

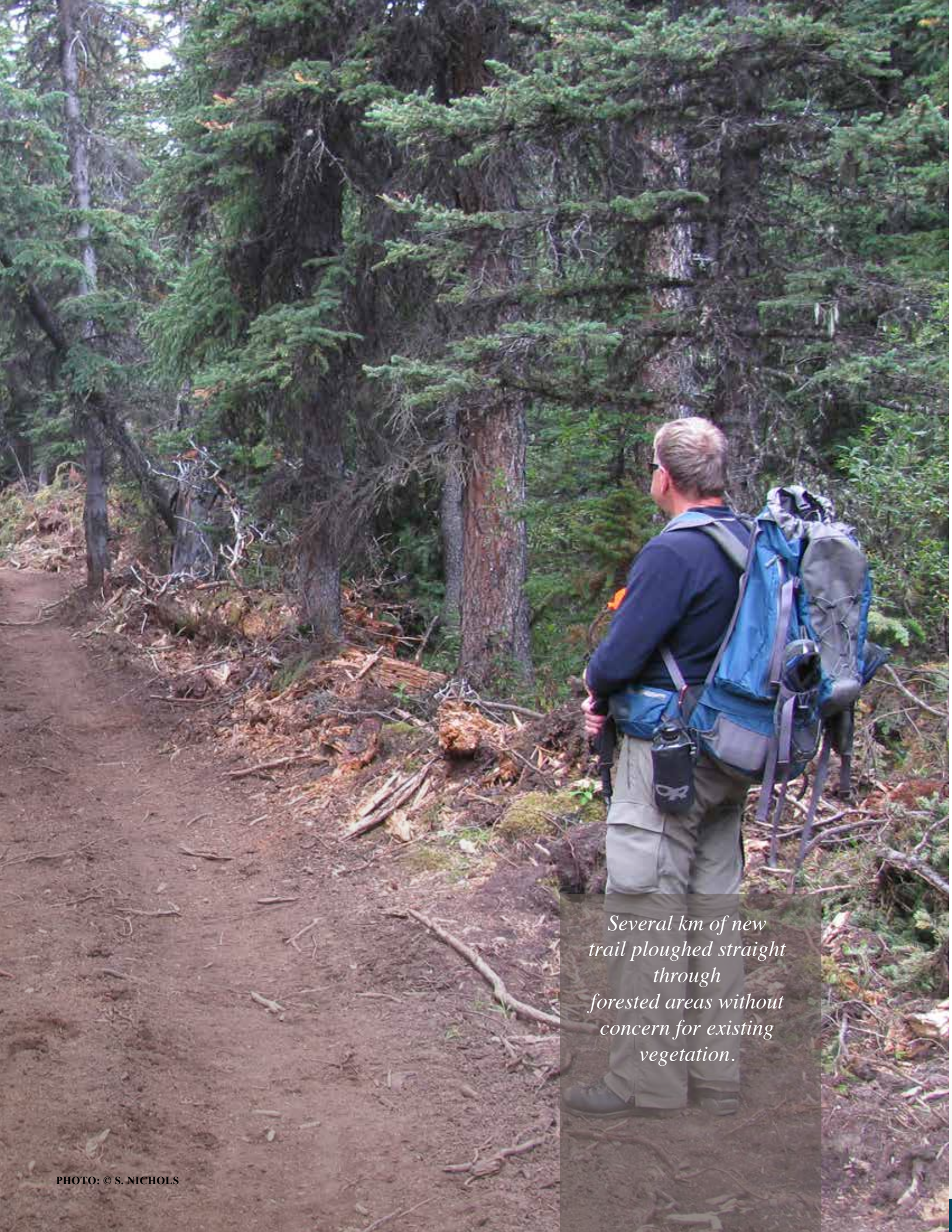
*Isn't this Where We Came In?*

SLAPPING A BAND-AID OVER  
THE BIGHORN'S CANARY CREEK

by SEAN NICHOLS, AWA Conservation Specialist







*Several km of new trail ploughed straight through forested areas without concern for existing vegetation.*



Sometimes one writes a story, then sits back thinking the task complete, only later to revisit it with the new understanding that what was initially assumed to be the entire story is but the introduction to a larger set piece.

## A YEAR AGO

The tale of the Canary Creek in the Bighorn's Hummingbird area is, regrettably, one of those stories.

In 2012 AWA visited Canary Creek and adjacent valleys to survey the state of the trails as part of our Bighorn Wildland Recreation Monitoring Project (BWRMP), now in its tenth year. What we found was disappointing to say the least. We discovered that almost the entire trail system was closed to all vehicles due to extreme erosion (for details and photos see my article in the August 2012 issue of *WLA*). Then I wrote that “the access trails have

been so badly affected by erosion from this year's runoff that they have caved in, becoming impassable to all but the more determined foot users.”

