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Recreation Damage in Bighorn Shows Current Activities not Sustainable

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Illegal off-highway vehicle (OHV) activity and serious trail damage from both OHV and equestrian use continue in the Bighorn Wildland, according to new observations made during the 2005 season, the third year of AWA's four-year recreation monitoring study. More work needs to be done before the current recreation activities in this area can be considered sustainable.

AWA is concerned with how the landscape is impacted by recreational use and how these activities are managed. Our focus is on how all recreation activities are managed to keep the ecological integrity of the area intact and to allow appropriate uses so that people can enjoy the Bighorn Wildland gem in perpetuity.

AWA has assessed about 90 kilometres of trail within the Ram-Clearwater Forest Land Use Zone, located within the Prime Protection Zone (PPZ) in the Eastern Slopes southwest of Rocky Mountain House. Under the Alberta government's Policy for Resource Management of the Eastern Slopes (1984), the intent of the PPZ is to preserve environmentally sensitive terrain and valuable ecological and aesthetic resources, and to preclude motorized recreation as an acceptable use.

The persistence of OHVs using trails not designated for motorized use, as well as the illegal off-season use of trails, is a chronic concern. Illegal activity is occurring on a minimum of 10 per cent of days observed and occurs any day of the week. However, on one section of trail, illegal activity was occurring 30 per cent of the time.

This level of activity and disregard for rules (which we assume were constructed to make the activity sustainable for those willing to abide by them) leads us to question the effectiveness of enforcement and the appropriateness of motorized activities in a PPZ.

The government of Alberta recently made changes to the penalties for unauthorized operation of a motor vehicle/OHV in a park/recreation area. The fine has increased from \$50 (established in the mid-1980s) to \$250; however, the costs to a violator can be substantially higher, depending on the circumstances and the court process.

Although this is a move in the right direction, enforcement of laws prohibiting these violations is a challenge in large, relatively remote areas. The commitment from government, including the allocation of adequate resources for enforcement and a comprehensive education and enforcement strategy, is paramount in order for these deterrents to be effective in making recreational activities sustainable and enjoyable for all users.

Damage from recreational activities is extensive. Of the trails measured this past season, 22.5 per cent of their length was structurally damaged or compromised. The average maximum depth of structural damage on the trails assessed was 0.35 metres. The average length of a damaged section of trail was 88 metres.

Both equestrian and OHV activities are producing signs of wear on the landscape. Of the trails studied this summer designated for OHV use, 44 per cent were primarily OHV trails and 45 per cent were





primarily equestrian trails. Of the secondary trails that branch off the main designated trails, which are legal for equestrian users and illegal for motorized users, 41.7 per cent were primarily from OHV use.

Overall, 78 per cent of all damage observed was in the moderate/severe to severe categories. One type of activity was not clearly more damaging than the other. Equestrian and OHV trails had moderate/severe to severe levels of structural damage at 78 and 80 per cent, respectively.

A more subjective observation from this summer's activities is that the multiple-use strategy for the area appears to be gravitating to a segregated-use in actual practice, as the equestrian users appear to concentrate their use on trails where OHVs are not permitted.

The government's response to AWA's study has been selective. The Monitoring Standing Committee for the Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan, of which AWA is not a member, indicated that AWA "is encouraging specific area closures for equestrian users due to trail damage and non-recovery of vegetation" and "continued to use trail counters and has evaluated equestrian damage in specific areas."

In fact, AWA's study is not focusing on damage from any one specific user. The study is first identifying and assessing damage sites, and then identifying, where possible, the primary user. Both ATV and equestrian users are the major contributors to damage and it is apparent that some trails used primarily by either user could stand to be closed for restoration.

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

