

Not in my Backyard ("NIMBY")

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Picture your daily morning routine: you wake up, grab your morning cuppa Joe, and open the blinds to let the morning sun wash across the kitchen table. But your window lets in a more disturbing image. Overnight someone had dumped a pile of garbage on your lawn and then chopped down and set fire to your favourite tree. Freshly ripped tire tracks over your beloved begonias and perfectly manicured lawn are the scars of a midnight joyride.

I imagine you would be furious. You would want to go to the police and demand that they serve justice. You would call your insurance company and want compensation for thousands of dollars of damage to your property. After that is all done, you'd need another cup of coffee – maybe something stronger. You might take a selfie with the damage and post it to social media (#mondays am I right?) so you can vent your anger and

publicly shame whoever did this to you.

After your anger subsided, you would be filled with a sense of loss. Much of the work you've done to take care of your home, gone after a few thought-

less moments. The tree where your children spent endless hours climbing and swinging on that old tire, burned down.

The following three photos show that this happens every day on land that



Garbage left in piles will be foraged by hungry bears, acquiring a taste that may get them killed one day.
PHOTO: © W. HOWSE



Stay off the lawn: Too lazy to take your chairs home after a weekend of camping? Why not burn and leave them? PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY



My begonias! Nothing left to grow on this mud bogging patch adjacent to the North Saskatchewan River. PHOTO: © W. HOWSE



An example of a created and abandoned campsite. All the trees have been cut down to make room for trailers. Garbage, including empty shells, litter this camp – with the next camp only metres away. PHOTO: © J. SKRAJNY

belongs to you and me, the wonderful backyard that Alberta's public lands provide us with:

These photographs are just a small sample of what Corporal Wayne Howse of the RCMP has seen during his time enforcing public lands legislation in the Bighorn. On a recent tour that I took with him around this area I saw just a small piece of the extent of damage and neglect on our public lands.

Case Study: Abraham Lake Mouth (KiskaWilson PLUZ)

The Kiska-Wilson Public Land Use Zone (PLUZ) is an incredibly popular area for random camping on weekends, as it backs onto Abraham Lake. Corporal Howse showed me the proliferation of trails everywhere in this area. They are especially common around the lake

and river. Keep in mind that in a PLUZ it is illegal to operate an off-highway vehicle anywhere that isn't a designated trail. Most of what Corporal Howse showed me was evidence of illegal use. A large portion of the forest around the roads has been cut down in order to make room for trailers, for firewood, and for campers. Trails have even been graveled over by motorized users to make them "legitimate" for the 5th wheelers to come in.

I learned that, on a summer weekend, upwards of 400 trailer units camp in this area. Multiply that by a few times and you have an estimate of the sheer number of people and OHVs that are in the Kiska Wilson Public Land Use Zone. As you can imagine, environmental damage is only a small portion of the work that officers have to do every day. With so many people out in such a small area,

public safety very quickly becomes the primary concern.

Perhaps the most egregious damage results from the cumulative impacts of so many people with motorized vehicles on a landscape. There is evidence everywhere of people joyriding in the lake and on the river beds. All of the surrounding hills have tracks running up and down them and the hills are visibly slumping. The garbage is left for the wildlife to feed on. Often, this damage goes un-noticed and unenforced, because there is literally only a handful of officers responsible for watching over thousands of kilometres of public land.

I used to think that this disturbance, however intense, only would be found in isolated pockets. The reality is that the disturbance is everywhere. There were many locations on our full day tour, covering a few hundred kilome-



An aerial photograph of a popular random camping spot in the Kiska-Wilson PLUZ. This is just one of 3 or 4 similarly sized sites – it's not uncommon for these fields to be completely packed wall-to-wall with trailers during weekends. PHOTO: © W. HOWSE

tres, where you would see trailer units camped on oil and gas well pads, surrounded by clearcuts, with trails cutting into the remaining forest. It's important to keep in mind that this is only a snapshot of one of the hundreds of areas that enforcement officers have to patrol. And then there's the ongoing proliferation of logging and industrial roads that encourage even more motorized access onto the landscape. In a word, it's overwhelming.

We are used to hearing these things, but it's very different when you actually see it on the land. By the end of the day, I felt an incredible sense of loss. This is land that belongs to the public, and must not only serve human wants and economic development, but must sustain our wildlife as well. It's clear that the current model of managing public lands is simply not manageable.

So what can we do?

Here are some suggestions on how we can avoid NIMBY on our public lands:

1. Off-highway vehicle (OHV) use needs to be considered a privilege, not a right. In the absence of a designated trail network, public lands should default to being off limits to OHVs. We need to recognize that off-highway vehicle use can have significant impacts to our lands and wildlife if it is not properly regulated. Trails need to be planned in areas where watershed, wildlife, and ecosystem integrity is not compromised by OHV use.
2. Give out expensive tickets... often – constant enforcement educates those who listen and penalizes those who don't. Enforcement officers also need to be able to give on-the-spot fines to offenders.

3. There needs to be areas where motorized recreation is not permitted under any circumstances, such as in our provincial parks. Currently, over 90 percent of provincial public lands are open to OHVs, yet recent surveys have estimated that only about six percent of Albertans participate in motorized recreation. OHVs are known to displace other users such as hikers, as well as wildlife. Simply put, this use is permitted on a disproportionately large amount of land. ▲

Thanks to Corporal Wayne Howse for the photographs, the tour, and the endless hours of helping to protect our public lands.