

BIGHORN USERS SEEK BETTER MANAGEMENT TO PROTECT WILDERNESS VALUES

By Chris Wearmouth, Conservation Specialist

Backcountry recreationists are hoping for better management to protect the pristine wilderness of the Bighorn, according to a recent survey of users in the area.

Last summer, Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) surveyed individuals and organizations active in the Bighorn to find out where Albertans' values and concerns lie when it comes to enjoying this magnificent mountain and foothills region in the west-central part of our province. The survey results show that almost half of the individuals and a third of the organizations believe that the most important goal for the future of the Bighorn is protection of its natural, wild character. Management issues topped the participants' list of current and future topics to be addressed, followed by issues of access, including access by motorized recreationists.

"Unless the regulators make a serious effort to protect the Bighorn, it will be lost as a valuable asset for Alberta, Canada and the World," wrote David Hatto of Wandering Waters Canoe Tours, which operates heritage canoe trips and winter adventures in the Bighorn.

The wilderness character of the Bighorn and its importance to Alberta's watersheds has long been recognized by the people of this province. Lying just east of Banff and Jasper National Parks, much of the Bighorn was designated as Prime Protection and Critical Wildlife Zones in the Government of Alberta's *Eastern Slopes Policy*, which included extensive public consultation. Its numerous rivers bring water to more than a million Albertans while the 7,000 km² of surrounding lands provide extensive and relatively intact habitat for mountain and foothills wildlife.

The area presently maintains its ecological integrity primarily because of a lack of development and an absence of roads. In 2002 a new management strategy was implemented with the designation of six Forest Land Use Zones



AWA volunteer Stephanie Whitehead surveys a couple enjoying the Bighorn.
C.WEARMOUTH

(FLUZ) and the naming of the "Bighorn Backcountry." Each of these six FLUZs covers a specific geographic location and comes with its own regulations and permissible activities. The name itself is merely a convenient moniker and does not provide protected area status.

Following the designation of the FLUZ system, AWA began conducting trail monitoring research in the Bighorn area. It wasn't long before we recognized the need for an informed body of knowledge about the area's primary users – recreationists looking

for a wilderness or backcountry experience. From May to September of 2007, the survey was conducted through on-the-ground solicitation at campgrounds, trails, and other gathering places for people enjoying the area. This was complemented by mailouts to organizations and AWA members in the area.

The individual participants, whose names were not required in the survey, came from a wide background, ranging from those on their first trip to those having spent more than 50 years in the area. They represented many different user groups from motorized recreation to climbing. Likewise, the organizations contacted represented different interests, including recreation clubs, hunting, and equestrian outfitters, as well as campgrounds, lodges, and outdoor education groups. In total, 158 individuals and 22 organizations representing groups ranging in size from a single operator to more than 9,000 members responded to the survey.

The individual survey shows that by far the largest group of users believe the priorities for the Bighorn are pristine wilderness and fish and wildlife habitat. Echoing this opinion, organizations also ranked these priorities as being in the top three, adding as their number one priority the area's importance as a source of clean water. "This valley has the opportunity to become a prototype for land use/water planning if done in the near future,"

AWA's VISION FOR BIGHORN



The Bighorn area contains wilderness that must be given Wildland Park designation according to the boundaries delineated in 1986 by Minister Don Sparrow. Protection must ensure, in perpetuity, the security of the Bighorn's wild land, wildlife, and wild waters. Wildland Park status must preclude motorized access. The adjacent Bighorn area east of the Wildland Park must be managed to the highest standards of practice by all who use the area including industry and recreationists.

wrote Jeff Wilson, owner/operator of Klondike Ventures, a local adventure tourism company.

At the top of the list for changes that people wish to see in the Bighorn now and in the future is the issue of managing effectively for these priorities. “Wake up, Alberta government, the Bighorn is a world-class destination,” wrote one survey participant. “In any other country or province, the Government would invest in, and manage for sustainable uses, a jewel like this.”

Other issues identified as important under “management” are more enforcement of rules, the creation of a management plan, and improved trail management.

