

The Great Divide Trail



By Joanna Skrajny, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

Amidst the controversies concerning what will be allowed and what won't be allowed in the Castle Parks one can be forgiven for perhaps overlooking a line on the government's draft management plan. That line is the Great Divide Trail and it represents a major milestone for the Great Divide Trail Association (GDTA). If the route of the Great Divide Trail appears on the final map it will be the first time in the trail's history that it has been officially recognized in a government publication.

To celebrate this major accomplishment, I wanted to hear more about the history of the trail and the efforts to recognize it. I sat down with Dave Higgins, co-founder of the Great Divide Trail Association, Dustin Lynx, author of the guidebook *"Hiking Canada's Great Divide Trail"*, and Dave Hockey, the current president of the Great Divide Trail Association. [Dave Hockey wrote in the August 2015 issue of *WLA* about the first leg of his effort to hike the 4,200 kilometre Pacific Crest Trail that stretches from Mexico to Canada.]

The Continental Divide is the origin for three watersheds – the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic – and is the water tower for the Prairies. The idea to establish a long distance trail running along the Continental Divide between Waterton and Kakwa Lake is an old one; various groups and individuals started to imagine this route in the mid 1960s. The idea finally achieved more formal recognition when, in the summer of 1974, six young people received a federal grant to complete a proposed route for the trail.

Dave Higgins was part of that original group of six that first, completed a study to determine the feasibility of such a trail, and then formed the Great Divide Trail Association (GDTA). He said that conservation of wild spaces has always been one of the driving factors behind the association and its goal. "One of the core values of a long distance trail is its ability to bring attention to the area that it goes through, he said. "In order for a trail to be a desirable asset it's important for the area to be relatively untouched. From the very start we felt that the area deserved higher stewardship," he added.

He went on to explain that they had become increasingly concerned over resource extraction and fragmentation of the landscape along the Continental Divide. The group felt that if the trail could bring more people to the land, then those people in turn would become more actively involved in how those lands are managed. This would either encourage those areas to be protected or to be managed in more sustainable ways. As Higgins emphasized, "long distance trails are special because they knit areas together."

Trail building began quickly after the group's establishment; however, the group struggled to achieve official recognition and to secure the protection of the built trail portions. Higgins attributes this to a political shift in the 1980s which created both ambivalence and unwillingness in government to see the landscape used for anything other than resource extraction. Of course, this government disinterest made building and maintaining the trail

a challenge: volunteers could become discouraged and less likely to help if they doubted that the trail might even exist the following year.

The lack of early progress certainly wasn't for lack of trying – Dave Higgins remembers quite clearly the Castle Access Management Process, a three-year period where he attended meetings on nearly a monthly basis trying to get the trail recognized. As he recalled, he wasn't necessarily opposed to motorized use in the area, as long as there were designated areas for motorized and non-motorized travel. At the end of the process Dave Higgins thought they had reached consensus to allow for the Great Divide Trail to be officially recognized. Unfortunately, powerful lobbying by the motorized contingent resulted in more motorized trails through the Castle Public Land Use Zone and taking the Great Divide Trail off of the map altogether.

A major roadblock then (and now) that Dave Higgins points to is the absence of legislation dedicated towards the categorization, establishment, and protection of trails. The United States record is very different. In 1968 Congress passed the *National Trails System Act* and created a system of nationally protected trails. This has allowed Americans to preserve trail corridors in a way that Canada has failed to do.

The lack of political commitment meant, when Dustin Lynx and his wife Julia hiked the entirety of the Great Divide Trail in 1996, their route was unmarked.

As Dustin Lynx says in *Hiking Canada's Great Divide Trail*: "The Great Divide

Trail has a disproportionately long history compared to the amount of trail built in its name. Today it remains an unmarked route despite public support and government approval for an official trail.”

