

My First Year in the Bighorn



By Joanna Skrajny, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

We finished our first day of backpacking through the mountains and arrived at our camping spot after a long day of meticulously measuring the length of every damaged trail. As the three of us set up camp, I had taken off my shoes to rest my red and swollen feet, and the contents of my pack lay strewn around camp. The others had done the same, three trails of cooking ware and sleeping materials leading to tents.

After dinner, and just as drowsiness began to set in, we started a particularly important daily ritual – hanging our food in a bag on a tree away from camp in order to avoid any midnight visits from a bear. One of AWA's most dedicated volunteers, Paul, took it upon himself to complete the task. He meticulously wound a length of rope around a rock, and the three of us walked to scout a suitable tree candidate. We found one a few hundred feet away, and Paul aimed his rope bound rock at a reasonably tall branch. He threw the rock, only to have it catch the branch below. In a particularly impressive

display the rock shot right back – narrowly missing us three monkeys in the path of the rock. I silently thanked myself for packing a good first aid kit.

Once our food was safely aloft, the three of us hobbled off to bed at the ripe hour of 8pm.

Although I have been out a few times before to the area, this was my first time out on the trail systems leading into the heart of the backcountry. What is wonderful about the Bighorn is that it is full of flat valley bottoms covered in a network of nameless creeks and streams. You are immediately greeted with wonderful views – open landscapes, twisted trees, interesting rocks and open skies. An easy 10km hike takes you to a gorgeous back mountain pass filled with alpine meadows. With many creeks crisscrossing the valley bottoms the hike entailed a fair number of water crossings – but my feet weren't complaining about the cool water on a nice summer day!

One of the things that anyone who has spent time in the wild can attest to is the

volume of silence you experience – until you realize it's not silent. It might be subtler but it's just as dynamic as the city din we are accustomed to. As the cold alpine air settled down on our camp, we fell asleep to creeks chattering away into the night. We experienced a thunderstorm one night, every single bolt of light flashing brilliantly and the rain droplets tapping on the canopies of our tents. As the storm finished I stepped outside. The storm had passed through quickly, not even leaving a cloud behind. Water dripped from the trees that wetly glistened in the night from the stars above, stars so very, very bright. Slowly, as dawn drew closer, the forest began to move and rustle again with life.

With the morning came bird song and chilly frost. During the daytime, pikas called to us out from the scabble and marmots poked out their rotund bodies. One very special morning, we saw grizzly bears digging in the meadows for hedysarum, also known as "bear root," among a splash of wildflowers.

Why were we in the Bighorn?

In the late 1970s, Bighorn Wildland was managed primarily under the Alberta Eastern Slopes Policy as prime protection zone, which prohibited motorized recreation. In 2002, the Alberta Government formalized an access management plan that legalized motorized recreation in the Wildland on designated trails. AWA had the foresight to see that trail monitoring was essential to determine the effects of

motorized use and, in 2003, AWA initiated a project called the Bighorn Recreation and Impact Monitoring Project.

2016 marks 13 years of AWA monitoring these trails. Although it was my first trip a few volunteers like Paul Sutherland and Heinz Unger have participated in these monitoring exercises many times. They were an invaluable pool of knowledge for me to draw from. This year, we took two separate 3-day trips, which is the time needed in order to cover the trail sys-

tem. Over the years, the trails we walk and what we use to monitor them has changed drastically. From pen and paper we have transitioned to tablets on which a questionnaire-style form is completed in order to ensure consistency in the answers.

This work has been an integral piece of AWA's work on the Bighorn and we couldn't have done it without the dedication of volunteers like Paul and Heinz. Many thanks to you both!



Room with a view! PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY

The Bighorn is big country, with some impressive wild spaces. Its stretches of uncompromising wilderness – sometimes silent, sometimes not – are so humbling to me. It's country I cherish and seek out. It offers what I need to “reset” my addled urban mind.

As we were out hiking the trails, it was clear we were out during an unusual time. Many of the trails had been closed due to the fact they were unstable and highly eroded. Consequently, the amount of motorized activity was minimal. For once we could actually *hear* the wilderness, which is too often ruined by off-highway vehicle racket. In August, following a month of consistent rain, the remaining open trails were filled with water. We slipped and slid our way down the middle of the tracks where possible, bushwhacking where it wasn't.

All of this August rain, although not uncommon in the Bighorn, provided us with a unique vantage point. It helped us appreciate just how much erosion this landscape has experienced in just over 10 years. Sticking our tape measures into the puddles consistently revealed that even trail

portions which are considered “undamaged” have eroded around 20cm since they were opened.