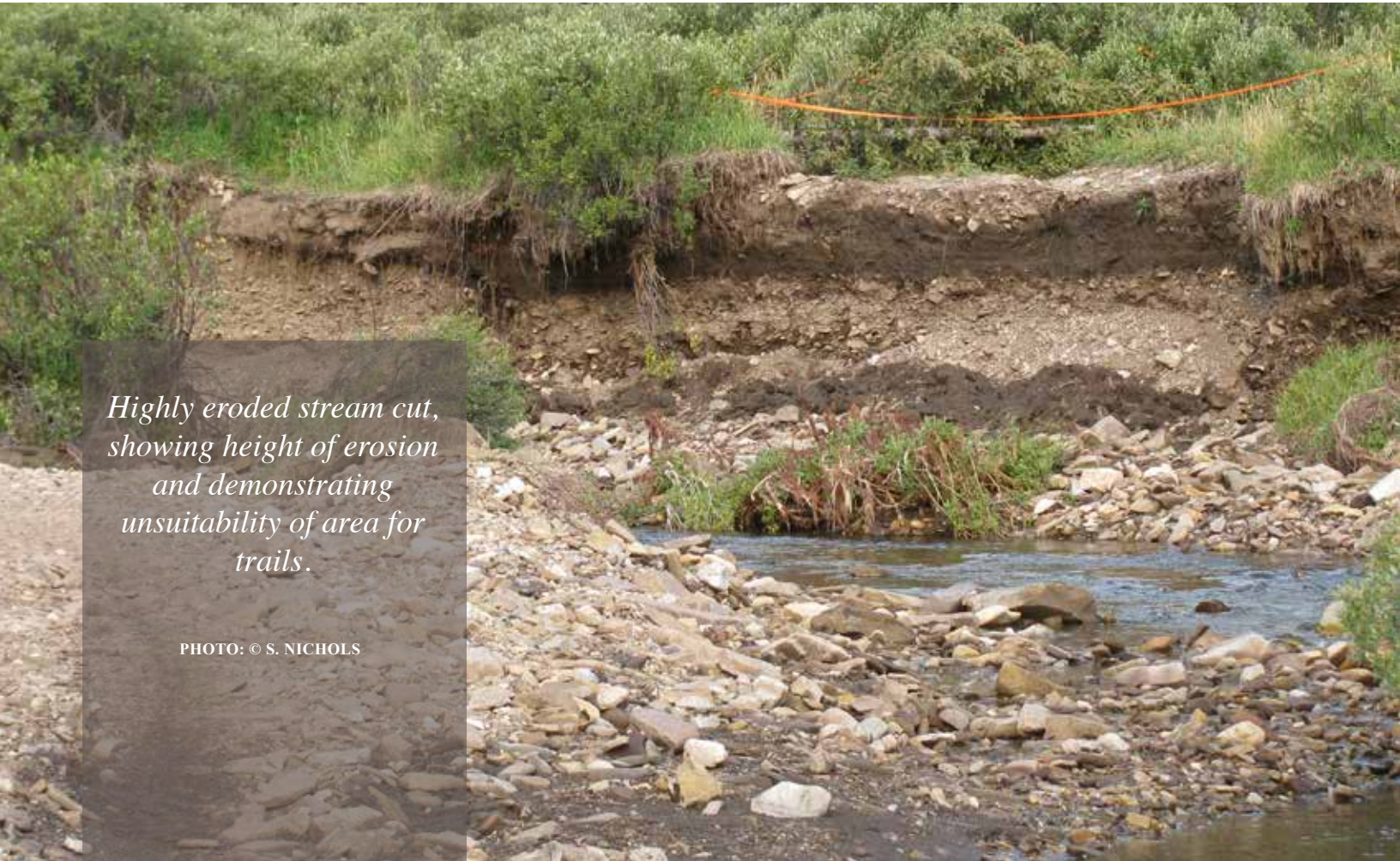
My article further deliberated on AWA's conclusion that the erosion was not due merely to higher than normal runoff occurring in increasingly-frequent “high water event” years, a theory proposed by some Land Management officers working for Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD). Rather, I posited, “the wet weather does nothing but exacerbate (...) damage that has already been occurring.”

AWA's position was then and still is now that the terrain in these valleys cannot support this type of use. The ground in the river valley bottoms is boggy and porous, easily eroded, and prone to washouts. Attempt-

ing to put OHV trails through these systems aggravates the situation by channeling waters and creating paths for intense erosion.

Last year's article ended with the suggestion that the 2012 washouts might be a blessing in disguise. Perhaps AESRD would use the washouts as an opportunity to re-examine the appropriateness of the trail system and consider not re-opening the trails at all. Could AESRD take the bold, but necessary, action they had failed to take during the previous high water event year in 2006, when a section of the network was similarly washed out?

At the end of July 2012, we presented these same concerns and the same proposal to AESRD's Lands Area Operations division along with our observations. These observations were included in a 2012



*Highly eroded stream cut, showing height of erosion and demonstrating unsuitability of area for trails.*

PHOTO: © S. NICHOLS





*Example of flagging used as directional “signage” on new trails.*

PHOTO: © S. NICHOLS

update report produced as part of the BWRMP (and available on the AWA website at [www.albertawilderness.ca/bighorn](http://www.albertawilderness.ca/bighorn)).