Dustin Lynx is about to release *Hiking Canada's Great Divide Trail – the Third Edition*. His guidebook in many ways has helped to keep the trail alive and available to those adventurers that either don't mind or relish a bit of route finding, especially during years when the GDTA disbanded. Now, 17 years after Dustin's first guidebook was released and 43 years after the birth of the GDTA, official provincial recognition may open the window to change the status and prominence of the Great Divide Trail.

When I spoke to him about how he feels about the Castle Parks and the trail finally being recognized, he said: “It really excited me to see the trail on the provincial map. We've managed to re-protect

an amazing place, which used to be a part of the National Parks system, but protection was rolled back approximately 100 years ago.”

The Great Divide Trail is important to Dustin for many reasons. Initially, he had been looking for a way to continue hiking long distance trails in Canada. Through the years, he's reorganized his life around the Great Divide Trail – first going to the University of Calgary so he and Julia could hike it and finish school, later moving to Canmore where they now reside. Now, along with his children, they've hiked thousands of kilometres of the Great Divide Trail together. Today, Lynx says the trail is still “unmistakably beautiful, it has its wilderness values still in place.” He's excited about the upcoming release of the updated version of his guidebook, not least because it highlights some of the beauty and challenges along the northern sections of the trail.

AWA can claim a place in the history of support for the Great Divide Trail. We supported the GDTA during its formative years. AWA was able to offer some financial support to the Association. Both AWA staff and members helped to construct and maintain sections of the Trail. AWA organized trail maintenance trips to Cataract Creek, Lost Creek, and the Baril Creek area in Don Getty Wildland about ten years ago.

It was also through AWA's “Tuesday Talks” that Dave Hockey, current President of the GDTA, started getting involved in 2010. Then he attended a Tuesday night talk with some of the founding members. He had wanted to give back to the community after his humbling experience of hiking the Pacific Crest Trail and seeing just how much people were willing to do in order to ensure that you had a great experience.

Dave Hockey hopes that through his work with the GDTA he can help ensure

that the public is able to hike through Alberta's wild spaces. As he said: "I think many people don't understand what we have in Alberta and how it is being impacted. What better way than to hike all or part of it, and see nature and development together? If you don't experience it, you won't want to protect it."

I asked Dave what has made it possible to get the trail officially marked 43 years after the idea first emerged. He thinks that having the capacity to be a consistent part of the consultation process and forming working relationships with the government staff have gone a long way to ensuring the Great Divide Trail is recognized. He says that another instrumental piece has been developing a larger Board of Directors and a bigger team of people that are willing to help. "It's really impressive how many people are jumping on board and willing to help," he said, "even if it's in a small way. I think that's

what makes the difference".

AWA hopes the Great Divide Trail will be officially recognized on the final version of the Castle Parks Management Plan. AWA thinks such recognition would help the GDTA secure the funding and volunteer crew needed since recognition offers some assurance the trail will exist in the future. The Castle is currently the worst section of the Great Divide Trail despite going through some of the most beautiful country. It's marred by often running on top of OHV trails. If it's recognized, Hockey hopes to be able to build a whole new section of trail through the Castle.

I asked Dave if he would recommend the current Castle section of the trail to those wanting to explore and enjoy the new parks. "The Great Divide Trail in the Castle is in some of the most spectacular but also some of the toughest parts of the trail," he said. "It's up very high, and there are steep sections in a few areas where you

have to be comfortable with scrambling. So yes, I would recommend it, but not to a novice."

So, at least for now, for an experienced backpacker, hiking the Great Divide Trail is a great way to support the new parks and to see what they may yet become.

As for what the future holds, Dave Hockey hopes that the Great Divide Trail can become recognized during the Livingstone/Porcupine sub regional planning process. He hopes that recognition there will become the catalyst to getting the trail recognized along its entire route through Alberta, B.C. and our National Parks.

If you want to find out more about the Great Divide Trail and the Association, go to www.greatdividetrail.com

They have great trip planning resources, maps, and information on how to get involved. 🐾