

September 5 ·

The Alberta government is soliciting planning advice from us for the new protected area in the Castle River, which will continue to have off-road vehicle as a permitted use. If you want to give them your thoughts, you can send an email to LUF@gov.ab.ca with the subject line "Enhancing the Protection of the Castle Area." In case it is helpful, here is what I just sent them and if you like any of it, feel free to cut-and-paste, below.

Kevin Van Tighem

Hi. Your feedback form asked about point facilities, but not the linear ones (i.e. trails). I think that is a mistake, as one of the most controversial issues in the Castle has been, and for the next while will continue to be, off-road motorized use.

Given its culture of vandalism and the serious, accelerating impacts that this activity is causing throughout the foothills region, I oppose any off-road motorized use of the protected area. But since the government has decided that this use will continue, however, I am hoping you will seriously consider these suggestions:

1. Trail density. A planning criterion should be linear trail density, and in keeping with the premise that you are enhancing the protection of this area above the status quo, very conservative trail density targets should be established as a planning principle. I would suggest that the linear trail density in the Wildland Park be set at 25% of the density identified for core grizzly habitat in the grizzly recovery plan, and that the density in the Provincial Park be set at 50%. Low trail densities not only minimize wildlife impacts and wear-and-tear on the land, but they enhance the recreational quality of everyone's experience by making the place feel wilder and less busy.
2. Trail standards. One of the big problems with off-road motorized activity is that few, if any, of the trails that off-roaders use are designed and maintained for that purpose. They quickly become rutted, then muddy, then impassable. Two things happen then: many users go around them, creating a braided trail system that disturbs far more land, and some users decide these are places for motor play and start mud bogging in and around the damaged sites. In either case the non-verbal message to subsequent users is that they need not care for the land because it is obvious that nobody else does. So you get a continual lowering of the common denominator for user stewardship and respect for the land. It is essential, if off-road vehicle use is to continue as an accepted use in these parks (given that, strictly speaking, it is not a legitimate activity of a protected area) that trails be built to a much higher standard with drainage diversion bars, hardened bases where they cross soft soils or concave areas, corduroy and bridges to cross wet areas, etc. Users need to have no doubt about where their wheels should be or reluctance to put their wheels there. If you are going to allow off-roading, design for it. If you can't afford to design for it, prohibit it.

3. Restoration. There is extensive and severe landscape damage throughout the Caste region from poorly planned off-road use, deliberate vandalism, motor play and random camping. Much of the damage is in low elevation grasslands, riparian areas and side hills that have very high ecological and watershed values. These sites aren't going to heal quickly (and are subject to continuing erosion and weed invasion) and as long as the scars are visible they will attract illegal use. The healing process would be accelerated by felling trees into them or finding other ways to get large woody debris onto the erosion spots, planting screening vegetation and transplanting plugs of native vegetation to hasten the revegetation process. Healing is essential not only to prevent future illegal use but to restore ecological communities and to plug all the leaks in the water table that result from shallow ground water draining into trail cuts. I strongly recommend that restoring damaged sites be given a high priority in the capital development program during the next several years. It is more important than building new stuff. One way to reduce the cost to the public Treasury would be to make effective restoration of damaged sites part of the "cost of admission" for off-roaders: adopt an approach whereby the government initially prohibits off-roading and then incrementally opens off-road trails built with public funds as off-road user groups meet targets for restoring the damage users have previously done. This would also go a long way towards addressing the sense of entitlement too many users have been able to develop.

4. Enforcement. If there is one subject on which those of us opposed to motorized off-road use and those promoting it agree, it is that a lot of the user conflict and landscape damage would go away if there were better enforcement of regulations. Under the Parks Act, you have the ability to require permits for motorized use off-highway, to set stringent conditions on use, and to confiscate equipment used to violate regulations. I strongly encourage you to use those legal authorities to the maximum, and to ensure a dedicated, on-the-ground enforcement presence with a mandate to ensure that park users are following the regulations.

All the above notwithstanding, I am personally of the view that motorized off-road use should be prohibited in the new parks. The Alberta government agencies responsible for land use in our headwaters have demonstrated an appalling lack of competence at managing this activity and as a result the landscape is fragmented, eroding and muddy in many areas we other users remember as healthy, green and well-cared for in the not so distant past. There is a culture of vandalism and entitlement among a significant subset of the users that translates into bullying, aggression and abuse of public servants trying to enforce rules and of other users. This is not the Alberta we should be living in and it is not the kind of ethic that will give us healthy landscapes and secure water supplies into the future. If we can't send a strong message to motorized vandals by banning them from the new protected area, then at least please use your approach to the planning, construction, maintenance and policing of off-road use to start steering land users back to the stewardship ethic that used to be the standard among those of us whose hearts are torn by what we have seen happen to the places we love best.

Thanks