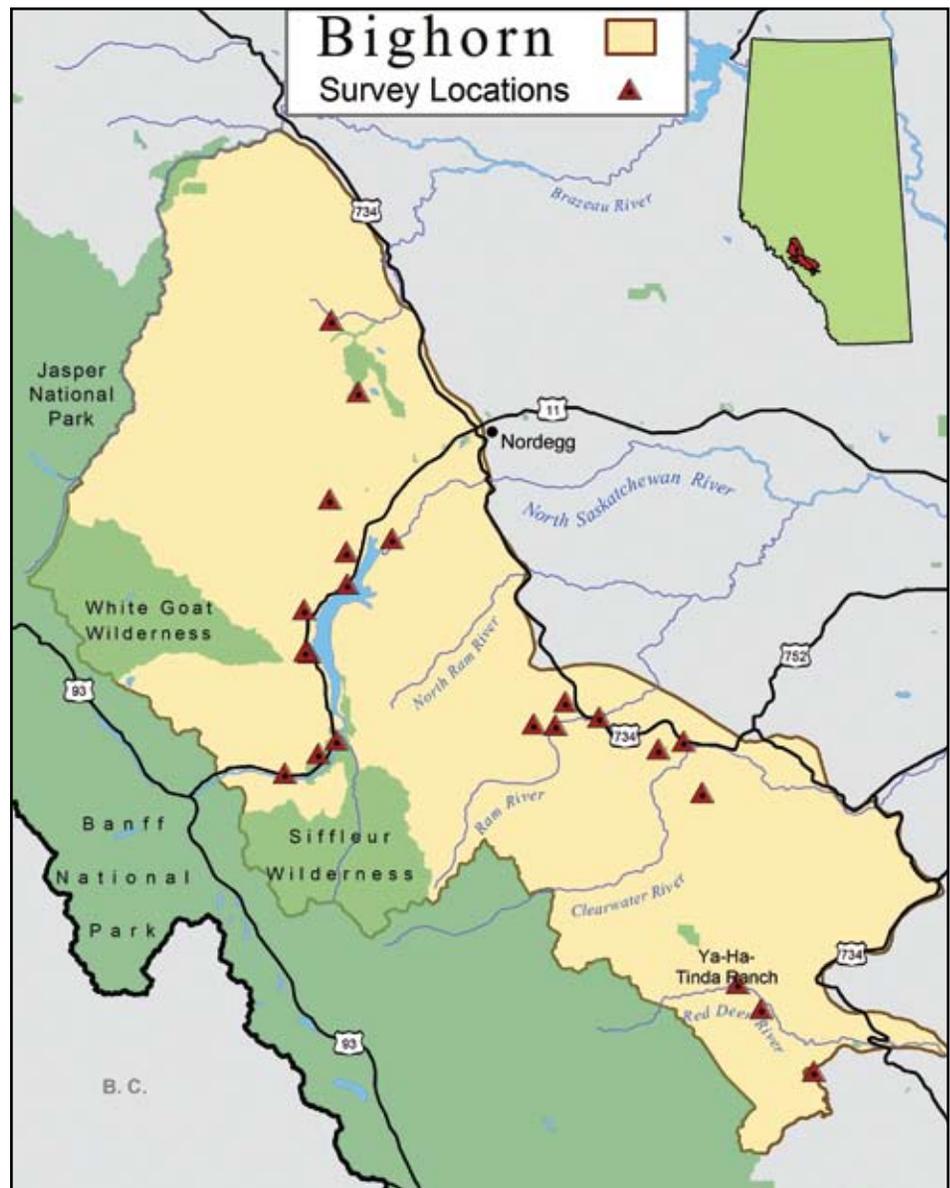
Second to management was a concern among individuals and organizations about access to the area, most often in regards to motor vehicles including off-highway vehicles (OHVs). As another respondent wrote, “I wish our government would have the vision to see that motorized vehicle use is going to eventually destroy the wildness of this area.”

In the December 2007 issue of the *Wild Lands Advocate*, we reported this year’s findings of AWA’s Bighorn traffic monitoring project: the volume of traffic and illegal activity along the trail system near the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area is increasing. It is highly questionable whether this intensive use by high-impact recreation is suitable for an area that has been designated Prime Protection and houses the drainage for the Ram River, one of the major tributaries of the North Saskatchewan River.

However, a proportion of those surveyed felt that wilderness values have to be balanced with allowing access to the area for all user groups. One individual noted that “things always get better when there is a need or want to use them,” adding that OHV users should be included in the future of the Bighorn.

While there are hopes of balancing wilderness values with access, and voices in favour of motorized recreation within the Bighorn, most who provided their views on the subject saw the need for OHV use to be prohibited or limited in order to protect the natural character of the area.

AWA’s vision for the Bighorn is supported by the outcome of this survey. As the results show, many of



Map of the Bighorn showing the boundary of AWA’s Area of Concern and locations of the on-the-ground survey

those who are active in the Bighorn want the area to be managed for wilderness and conservation values. AWA believes that this would be best done through the creation of a Wildland Provincial Park with boundaries that follow the general outline of the Prime Protection and Critical Wildlife Zones. With the addition of an appropriately administered transition zone to the east of the proposed park, the interests of motorized recreationists and industry could be balanced in the Bighorn with the priorities identified in the survey.

In fact, an equivalent protected area was promised by the Government of Alberta in 1986. Officials went so far as to identify the area on government maps, but the legislation was never put in place to fully protect the area; the plans for

protection were eventually replaced by the current FLUZ system. It is our hope that this survey will be part of the process that will lead to the belated fulfillment of this promise. The future of the Bighorn depends on many longstanding policy challenges that need to be resolved by Albertans. If not confronted, these issues will continue to slide and we could lose one of our province’s great wilderness areas. And as one respondent said, “Once it is gone, it will be gone forever.”

The complete survey report, “Recreational User Perceptions of the Bighorn,” is available on our website. For an in-depth look at the Bighorn, read the August 2007 issue of the *Wild Lands Advocate*, available at www.AlbertaWilderness.ca.