



Horse Use in Wilderness

Position

AWA supports the safe and responsible use of horses in wilderness and backcountry regions of Alberta. Because horses can negatively impact trails, campsites, stream banks and grazing lands, regulations and monitoring are needed to control these impacts. Today horses are primarily used for day riding into backcountry areas, rather than the extended horse packing of the past. Day riding concentrates horse camping and impact onto the fringes of wilderness, necessitating greater attention to facility camping and local mitigation. Kananaskis Country and Cypress Hills Provincial Park have developed exemplary trailhead facilities for overnight horse camping that should become models used throughout the province. Paid staff are required to maintain sites and trails.

Points of Emphasis

- Where possible, horse use should be restricted to roads, trails and routes designated, sited and designed for their use.
- Appropriate regulations must be in place to control the type and intensity of horse use, grazing activity, tethering practices, and manure removal to control weed spread.
- Appropriately developed trailhead facilities are needed not just along the Eastern Slopes, but throughout other ecological regions where horse use is appropriate, in order to meet recreational needs and disperse impacts.
- Backcountry camps set up for extended seasonal use must be rotated regularly to avoid damage and must be removed completely at the end of each season.
- Wilderness camps should not be serviced by helicopter except in emergency situations.

Background

Horses have been used in Alberta's prairies, mountains and foothills ever since the Spanish made them available to Aboriginal peoples. Early explorers such as John Palliser and David Thompson used canoes where they could and horses where canoes wouldn't go. Early ranchers, explorers, adventurers, outfitters, national parks and Forest Service personnel all travelled the Alberta foothills and mountain backcountry by horse over the past two centuries. Many of the original parks and eastern slopes Forest Service trails undoubtedly began as Indian trading and hunting trails, traversing the best routes across the Rockies into British Columbia and penetrating summer and fall hunting areas. The historic Bighorn Trail, long maintained by the AWA, is one such trail that served first as a native hunting route and later as a national parks and Forest Service route along the Front and Bighorn Ranges.

In an era when horses were the main overland vehicle, trails were built by skilled Bushmen who sited them in the best locations for route stability and efficiency. Both the national parks and early Forest Service, hired outfitters and others skilled in trail orienting, building and maintenance to build interconnected trails throughout the foothills and mountains of Alberta. Many of these Eastern Slopes horse trails are still in use. However, others have disappeared due to lack of maintenance and lack of use or have been obliterated or usurped by roads and seismic lines. Equestrian trail building and





maintenance outside of designated parks, has long been neglected, despite trail riding being an important and growing economic contributor and important contributor to healthful living.

While the foothills of the Eastern Slopes are relatively resilient to damage from horse trails and camping, intense or prolonged use will result in permanent damage unless particular care is taken to harden sites or choose resilient sites. Higher elevation backcountry camp sites such as those coveted by hunters and summer outfitters are more susceptible to damage or becoming “ghetto-like” due to thin soils and shorter recovery seasons. This becomes particularly problematic if camps are allowed to become “permanent” through being left in place all year or if gear is left in place and accumulates, year after year.

Today, most people who own trail horses do not have the skills, equipment or time for extended packing trips, rather they tend to day-ride from a trailhead. Within Kananaskis Country, Alberta has developed exemplary trailhead facilities that are well sited, well provisioned and well positioned to support several days of interesting riding. These include Mesa Butte, Blue Rock and Elbow River. Sandy McNabb is a luxury example of similar facilities that allow for large RV camping with hookups to electricity and water. Other sites that do not provide roofed stables, but do provide water, toilets, manure removal, corrals and individual camp sites include Indian Graves and Cypress Hills. All of these sites require bookings and fees and are maintained by Alberta Parks. Repeating the Kananaskis-Cypress Hills example elsewhere would help to alleviate congestion and environmental damage at other Eastern Slopes sites such as occurs at Ya Ha Tinda, Clearwater and Hummingbird.

Backcountry Trail and Camping Etiquette

If you are planning to pack into the backcountry in the old style, these are basic suggestions:

- **Choosing a campsite:** Preferably, choose a site that is an obvious old camp. Usually these were chosen long ago for their proximity to essentials like water, grazing, flat tent spaces, wood, shelter and rocks for fire places. You will need trees or hitching rails for temporarily tying horses while you unpack. Often these campsites will have a courtesy woodpile, wood blocks for sitting on and rails for holding saddles and pack gear off the ground.
- **Limiting Horse Numbers:** The fewer the horses, the less the impact. National parks places limits on the number of camp/grazing day/year in backcountry sites. Limiting horse numbers also reduces the need to carry feed that in the case of hay, is a major contributor of weeds entering backcountry sites.
- **Tethering Horses:** Prolonged tying, as overnight, or if pack horses are left in camp during the day, should be to ropes strung between trees so as to avoid pawing damage to tree roots. If you are traveling in the fall when nights can be cold, bringing horse blankets will allow tethered horse greater comfort and reduce the need for feed. Scatter horse manure before leaving camp.
- **Setting up Camp:** Use low-impact methods with small fires confined to rock rings designed for ease of cooking. Carrying a small grill helps to facilitate cooking on an open fire. If appropriate, scatter fireplace rocks and cold ashes before you leave the site. Hang saddles and pack gear on rails well off the ground and cover with tarps tied into place. Lash ropes make good clothes lines for drying horse blankets and pads. When leaving camp, pile up the sitting blocks and leave some split wood for the next group.

