

Why not a Castle Wilderness?

By Joanna Skrajny, AWA Conservation Specialist



Some History

Fifty-one years ago Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) was started by a group of hunters, anglers, and landowners concerned with the future of Alberta's wilderness. AWA cut its teeth defending the need to protect the Castle Wilderness, recognizing that if we were to have wildlife in the future we needed wild spaces as well. The Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC) was born in 1989. This group, largely drawn from residents in southwest Alberta, recognized the unique ecological values associated with the Castle and its pivotal location in the Crown of the

Continent Ecosystem.

The fight for the Castle has been long and hard. The landscape has suffered greatly from the days when the Castle was part of the National Parks system. Logging, mining, and petroleum extraction have all left scars on the landscape. More recently, as detailed so well by Global Forest Watch Canada, off-highway vehicle use and random camping have added their insults to the land.

In the 1990s AWA warned that the government's efforts to address motorized use in the Castle and Eastern Slopes were woefully inadequate. In language that is as ap-

propriate now as it was when AWA spoke it in the 1990s we said:

Compromises to please 'user groups', if implemented, will lead to continued degradation of the recreational Wild-land potential of the area, soil and vegetation damage, harassment of wildlife and other impacts. Where the bottom line of any planning process should always be resource protection and environmental leadership, we see an access plan whose bottom line compromises these principles in order to try and please all users, whatever the impact or legitimacy of their activities.

For some reason, the off-road vehicle users have already chosen to renege on the consensus decision they helped shape. After agreeing to a consensus solution that was already too heavily weighted in favor of motor vehicles, they orchestrated massive demonstrations to further weaken the draft policy.

Since we spoke those words, the situation has only worsened. When the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan was approved in 2012 its only commitment to protection was to the bare mountain tops in the region.

We thought that had changed in 2015 when the government declared that it would "fully protect" the Castle. Our hearts dropped again when we read the fine print – off highway vehicle use would be allowed in the Castle.

More than another year of consultation followed. Municipalities, ranchers, off-highway vehicle users, scientists, and conservationists all participated. AWA ar-



Numerous flower species like this yellow monkey flower can be found throughout the Castle.
PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS

gued consistently throughout the consultation that OHVs should be prohibited from the Castle parks. First Nations were engaged in a separate process. Personally this second consultation was vital. It's all too easy to forget that our time on this landscape is miniscule compared to First Nations who have used the Castle Wilderness for at least 10,000 years.

The government response to date is promising but it's too long on intention, too short on action. On January 20, 2017 Premier Notley went some way towards that position. OHVs were to be prohibited starting in 2017 on lands south of Highway 774, an area that included approximately 50 percent of the Wildland Provincial Park. Critical habitat for westslope cutthroat in the West and South Castle would have benefited immediately from that decision.

That commitment lasted less than six weeks. On March 1, 2017 the Minister of Environment and Parks announced there wouldn't be any change to "current state-of-trail access." OHVs will operate this year

south of Highway 774 on designated trails, regardless of the proximity of those trails to critical cutthroat habitat.

This disappointment comes despite plenty of evidence that the Alberta public wants something very much like the "fully protected" Castle they have been expecting since September 2015. How many more years, then, before they can see for themselves that the Castle has been protected and has recovered from the abuse?

So with the overwhelming support for protecting the Castle, why hasn't more progress been made? In order to answer that question, we need to take a step back and look at the value of wilderness itself.

Valuing Wilderness

To begin, what is wilderness? Personally, I'm fond of the legal definition used in the United States:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its com-

munity of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. (Wilderness Act)

I have always been proud of Canada's reputation for wild spaces. Many weekend excursions have helped me disconnect and reconnect with myself and to feel grounded. Yet unfortunately, we as Canadians also tend to take our wild spaces for granted. An eye-opening moment for me was to visit Kananaskis Country with a cousin who lives in Europe. Coming across a series of blue lakes and openly forested mountains, she was dumbfounded for most of the day before finally exclaiming – *this can't be real!* At the time, it seemed equally unbelievable to me that there were places where this didn't exist.

Unfortunately, Canadians' ability to take our wild spaces for granted has led to the degradation of much of what we hold dear. We have generally assumed that there is more than enough wilderness in Canada. Yet this assumption has been challenged by scientists for generations;



Why not wilderness? Victoria Peak stands majestically in the Castle PHOTO: © C. OLSON

their subsequent calls to protect wilderness have gone largely unanswered. As a result, we've seen the widespread declines of many species, including iconic ones such as caribou which depend on true wilderness in order to survive.

Why not wilderness? It's a simple enough question, yet incredibly poignant. Dave Sheppard, a retired ecologist, posed this exact question in his book by that name. He theorized that Canadians' inability to properly value and protect wilderness was a combination of our inability to speak up and taking our wilderness for granted. The lack of checks and balances and any proper protections for our wildlife or wild spaces has led to preferring industrial development over anything else. Any conversations about protecting wilderness lead to squawking over the "need to balance" all uses, despite the fact that the scales are unfairly tipped towards exploiting the landscape. This has resulted in a disconnected public that, although supportive of wilderness protection, is largely isolated from experiencing true wilderness. I tend to agree with his use of Fred Bodsworth's assessment of the situation in Ontario's Algonquin more than forty years ago:

So, indeed, why all the fuss about preserving wilderness? Except for a narrow strip of settlement along our southern border, Canada is all wilderness and likely to remain that way for a long time.