The amount of water that this landscape is capable of holding is reflected in the trails. Many *Wild Lands Advocate* readers may remember last year's findings of what happens when a new trail is built on such a sensitive landscape. The Canary Creek trail had been relocated away from a valley bottom, a section with multiple creek crossings, up to a wooded hill in order to avoid washouts from future floods. Good in theory, but the exceptionally wet landscape played havoc with this relocation effort. Cut into a 33-degree slope made of soft soil, the trail was already slumping and collapsing not ten months after it was built.

My visit one year later to the rerouted trail gave me two definite conclusions – neither of them positive ones. The first was that the whole 800m of the rerouted trail looked – bad. There's just no other word for what we witnessed. The slumping had moved up the slope by another metre in some portions. Where the trail wasn't cut into



Mmmm... breakfast for mama bear!
PHOTO: © P. SUTHERLAND



On the August trip - Left to right: myself (Joanna), and volunteers Heinz and Joel on the August trip.
PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY

the slope, we still noted huge piles of earth churned to reveal exposed and torn roots. And yet this wasn't the only spot. Almost the entire network of the trails, especially those contained in the mountain valleys, where both water and OHVs funnel, were in a similar – if not worse – state of disrepair. The second conclusion was that there is simply no better place to put this trail, much like many others in the Bighorn. This was the shallowest slope away from the creek valley. If any trail were to be here, this would be the place to locate it.

This year in the *Wild Lands Advocate* we have extensively covered the various impacts that OHVs have on the landscape and

wildlife. Some of the “hits” include:

- increasing runoff and sediment,
- increasing habitat fragmentation,
- displacement of wildlife such as elk and grizzly bears,
- increased motorized access contributing to poaching and stress on wildlife
- displacement of other users such as hikers

From a conservation perspective it's clear that OHV use has impacts on any landscape. These environmental impacts are exacerbated in areas as sensitive as the Bighorn. Any trail damage is long-lived, magnified by the short growing season. But even from a perspective of simply *looking* at the trails it's clear they are doomed to fail. Nature simply didn't mean for them to be on this landscape.

Water + soft soil + over powered machines is simply not a sustainable combination. When every step of our feet squishes into the trails, how are machines weighing anywhere from hundreds of pounds to over half-a-ton with huge tire treads supposed to ride on these trails without having an impact? In recent memory trails have now been closed in 2012, 2013, and 2016 for some portion of the summer. Even from the perspective of the public purse it is obvious that these trails will have to be rebuilt again and again. Why should we spend money endlessly repairing the damage done? And that's assuming that all users are respectful

and will keep their machines on designated trails – which we know is not always the case.

Another important piece to this puzzle to me is that the Bighorn is special and it is heartbreaking to see piece by piece whittled away. Last year was a particularly dry spring, and for most Albertans, the rain this summer was welcome. This landscape is highly valued for providing drinking water to many Canadians. The Bighorn is called the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River for a reason – it's wet! The rivers and streams flowing out of the Bighorn provide up to 90 percent of the water supply to Edmonton. This landscape is clearly crucial for water security and wildlife habitat. It is also one of the only remaining footholds in Alberta's Eastern Slopes free from heavy industrial use and logging.

As we hiked in the rain, listened to it pelt our tents, saw the stars, and lost ourselves in such a vast landscape, I kept having the overwhelming sense of experiencing something so much greater than myself. Too many members of our species believes we can build it better, we can conquer and tame the landscape. But at what point do we accept, respect, and humbly bow to the uncompromising wilderness, instead of picking up another shovel? At what point does wilderness, landscapes not or very lightly touched by our hands and boots, have its own worth?



Who's laughing now? Volunteer Joel happily knee deep in waders on a trail filled with water. This is a designated trail and was deemed stable enough to be open. PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY

My first year in the Bighorn affirmed why I work as a conservation specialist and what AWA is working towards. It's clear the Bighorn should be protected as a Wildland Provincial Park, just like the government promised in 1986. Our monitoring is used to inform decision-makers about the importance of smart planning and protecting wilderness and headwaters landscapes. But it's also important to physically walk the land and appreciate it for yourself. I hope this will encourage you to do the same. 🌲



In 2015 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



In 2016 a portion of the rerouted trail in the forest. Even where the trail wasn't cut into a 33 degree slope, there was extensive root and vegetation damage. PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY