

Once Upon a Time in the Rockies:

The Enduring Legacy of Too Many Trails

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The Failure of the Canary Creek Trail

We can generally have faith in this century and this part of the world that a job, when performed by knowledgeable professionals who take due care and attention to said job, will be done correctly. We shouldn't expect failure within a very short time.

We watch with a curious fascination historical scenes such as the video of the 1940 collapse of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, confident that would never happen here, to infrastructure built today.

It runs counter to our faith in technology to think that, if we build things to the

best of our ability, they still may fail. A trail along Canary Creek in the Bighorn partially collapsed last winter, less than 10 months after it was constructed. It didn't collapse due to negligence or inability. It collapsed for a very simple reason that construction wizardry cannot always address: steep slopes with soft, waterlogged soils are inherently unstable.

This trail collapse, for this reason, contributes to AWA's consistent opposition over the years to OHV trails in the Bighorn's headwaters. It's why we've consistently opposed such trails in all of Alberta's Rocky Mountains headwaters.

As long time readers of the *Wild Lands Ad-*

vocate

 will be aware, AWA has been taking direct action in the Bighorn for more than 10 years now. We initiated our trail monitoring program on the trails of the Hummingbird area following that 2002 introduction of the Bighorn Access Management Plan, a plan AWA strongly opposed. We termed our program the *Bighorn Wildland Recreational Trail Monitoring Program* and initially intended for it to be a five-year project, running from 2003 through 2008.

The program involves two components: first, we continuously count vehicles using buried TRAFx vehicle counters; second, this count is paired with an annual survey and inventory of damage spots and landscape health along the trails. This design allows AWA to correlate trail use by vehicles with trail conditions. It's not a pretty picture

AWA encountered the collapse along Canary creek this summer during one of our surveying trips. It was the first time we had done a visual survey of this trail, which had been built in the fall of 2014, since our previous trip to Canary Creek. This new trail, built under Alberta Environment and Parks' *Backcountry Trail Flood Rehabilitation Program* (BTFRP), replaced a section with multiple creek crossings and impacts on riparian areas that had been damaged by flooding in 2012.

AWA was encouraged to hear that the trail had been rebuilt. This was especially so since the BTFRP mandates that new trails are built to the Kananaskis trail standard and take long-term sustainability into account. It sounded like an improvement over some of the trail reconstruction efforts OHV groups have undertaken in



Volunteer Ken Lee measures collapsed sections of trail along Canary Creek, less than 10 months after the trail was constructed by the Government of Alberta. PHOTO: © S. NICHOLS



A map of the Hummingbird area trail system showing where AWA undertook monitoring trips during the summer of 2015. AWA recorded 179 notable damage sites (indicated by yellow markers) over about 40km of trail.

the Hummingbird area in previous years. AWA has written of those misadventures before (see the article by Sean Nichols in the October 2013 issue of *Wild Lands Advocate*). They have often involved trails bulldozed through vegetation, no signage, and has been guided by design approaches that did not take hydrology into account. Consequently, some of this reconstruction is even more highly subject to erosion and re-flooding.

With such a low bar to clear, AWA expected that the 2014 BTFRP reconstruction would be an improvement. And to be sure, the bridge over Canary Creek built at the west end of the reconstructed segment is indeed a significant improvement over the unimproved crossings typically found on the trail.

The 800 metres of reconstructed trail leading up to the bridge, however, are a different story. Cut into a 33-degree slope made of soft soil, the trail was already slumping and collapsing not ten months after it was first built.

Why not put the trail somewhere else? There isn't any better place to put the trail. Thirty-three degrees is among the gentlest incline anywhere along that slope; elsewhere it would have been steeper and less stable. The valley bottom is a narrow riparian zone with no real place for a trail to go that does not run through sensitive areas or through the creek and flood plain as the

original trail did.

Everything about the situation supports AWA's longstanding contention: these valleys are no place for motorized vehicles or motorized vehicle trails. They cannot support the motorized trail network that has been built there.

Twelve years into the BWRMP, the study's results continue to show, with one of the clearest examples yet, exactly what AWA has long believed and what has been obvious to the many scientists and experts on whose advice we depend. There isn't a good place for trails in this landscape.

Twelve Years of Trail Monitoring

Although this is a particularly clear example, it is far from the only one. Over the many trips taken to the Bighorn by AWA staff and volunteers, we have catalogued, timestamped, and GPS-positioned thousands of photographs and measurements that all support the same conclusion.

We have published photographs of trail erosion, vegetative damage and the effects that these trails have on the landscape (see articles by Sean Nichols in the August 2012, October 2013 and November 2014 issues of *Wild Lands Advocate*).

What is most salient here is this: the presence of the trails themselves causes damage. OHV riders are often quick to insist that a

majority of their kin follow the rules and stick to the trails. Only a few "bad apples" misbehave.

This may be so. But even when users follow the rules and even when they stick to the trails damage to the land happens. Even when every single user behaves precisely as they are supposed to, the simple matter of the presence of the trails on the landscape promotes degradation and erosion.

The simple presence of the trail network acts as a vector for increased human presence, increased numbers of hunters, fishers, and potentially poachers. This simple presence changes wildlife movement patterns and fragments habitat. The simple presence of (perfectly rule-abiding) users introduces non-native plant species, vehicle fuel, and other foreign substances to the trail where they take root, soak into the soil, and flow into water courses. These detrimental effects of trail networks in wilderness areas have all been well documented in scientific publications. As with the cause of the collapse of the reconstructed Canary Creek trail, they are not new or unexpected; rather they are routine, obvious, expected.

And to be sure, misbehaving users are a concern as well. Users do go off-trail, do cause havoc in wetlands, and do create illegal "frolic areas."

The trail network is closed to motorized use during the spring, to mitigate damage to the land when it's particularly wet during spring run-offs and to relieve pressure on wildlife during that sensitive time of their life cycles.

From our vehicle counts we can tell that use does, as expected, drop significantly during these times. However, it never drops to zero. Instead we record during closure periods, on average, about ten percent of the daily use we see when the trails are officially open.

It seems reasonable to use this proxy to roughly generalize that somewhere in the neighbourhood of ten percent of users are prepared to ignore posted regulations and ride in a manner that suits them, regardless of the consequences to the environment.

Our "few bad apples" then amount to about ten percent of the barrel. It's ten percent too many.



ESRD reconstruction efforts, such as this re-sited trail along Hummingbird Creek (otherwise relatively well done) are undermined when lack of enforcement means that users ignore signage and continue to use the old trail through riparian zones and badly flooded-out creeks.

Of course these (ab)users do an amount of damage that far exceeds that of the 90 percent. The effects of a user driving through a wetland or other area with soft soils can last for not just seasons or years but for decades. We see this repeatedly in the Hummingbird trail area with non-designated secondary (i.e.: side) trails. They bear no evidence of recent use but have left deep scars in the ground that are nowhere close to healing.

It's maddening that a simple issue such as signage has been handled so miserably over the years. In many – even most – cases, there is no signage at all. This has been one of our various concerns regarding the often ad-hoc reconstruction performed by user groups; on most cases where a trail has been rerouted, the only indication that a rider should stay off the old trail is a small strip of pink flagging tape. Occasionally there will be branches dragged across the old trail, as if this would seriously discourage its continued use.

Even recently-reconstructed BTFRP trails do not have signage. Surely this must change.

The upshot of trail reconstruction is that users now see two trails before them. They may continue to use the old trail (so far as possible) as well as the new trail. We have essentially doubled the footprint on the landscape for these sections.



Users have been going off trail and creating "frolic areas" on the hills along the back trail between Canary and Hummingbird Creeks PHOTO: © S. NICHOLS

Where signs have been erected, there are sometimes those tell-tale signs of a different sort that the bad apples continue to go off-trail.

Enforcement, its absence, is a serious part of this issue. Nothing new there. AEP has made the valid point that they do not have the resources to properly patrol and monitor a large area like the entire Eastern Slopes for violations.

In AWA's view, the takeaway from this is simple: if the resources aren't available to enforce the rules for restricting or managing an activity that badly damages the land, then the activity simply should be prohibited. As the saying goes, OHV use on public land in Alberta is a privilege, not a right. A privileged activity should be allowed only insofar as the resources are in place to properly oversee and manage that activity.

Options

There are definitely options available to address these management issues.

A permit system would be one option: permits could be issued to limit use to numbers and areas that can support that use. Such a system could tie in with enforcement in a couple of ways.

First, misbehaving users lose their permit: abuse it, lose it. It should be as simple as that. For those who preach "educating"

riders let this option be lesson number one. Flaunt the rules and you lose your privileges.

Second, permits can be tied to user fees to generate money to fund ministry patrols and other enforcement actions.

Third, by limiting the number of permits government can strive to allow only as many riders on the trails as the land can bear. This limitation would end the free for all that exists when the trail riding season is currently open.

Finally, by putting a price on motorized access to public lands, a permit system might stimulate some entrepreneurship among OHV devotees. Private lands could be purchased or converted into venues where OHVs could frolic.

These options are offered because it's long past time for Albertans to recognize that the historical approach to land use – one where we tend to favour "all uses at most times" cannot hold when our population is growing the way it is. Not only we, but our decision-makers, too, need to recognize this reality. A recent survey by CPAWS found that only about six percent of all Alberta recreationists ride motorized vehicles. It would be a real shame to continue to let them dirty the waters for everyone else. ▲