In this meeting, AESRD admitted that “in a perfect world” the Canary Creek trail wouldn’t exist. AESRD also cautiously suggested that some Hummingbird Area trails might not re-open at all that year. Officials noted:

- Every year AESRD finds new trails they have to close that they have never had to before;
- They could possibly see the day when the trails would indeed be closed down altogether due to rising costs.

In conjunction with this second point, AESRD pointed out that they had limited resources for performing maintenance on trail systems

such as those in the Hummingbird and that any maintenance or reconstruction would therefore need to be performed by volunteers. This latter possibility concerns us: while AWA prefers to see the closed trails remain closed, if they are to be reopened this should not be done on an ad-hoc basis where reconstruction decisions are left up to volunteer groups. Rather, there needs to be a comprehensive plan in place for tackling trail reconstruction efforts and the Bighorn Backcountry Steering Committee needs to have a set of guidelines in place surrounding those efforts.

Nevertheless, less than a month following last year’s meeting, Hummingbird and Canary Creek were back up and open for business; all trails were completely re-opened.

## DÉJÀ VU

This brings us to 2013.

AWA intended to re-survey the trails along Canary creek and the effects of reconstruction early this past summer. These plans were postponed due to yet another “high water event” and yet another trail closure. Last year’s supposedly rare event happened again.

Thus delayed until late August, the monitoring trip gave AWA the opportunity to observe any reconstruction that had taken place following this year’s flooding.

The cumulative effects of the floods, the erosion, and trails reconstruction have devastated the Canary Creek valley. Corroborating AWA’s analysis of the soil systems and terrain, the creek has now carved deep channels along





*The cumulative effects of the floods, the erosion, and trails reconstruction have devastated the Canary Creek valley.*

the valley floor. New and redirected watercourses have altered the lie of the land to the point where the existing OHV trails have become not so much impassable, as completely erased. Nature has obliterated them. New channels are up to three metres or more deep; the widths of some of these channels is in the tens of metres. The valley has been reconfigured, re-sculpted.

Where the new channels haven't erased trails the erosion has made the trails impassable for considerable distances. What has happened on the land this year surpassed what we saw in 2012.

The most disturbing aspect of the flooding, however, has come from human hands: the attempts at reconstruction.

No minor shoring up of eroded edges or buttressing of water crossings here. And how could there be, with the existing trails completely vanished?

Instead the traveler up Canary Creek encounters several kilometres of brand new trail (a precise measurement of the trail length is difficult as the radically altered landscape has changed numerous landmarks and it is sometimes hard to determine where an old but reconstituted trail ends and a new one begins).

Occasionally running immediately adjacent to the old but washed out trail, and occasionally taking wide detours along the valley's edge, one traverses many lengths of newly cut, newly trampled and newly

bulldozed trail through the vegetation and riparian areas.

The vegetative damage is extensive. Trees and underbrush have been pushed aside and piled up with seeming abandon. This destruction has even occurred in areas where their removal is not even necessary to build a trail.

Tree roots are exposed, rubbed raw, dug up and broken.

Tire and tread tracks are everywhere and slopes are gouged in an eagerness to get the trail back up and once again supporting traffic.

Little pieces of fluorescent pink flagging tape are everywhere. They





mark the new routes, however, there is no signage from the government or anyone else directing people to stay on the trail or out of sensitive areas. Indeed there is no longer any clarity, any indication, where sensitive areas might be and whether a new trail might not simply run straight through them in the first place. As a Land Management officer observed last year: “without signage, there is a green light to go.”

More frustrating than any of the above, even more so than the apparent lack of any attempt at an environmental assessment before reconstruction began, is the fact that all this damage amounts to little more than a big, long Band-Aid® over symptoms of a problem that remains unaddressed.

This is made immediately apparent when you consider the composition of the “new” trails. For significant distances, they run straight over soft grassy soils with little to no

structure for supporting the continued burden of OHV traffic. It is obvious that it will be but a matter of time, and a short amount of time at that, before they are dug into the ground and channeling water. One heavy rainfall and we can expect to see dangerous fissures opening up under the approaching vehicles.

In other areas where such fissures have rendered the old trail impassable, the new one is built immediately alongside it, on the same type of ground and subject to the same kinds of pressures and effects. It takes no great insight to see that the same fate will befall the new trail before long. We will be right back where we started and Canary Creek will be the worse for it.

## ISN'T THIS WHERE WE CAME IN?

We need to stop going around and around in circles. We need to recognize that the exit from this cycle of damage and destructive rebuilding is to bite the metaphorical bullet, to recognize that *this* is not the area

for these trails and next time, to keep them closed and enforce their closure.

On September 13, 2013, AWA once again met with AESRD’s Lands Area Operations division and presented our concerns. We received substantially the same response we did in 2012. It looks like this merry-go-round is going to continue. ▲

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PHOTOS: (from left to right)  
PHOTO: © S. NICHOLS

*Example of what happens to trails without adequate protection against erosion.*

*Example of trail-building practices employed on Canary Creek.*

*New trail beside old. Without protection from erosion, there is no reason to believe it will not end up in the same state.*