Yet despite this seeming incongruity, we have a wilderness crisis, we are rapidly running out of wilderness – the kinds of wilderness we need – and in the places we need it... A large and exploding mass of Canadians need wilderness where it can be conveniently reached and used.

There are as many reasons to protect wilderness in Alberta as there are landscapes. Protected wilderness fulfills a need to escape to experience solitude and silence – with a canoe paddle, tent, or fishing pole in hand. These areas protect our water supply and ensure we have clean drinking water in the future. We also protect wilderness areas out of a sense of obligation to pass on a natural legacy to our children. There are

aesthetic reasons – the joy of knowing our province still has magnificent, undisturbed water and landscapes. And there are moral imperatives too – commitments to protect and preserve wildlife and biodiversity.

The most touching aspect about Dave Sheppard's writing is that in many ways *Why Not Wilderness?* is an homage to the Castle. His opening paragraphs describe the Castle in a way a parent describes a child – with grief to the damage that has been done to the area, but still adamant that it is: "A place worth saving." He understood very clearly that if the Castle was ever going to be protected, Albertans needed to value and speak up for wilderness.

The Castle is a special place. It is a natural force to be reckoned with not only on a provincial scale, but nationally and internationally as well. It's an area we and government stewards of public lands should see as fundamentally irreplaceable, a one-in-a-world kind of place.

As an essential piece of an ecological puzzle, the Castle Wilderness in the southwestern corner of Alberta contains one of the highest amounts of animal and plant species diversities in Alberta, as numerous ecosystems overlap in one relatively small area. Conservative estimates place the number of rare or at-risk species in the Castle at 200. This number is likely too low. Peter Sherrington, a past AWA President, local resident in the Castle area, and an avid birder, has identified 300 bird species alone, most of which he has seen

from his own backyard. This includes about 30 species that had been previously unrecorded in the area. High biodiversity means that this landscape is more productive and more resilient – the more species that exist, the higher the chance that one of them is able to survive and adapt to any changes. This is becoming increasingly important as climate change adds another stress to our natural environment.

The Castle also contains important wildlife corridors and critical watershed areas. Its watersheds are home to much of the remaining threatened native westslope cutthroat trout population in Alberta. Their habitat is legally protected at a federal level. These watersheds also comprise a significant source of the water in the Oldman River – roughly 30 percent – meaning that the Castle is critical for providing a sustainable source of water that people living and working downstream in our southern prairie provinces depend on.

It's clear that the Castle is valuable for countless reasons.

The Problem with Balance

Let's return to January 20 of this year, when the Government of Alberta announced increased protections for the Castle Wilderness. The announcement included an expansion of the boundaries of the Castle Wildland Provincial Park and a plan to phase out motorized use in the parks. AWA supports the creation of these parks. We made it clear that we agree that the eco-



This behaviour has no place in a protected provincial or wildland park. PHOTO: © W. HOWSE

logical arguments for eliminating off-highway vehicle use there are unassailable.

The Castle parks, with expanded Wildland Provincial Park boundaries, will provide important protection for headwaters and threatened species including westslope cutthroat trout and grizzly bears. I think that Albertans will be happy to see that they have been listened to and that protection of our headwaters and species at risk is being taken seriously. It's important to give the government credit where credit is due: if you haven't already, a quick email, letter or call to your MLA and to the Minister of the Environment's office is appreciated to let them know your support.

But, it's important to note that the government proposes to allow the damage OHVs do to critical habitat in the parks to continue for another three to five years. And, under pressure from OHV users, the government abandoned the commitment to ban OHVs immediately from the lands south of Highway 774. There is a risk that this wilting under pressure will worsen, so your participation in exercises such as the online survey about the Castle is imperative (see the link at talkaep.alberta.ca/CastleManagementPlan).

You may have heard rumblings from the legion of motorized vehicle users that there needs to be a 'balanced approach' where all uses are allowed on the landscape. Dave

Sheppard's counter to this in his book is a quote from wildlife scientist Brian Horejsi:

'Balance demands with protection' is just one rote use of words that has failed society and the natural world across North America for nearly half a century. If 95 per cent of the land is exploited and five per cent is protected, it's balance.

Horejsi's assessment is so true. On public land in Alberta, roughly 90 percent of it is accessible to those who can afford to spend \$10,000 or more on an OHV. This is completely disproportionate to the percentage of the public who claim that using machines to destroy public land and torment wildlife is their idea of fun: roughly two to six percent of the population. It's true that motorized users shouldn't be ignored and need trail systems built in places

where it is appropriate to do so. But it's also true that they must not have a disproportionate amount of attention paid to their cause. The argument over balance as it has played out over Alberta's lands falsely shifts the conversation from whether something is the right thing to do to it's my right to decide what I want to do! Again, the science is as clear as the ruts OHVs leave in the land behind them – motorized activity at current or reduced levels in the Castle is incompatible with the conservation goals of parks. Full stop. As a retired fisheries biologist once said to me: allowing OHVs into a protected area is essentially the same thing as allowing people into the park with chainsaws and bulldozers. But wouldn't I get in trouble for doing that? ▲



It's not too late to have your say – the deadline to voice your opinion is April 19.