

REDUCING ACCESS IS THE ANSWER: NOW WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?

By Nigel Douglas



Peanut

12" x 12" mixed media on panel

© LUCIE BAUSE

Q: What is the single most important thing that needs to be done to recover grizzly bears in Alberta?

A: Reduce Access.

Q: What is the single most important thing that needs to be done to recover caribou in Alberta?

A: Reduce Access.

Q: What is the single most important thing that needs to be done to recover westslope cutthroat trout in Alberta?

A: Reduce Access.

Q: What is the single most important thing that needs to be done to protect our headwaters, source of clean drinking water for most Albertans?

A: Reduce Access.

One answer to so many questions. A surprising number of the environmental issues we face in Alberta today have exactly the same starting point: the rampant spread of industrial access throughout the province and the associated poorly managed recreational motorized access that comes in its wake. The recognition of the scale of the problem has grown enormously over the



“Key priorities have included the protection of the watershed, fisheries and wildlife.”

Ghost-Waiparous Operational Access Management Plan

PHOTO: AWA FILES

past few years, but the willingness and the ability to deal with it has moved at a much more sedate pace.

Some will say it is the infrastructure that comes with industrial operations – the roads, the seismic lines, the pipelines – that is the problem. Others will say it is not the access itself that is the problem; it is the way we use that access. It is probably true, for example, that roads can actually “improve” grizzly habitat insofar as they might provide sunshine in previously dense forest, allowing grizzly food plants to thrive. But, they are also extremely good at killing grizzly bears: they are a population sink.

Effective access management ultimately will have to deal with both sides of the coin. The sheer volume of roads and trails and seismic lines will have to be physically reduced, by decommissioning existing access and reducing the amount of new infrastructure being built. And at the same time, use of existing access will have to be better managed, by gated access and better enforcement of regulations.

Two recent reports have highlighted the extent of the problem and the reluctance of the Alberta government to deal with it.

Castle Access Study

In April 2011, Global Forest Watch Canada released a new report, *Castle Area Forest Land Use Zone: Linear Disturbances, Access Densities and Grizzly Bear Habitat Security Areas*.

The report found access densities more than twice those recommended by the province for Core Grizzly Bear Areas. The Castle area, north of Waterton National Park, is part of the area mapped in 2009 by the Alberta government as a *Nationally Environmentally Significant Area* and significant portions of the area are designated as *Prime Protection* and *Critical Wildlife Habitat*.

Global Forest Watch Canada was retained by the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition and Mike Judd, a local resident and outfitter, to conduct a study of linear disturbances in the Castle area as part of their intervention in an Alberta Energy Resources Conservation Board hearing into Shell Canada’s proposed Mount Backus well. The report looked at motorized use of linear disturbances in the proposed Castle Wildland, and compared actual use to the Government of Alberta’s management and policy intentions. It also considered the potential implications on grizzly bear recovery and management. Key findings from the report included:

- The total length of roads and trails that are potentially used by off-highway vehicles within the Castle area is 1,283 km, or a density of 1.3 km/km². In some individual watersheds, this density goes up to 2.0 km/km².
- To put that number into context, the Castle falls within one of the *Core Grizzly Bear Areas* recognized by the Alberta government: access

densities in these areas are intended to be no higher than 0.6 km/km². The report points clearly to the fact that the Castle Special Management Area is “no longer secure for grizzly bears” and that “sustainable environmental management of the Castle wilderness is not occurring.”

- Motorized access in the Castle also goes far beyond the designated trail system. Field studies of unofficial trails leaving the main Castle Falls and Lynx Creek roads found that, of 42 disturbances which were not authorized for motorized use, 39 (92.9 percent) had evidence of being used by motorized vehicles.
- Since 1998, when the Alberta Government announced the Castle area as a protected area under their Special Places program, there have been an estimated 81 km of new man-made disturbances.
- There is no evidence of any government monitoring of human use in the Castle.

According to the Government of Alberta website, access in the Castle is managed according to the 1992 *Castle River Access Management Plan*. Somewhat surprisingly, the website goes on to state: “In May 1996, *on a voluntary basis*, the AMP was implemented and *the public was responsible for policing themselves*” (emphasis added). The Global Forest Watch Canada report would suggest that the public are not

doing a very good job of “policing themselves” but unfortunately there does not seem to be a Plan B. Although the government’s stated intention is: “A review of the access management plan will be conducted every 5 years,” fifteen years on, no review has yet been completed.

