

# Public Lands:

## What's in a name?

By Joanna Skrajny, AWA Conservation Specialist



### The Power of Language

**L**anguage: it's how we communicate, how we hope to understand each other despite our differences. It's amazing that we can make sounds with our mouths, gesture to each other, or write down symbols on a page and others can interpret meaning from them. It's how we maintain order and progress in a world of billions of different people living chaotic, unpredictable lives.

Language holds incredible importance then as the basis of our society and our laws. Replacing one innocuous word with another can change things tremendously. It's the difference between "you will be paid a lump sum of a million dollars or be paid 1,000 dollars every week" and "you will be paid a lump sum of a million dollars and be paid 1,000 dollars every week". The so-called "legalese" found in laws and other legal documents may be intended to reduce the number of ambiguous interpretations, yet that legalese may be near-unintelligible to the average person.

People who have mastery over language have power and influence over others – think of the sway that advertisers, authors, journalists, and celebrities have over our day-to-day lives.

Politicians and companies know this and they use it to their advantage. For example, let's say there is a new project like a new coal mine or dam being proposed and you are concerned about it. You try to read the environmental assessment or the management plan so you can provide some informed feedback. These documents often can be hundreds of pages long and, in my

experience, filled with jargon that is challenging to decipher. I often feel frustrated, stupid, and discouraged from even reading the thing; it doesn't encourage me to engage in public consultation!

*"Obsfuscation: Concealment or obscuration of a concept, idea, expression, etc."*

- Oxford English Dictionary

Are these documents intentionally written this way? Often, I think the answer to the question is yes. Corporations, governments too, use language that is "technical" English, but may be so full of technical terms and obtuse writing that you can't understand what's happening.

### The Language Associated with Alberta's Public Lands

In this way, the abuse AWA feels too often has been inflicted on Alberta's public lands has roots in language, in the meanings attributed to a phrase like "public lands."

What does the phrase "public lands" mean? Some of you might ask if I'm talking about Crown lands. Yes, I am – that's what public lands used to be called in Alberta.

