

RECREATION PRESSURE TAKES ITS TOLL ON THE BIGHORN

By Chris Wearmouth, AWA Conservation Specialist

AWA's five-year research project concerning recreational impacts in the Bighorn focuses on a 76-km trail network for motorized and non-motorized users in the Upper Clearwater-Ram Forest Land Use Zone. This trail system is situated in the Ram River watershed, which feeds the Clearwater River and from there, the North Saskatchewan River.

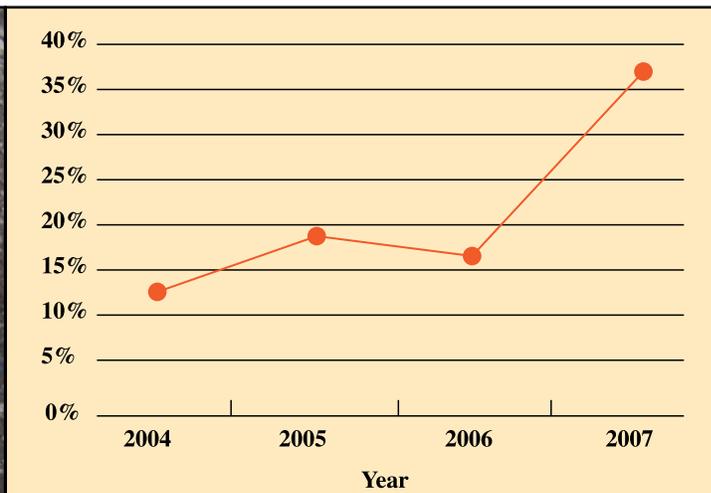
The project, which began in 2003, looks at the sustainability of current recreational activity in terms of damage caused to this sensitive area, a Prime Protection Zone designated under

summer months in four years. We suspect that the increase is due in part to a growing awareness of the area, promoted through SRD maps and local off-highway vehicle clubs.

Second, the data show an increase in the illegal use of the trail system. All trails within the system, except Ranger Creek trail, are open to motorized recreation from July 1 to April 30. Ranger Creek trail is open only from December 1 to April 30. Illegal use of designated trails by motorized vehicles during the two months when they are closed now constitutes 37 percent of all

highway vehicle use is permitted. As our previous research has shown, 20 percent of this network is considered to be damaged, unable to sustain the recreational uses presently on the land. Coupled with a growing volume of traffic and an unwillingness to obey regulations, it is questionable whether any motorized use is appropriate recreation for an area that contains one of the sources of clean water for residents across the prairie provinces.

Primary data collection will continue until summer 2008, after which AWA will continue to monitor



AWA Director Heinz Unger downloads data from one of the traffic counters in the Bighorn. C. WEARMOUTH

Table 2. Proportion of illegal passes to total passes.

the Eastern Slopes Policy of 1977. We monitored motorized recreation through traffic counters to gain an understanding of trends in traffic volume and user compliance with regulations.

Continuing our work this year, AWA spent three days downloading data from the traffic counters. This year's information, compiled with data gathered since 2004, broadens our understanding beyond what was reported last March in our interim report.

First, more vehicles are passing by the counters each year, leading to the conclusion that the number of vehicles on the system has increased (Table 1). Onion Creek trail, for example, has seen an increase of 384 percent over

traffic recorded by the counters (Table 2). This high percentage, along with its increase over the years, shows a growing disregard for complying with the regulations of the trail system.

These are unacceptable trends for an area under Prime Protection, which by the government's own definition should mean that no off-

the area for damage resulting from recreational use. For a complete history of the Bighorn and our monitoring project, see the August 2007 issue of the *Wild Lands Advocate*, available on our website along with the "Interim Summary" report: www.AlbertaWilderness.ca.

Trail	Recording Period	2004	2005	2006	2007	4 Year Change
Onion Creek Trail	July1 – Sept.30	382	n/a	906	1712	+348%
Canary Creek Trail	July1 – Sept.10	236	379	327	701	+197%
Back Trail North	July1 – Sept.11	210	343	381	n/a	+81% (3 year change)

Table 1. Summer traffic trend on designated trails, 2004-2007