The Global Forest Watch Canada report concludes “The Castle Area Forest Land Use Zone is not being managed according to its mandate, regulations or stated purpose. Access is not being controlled, and is a threat to all other public values of this area.”

The full report can be seen on AWA’s website at www.AlbertaWilderness.ca/issues/wildlands/castle/archive-1.

Ghost Access Study

In June 2011, a second report found access densities in the Ghost Watershed which were more than three times those officially recorded by the Alberta government, and more than four times the maximum densities recommended in the province’s *Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan*.

The report, *An Assessment of Cumulative Effects of Land Uses in the Ghost River Watershed, Alberta, Canada* was prepared for the Ghost Watershed Alliance Society by Cornel Yarmoloy and Brad Stelfox of ALCES Landscape and Land-use Ltd. The study is a “quantitative assessment of how past, current and future cumulative impacts of land use within the Ghost-Waiparous watershed could potentially affect sustainability of forests, water, wildlife and recreational resources.” The Ghost River watershed drains into the Bow River, and is thus the source of drinking water for the City of Calgary, and communities across Southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

The report looked at how Eastern Slope watersheds such as the Ghost supply us with a variety of services, including recreation, timber production, energy resources, and biological diversity as well as providing ecosystem services such as carbon storage. But, these services all may be impacted by human activities: “human land use development and recreational activities can potentially reduce the effectiveness of these valued services through incremental negative impacts on natural processes.” Key findings from the report include:

- The study area had approximately

2,780 km of linear features, with an average landscape edge density of 5.12 km/km². This compares with an access density of just 1.42 km/km² as measured by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, and a maximum density of 1.2 km/km² as recommended in the province’s 2008 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan. “Sensitive species such as grizzly bear and bull trout may not be able to maintain viable populations in the study area.”

- The report cites a 2006 Alberta Environment report, *Water Quality Study of Waiparous Creek, Fallentimber Creek and Ghost River*, which found “a 10-fold increase in sediment loading in Waiparous Creek that could be attributed to off-highway recreational vehicle (OHRV) activity.”
- The health of native fish communities has declined significantly over the past several decades.
- If existing forestry practices continue, younger forests will come to dominate the landscape in future. The more biologically rich old growth component will become progressively smaller.
- The value of the land for recreational use was estimated to be higher, in dollar terms, than its value for timber production.
- “There is extensive use by OHRVs of closed trails within the study area... The chronic and illegal use of trails and seismic lines by OHRVs also impairs the reclamation of many linear features in the region.”
- “There are many features of the Ghost-Waiparous region that define its limited potential capacity to maintain grizzly bear populations, including high densities and motorized use of linear features, forestry clearcuts, poor management of attractant foods by random campers and lack of food storage and garbage facilities.”
- “Literature review and data from field visits combined with simulation results suggest the need for more effective enforcement of OHRV regulations as a strategy

to help maintain or restore key environmental indicators and recreational opportunities for non-motorized users.”

The full report can be seen on AWA’s website at www.AlbertaWilderness.ca/issues/wildlands/livingstone-porcupine/archive.

Enough Studying: Time for Action!

What is perhaps most surprising about the Castle and Ghost studies is that they are not surprising at all. Intuitively, we have all known for decades that unmanaged motorized recreation in our headwaters is having serious negative impacts on a broad spectrum of things, from drinking water to wildlife to hiking opportunities. The Alberta government has responded in a token way to these pressures. The Castle and the Ghost-Waiparous areas are both designated as Forest Land Use Zones; both have Access Management Plans (but only for motorized access).

The *Ghost-Waiparous Operational Access Management Plan* boldly states “Key priorities have included the protection of the watershed, fisheries and wildlife.” Similarly, the *Castle River Access Management Plan for Motorized Recreational Access* has the goal of “(addressing) motorized recreational access considering the protection of wildlife populations and habitat; fisheries, land and watershed management concerns; wildland and recreational opportunities.”

It would seem that both are failing spectacularly. Until there is a quantum shift in the way that motorized access is managed in Alberta, and a real willingness to get to grips with the issue, then they will continue to fail. In late 2008, at a series of workshops hosted by the Alberta government to discuss access management for grizzlies, there was an impressive amount of consensus among stakeholders – including oil and gas and forestry representatives, scientists and motorized recreationists – that a great deal more could be done to reduce and to better manage access. All participants highlighted lack of enforcement as a significant issue. The Castle and Ghost reports indicate that little has changed since then. 🐾