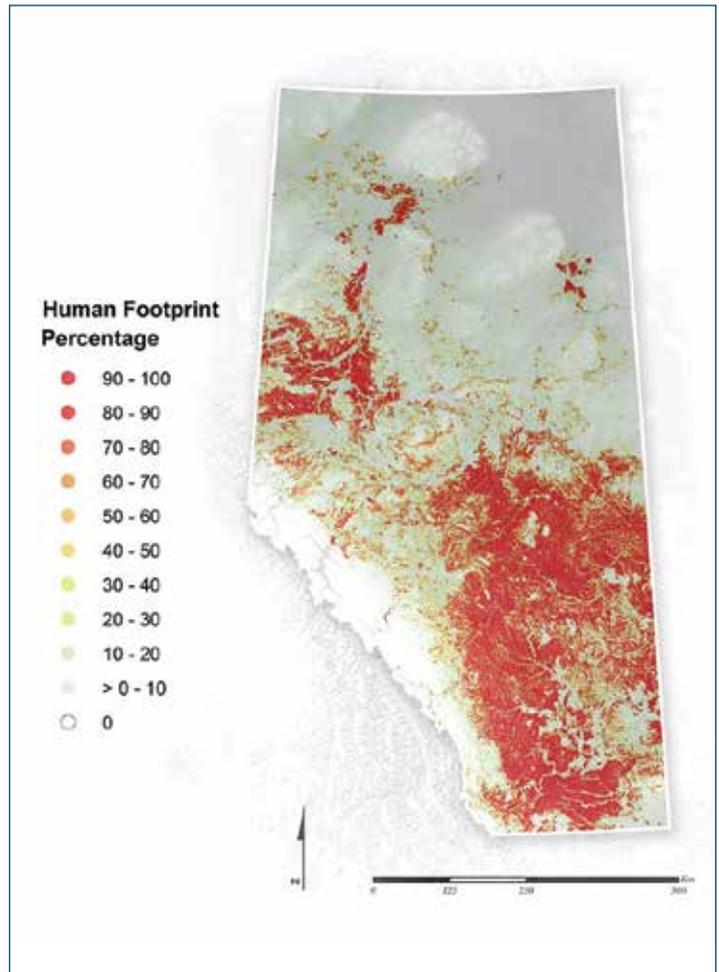
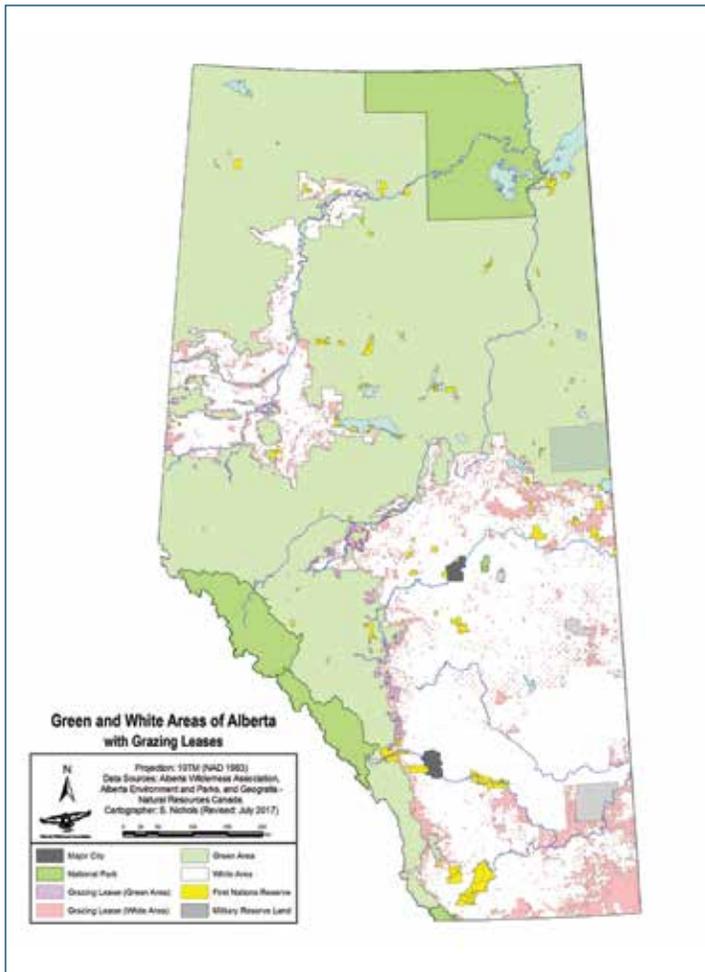
Public lands are lands that we, as the public, own. Our provincial and federal governments manage and administer them on our behalf. Approximately 60 percent of Alberta is provincial public land, which means the province is responsible for managing these lands. The federal government has jurisdiction over federal public lands, which include national parks, military land, and First Nations reserves – togeth-

er these make up about 10 percent of the province. The remainder is private lands – lands owned by individuals of one type or another (such as a person or a corporation).

Provincial public land is used and valued for many things. Agricultural pursuits, such as farming and livestock grazing, join resource extraction activities (such as coal, oil, gas, gravel, timber, and minerals) as industrial pursuits that depend on public lands. Water production, wildlife habitat, and recreation also depend on public lands and protected areas help provide us with their suite of benefits.

To reiterate, the public – you and I – own these lands. The government has a responsibility to manage and care for them *in our best interest*. Like any good investment, it only makes sense that we would want these lands to appreciate in value over time. And much like a financial manager, we pay our government, through taxes, to ensure these lands are managed responsibly.

In 1948, Alberta's public lands were divided up into two main zones: the Green Area and the White Area, which are also referred to as the forested and settled portions of Alberta, respectively. The Green Area (the forested portion) is located in Northern Alberta as well as the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies and is overwhelmingly public land. The White Area (the settled portion) is found primarily on Alberta's grasslands and parkland landscapes and contains only about 25 percent public land. Not only is the White Area largely private land but government has given private actors permission to use much of the remaining public land in the White Area for



A map of the Green and White Areas of Alberta (left) compared to the percentage of human footprint (right). Right map: ABMI, 2018, *The Status of Human Footprint in Alberta*. Accessible at [abmi.ca/home/reports/2018/human-footprint](http://abmi.ca/home/reports/2018/human-footprint)

agricultural and non-renewable resource extraction activities.

