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Recreation Monitoring Reveals Improvements and Persistent Problems in Bighorn

By David Samson, AWA Conservation Specialist

Alberta Wilderness Association's Bighorn Wildland Recreation Monitoring Project continues to reveal disturbing evidence of continued illegal ATV use in the Bighorn Wildland's Upper Clearwater/Ram Forest land Use Zone. This is despite efforts by Alberta's Sustainable Resource Department (SRD) personnel and various special-interest user groups to educate users and mitigate and prevent further damage.

With detailed surveying of the entire study area complete, we have an excellent overall view of the extent of the existing damage and we are still witnessing evidence of ongoing illegal use. Equally worrisome, though, is the potential for accelerating damage that could easily occur with increased recreation usage, both legal and illegal, if not properly managed and/or enforced. Ultimately, this leads to serious questions on the long-term sustainability of the recreation uses presently allowed in this area and questions on the effectiveness of the management plan.

The extremely wet season that the area experienced this spring and summer has exacerbated this whole situation. Heavy precipitation in the area is not the only factor, however, as we continue to observe damage and evidence of illegal use that clearly occurred prior to June of this year. We observed how rapidly rutting, braiding, and erosion can occur when certain weather conditions, types of terrain, and types and volumes of recreation uses combine.

It is not just spring and summer recreation that is of concern for illegal use. SRD described a recent situation that involved hunters on ATVs who made the choice to retrieve the results of their hunting efforts by driving down a section of trail that SRD had obviously closed. Earlier in the season, we saw evidence on this same section of trail where ATVs had circumvented numerous signs and temporary blockages put in place by SRD, only to proceed down this trail. The ATVs left their own trail on heavily washed-out portions of trail and included the creation of new off-trail braids through trees and shrubs.

After the 2004 season, AWA representatives met with SRD officials to discuss their management plans for the area for the following season. During the 2005 season, we could see that SRD had been implementing some planned measures in the field, with some of the efforts appearing to be successful.

For example, we observed a site where access to a stream had been blocked off with large mounds of rock by SRD and a sign was posted clearly stating that access was not permitted. This site illustrated that often strong measures are needed and can work in getting the message across to ATV riders of where they should not ride. Our observations of this site throughout the season reveal that this measure appears to have been successful. Unfortunately, as recounted above, sometimes even these types of measures are simply not enough to deter riders who believe that somehow the management rules do not apply to them; additionally, they appear not to understand the environmental impact and not to realize the damage inflicted on their own user groups.

Our concerns with sustainability of the current recreation management strategy for this area have been recognized by SRD. They acknowledge that we have continued concerns with illegal off-trail and out-of-season ATV use, and with damage mounting from unmanaged horse use; they also acknowledge our apprehension that there may not be sufficient resources and expertise available to SRD personnel and user groups to adequately manage the area, which was officially opened to ATV use in 2002.





We will be continuing with our study in the area and would like to be optimistic about seeing responsible use of the area, but some of the trends we have observed so far are not very encouraging.

AWA would like to acknowledge the support of Alberta Conservation Association in our Bighorn Wildland Recreation Monitoring Project.

