

The Bighorn... We Must Act Now

Before Mike Sullivan delivered this year's Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture those of us who gathered at the Hillhurst Cottage School that evening paused to toast a Government of Alberta announcement made just hours earlier. We raised our glasses and toasted the promise AWA sees in the government's proposal to establish the Bighorn Wildland Provincial Park. Earlier that day the government announced its intentions for Bighorn Country: create the Bighorn Wildland Provincial Park; create three new Provincial Parks (David Thompson, North Saskatchewan River, and Ya Ha Tinda); create four new or expanded Provincial Recreation Areas (Bighorn Dam, Hummingbird, Shunda, and Snow Creek); reconfigure/establish two Public Land Use Zones (Kiska/Willson and West Country).

It's impossible to overstate the importance of the Bighorn to AWA. No conservation group has worked as hard for as long as AWA has to further conservation in the Bighorn. AWA members should take pride in the Bighorn initiatives AWA has spearheaded for decades now. Between 1984 and 1994 AWA staff and volunteers cleaned backcountry trails and camps of over 60 years of accumulated garbage. With the assistance of the provincial government, AWA airlifted tons of garbage out of the Bighorn. In 1994 AWA adopted the historic Bighorn Trail that starts at Crescent Falls and runs through Wapiabi Gap to Blackstone Gap.

Virtually every year since Vivian Pharis and others have worked there to maintain that historic trail. In 2003 AWA launched another unique, very positive, version of direct action – the Bighorn Recreation and Impact Monitoring Program. AWA stepped up in a way that neither government nor other conservation organizations were prepared to do – we studied and documented the extent of OHV use in the Bighorn and the impacts such use had on the land. When it comes to walking the stewardship talk in the Bighorn no public or private organization is AWA's equal.

For this reason, we're pleased to see that the boundaries of the Bighorn Wildland Provincial Park, the Crown jewel in this conservation/recreation/tourism proposal, conform very closely to those the Progressive Conservatives nearly put into place in 1986. The boundaries proposed then, the boundaries proposed now are very much the product of your organization's efforts. Indeed, the concept of Bighorn Country is based on Peter Loughheed's Kananaskis Country.

Park boundaries are one thing, what governments allow to take place within those boundaries is something else. Between now and January 31, 2019 Alberta Environment and Parks is conducting an online survey about what activities should be encouraged and allowed in these new parks, recreation areas, and public land use zones. With more than 7,000 members and supporters across the province, today's AWA (you and

me) have a tremendous opportunity here to honour and continue the efforts AWA staff and volunteers have made for decades now to conserve this area. Please take a minute to say Yes to Bighorn Country by sending an email letter at <https://tinyurl.com/bighorn-country>. **This government needs to have a positive response from us to make this happen in 2019!** As well, please take a little more time and complete the survey and urge your conservation-minded friends to do so also. The link to the survey is at: <https://talkaep.alberta.ca/bighorn-country>.

When I complete the survey I will urge the province to take their cue from the direction the government outlined thirty and forty years ago. In *A Policy for the Management of the Eastern Slopes (1977/1984)*, most of what may soon be the Bighorn Wildland Provincial Park was designated as Prime Protection Zone. This meant it was off-limits to industrial development and off-highway vehicle use. The same message was delivered in the Integrated Resource Plans developed for the Bighorn in the early 1980s.

My Christmas wish for 2018 is that all our elected representatives, will see the wisdom in taking their cues from what the government of the day proposed decades ago.

- Christyann Olson, Executive Director