This basic division has resulted in major differences in how these two areas have been developed and managed. The Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute recently released a report on the status of human footprint in Alberta, for which they produced a map showing the percentage of human footprint across the province. When you compare the two areas, it's quite shocking to see the difference. Virtually the entirety of the White Area is over 60 percent disturbed. Major disturbances in this area include agriculture, energy, roads, and urban development.

Since most of the province's grasslands and parkland are located in the White Area, it's no surprise that these natural regions have greatly suffered: 73 percent of Alberta's Species at Risk rely on native prairie, yet less than one percent of our grasslands

have been protected.

The only relatively undisturbed pockets of the White Area closely mirror the locations of grazing leases and military reserve land. AWA has long supported grazing domestic livestock on public lands, primarily in the grassland and parkland regions, for this reason.

While there may be less human disturbance in the Green Area than the White Area our impact there is considerable: the footprint of the forestry industry, which primarily operates in the Green Area, doubled from 1999 to 2015. In the Foothills, which are located almost entirely in the Green Area, forestry disturbance alone covers 20.5 percent of the region. When that disturbance takes place in our headwaters, Alberta's native trout suffer. Clearcuts and haul roads, combined with thousands of kilometres of seismic lines and other industrial linear disturbances, have contributed

to the population collapse of woodland caribou in this region.

It's clear that our public lands need support and involvement from the public in order to be managed in our best interest. Yet as a member of the public, it's very difficult to find out the "what, where, and who" of our public lands. What activities are allowed on public lands, where are those activities allowed, and who decides what's allowed?

For example, let's say you wanted to get out into the country this weekend. You want to know where you can go to recreate and what you can do. How would you find that information? Perhaps you would check the government website to see what their guidelines are. As a *starting point* the provincial government suggests that you should be familiar with the *Forest and Prairie Protection Act*, the *Public Lands Administration Regulation*, *Off-Highway Vehicle Reg-*

ulation, *Recreational Access Regulations*, and *the Traffic Safety Act (Part 6)*.

I don't know how many of you have read these laws and regulations in their entirety, but I can assure you it is not light reading.

But let's assume you are a model citizen and have read them all. You would then need to know whether you are on public land in the Green or White Area, a public land use zone, or in one of Alberta's eight types of protected areas. You would also need to know if there were any dispositions restricting your access onto these lands.

There is no pamphlet, no single web resource to figure out what you can do. If that's not enough, rules sometimes vary between the same types of areas!

Recreation on Alberta's public land is just one example. Thanks to decades of inac-

tion and ineptitude, Alberta has a complete hodge-podge of laws and regulations for managing Alberta's public lands.

As a result, the issues surrounding Alberta's public lands are as numerous as the laws that govern them. Our forests are being logged with too little concern for other values such as water, recreation, or wildlife. Critically valuable public lands containing native prairie and wetlands are currently sold, drained, and ploughed without consultation. On public land that is leased for cattle grazing, leaseholders are receiving compensation for oil and gas activities instead of the public, the true owners of the land.

I believe this confusion, this lack of clear language defining what is acceptable, has had significant consequences for Alberta's public lands. It has confused the public

about the rules, disillusioned some of us and made our public lands anything but "public." Our wilderness has suffered as a result.

It is long past time for our public lands to be managed in the public interest, in a way that can be sustained and enjoyed by generations to come. The government must regain the public's trust by taking responsibility for our public lands and having honest and clear conversations about how it is managing our collective resource. Our future depends on it. 🐾

*The true tragedy of the commons of public land is really not a tragedy at all but the farce of uncaring, negligent governments who do not manage and steward the land remotely competently. - Bob Scammell*

## Featured Artist Colleen Campbell

*My Paw is Sacred*  
55cm x 75cm  
Medium: graphite  
(the whole bear), gold and  
silver leaf powder painted  
on with a medium,  
silver watercolour  
and acrylic paint.  
PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL

