on or near the surface of the piled debris. But that adaptation comes at a price. Wusaty recounts the bumper to bumper traffic along the entrance to the mine and the slaughter of many unsuspecting animals when SRCL closed.





In 2000, Smoky River Coal Limited (SRCL) went into receivership due to declining world coal prices. SRCL abandoned their fully stripped mine pit at Caw Ridge, leaving a large scarred moonscape on the edge of a wildlife mecca. Not only was the Alberta public left with a distasteful mess and a large reclamation bill, but the site was left unmonitored.

Given the safety and liability issues brought about during mine operations, access was closely monitored by SRCL. However, with the demise of the company, the area became a free-for-all to recreationists, including hunters looking to take home large bighorn sheep.

According to Tom McDonald of the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation, bighorn sheep in the mine area are known to have horn bases with a circumference as great as 16 inches. This is even larger than those found in the Cadomin area, known for its large-horned sheep. Given the sheep hunt, GCC is concerned about access once operations and reclamation have been completed and would support an access management regime for the area.

Ideally, the entire ridge should have been left within Willmore Wilderness Park, but now half the ridge is gone, taken away in truckloads of mined coal. There are plans to take down the entire ridge, so AWA does not want to see mining progress further. GCC is investigating the possibility of obtaining permits from Alberta Energy to advance their operations into the remaining ridge.

GCC says they will assume responsibility for reclamation of the mine area, but only after they remove the remaining coal. GCC currently has not received final approvals for the final phase of mining of the No.12 B2 pit.

AWA will continue to meet with GCC and monitor their activity in the B2 pit. We have also written to the Ministers of Energy and Sustainable Resource Development asking them not to approve further industrial activity on Caw Ridge.

