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Wayne Wegner took this photo of the Bow River Valley from the site of Iniskim Umaapi (the Majorville Medicine Wheel). Composed of a central cairn linked by 28 spokes to a surrounding stone circle, archaeologists estimate the site has been used continuously for 4,500 years. PHOTO: © W. WEGNER



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ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

Dedicated to the conservation of wilderness and the completion of a protected areas network, **Alberta Wilderness Association** is a voice for the environment. Since 1965, AWA has inspired communities to care for Alberta's wild spaces through awareness and action. With a provincial office and library in Calgary, AWA has active members, volunteers, and sponsors throughout Alberta and beyond. AWA is a non-profit, federally registered, charitable society. Donations and financial support are greatly appreciated, please call 403-283-2025 or contribute online at AlbertaWilderness.ca

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Featured Art

Jared Tailfeathers Sikohm Kokomii (Calling Crane)

Jared is a bi-racial Blackfoot (Kainai) multi-media artist, musician, teacher, historian/researcher and author. His practice focuses on bridging the gap between various genres/media for arts and culture, making work that is designed for large conceptual and multi-media communication and collaboration. He also is a multi-instrumentalist with over 20 years of experience as a writing and performing musician. He builds one of a kind musical instruments to use in interactive projects. He also builds and designs working instruments for private collectors, patrons, and musicians. He works with Indigenous arts and cultural groups to promote sustainable growth for indigenous artists, musicians, and youth. Check out Jared's website here: <https://sinicaethics1.wixsite.com/jaredtailfeathers>

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Think Big, Act Bold, Be Brave

Meeting thoughtful, passionate people has been one of the biggest rewards of immersing myself in Alberta's coal follies since last fall. Walter is one of those people and my focus here comes from a recent conversation we had about coal and the future of Alberta's Rockies and Foothills.

Walter used part of the phrase – “Think Big, Act Bold” – when we were talking about the 1976 Coal Policy and the wisdom of advocacy aimed at reinstating it. I asked Walter where the phrase came from. He told me it's often used in executive leadership training; for Walter it meant what Gary Keller said in 2019: “There is one thing that I've learned in life: It is that small goals tend to place limits on our potential, and that big goals tend to pull us right through the small goals on the way to attaining the big ones.”

I think it's fair to say that Walter is one of the thousands of Albertans who weren't experts about the industrial and policy history of coal in Alberta before last fall. As we spoke, I wondered if the thousands of people new to coal arguably may be more inclined to take Keller's words to heart than would the policy experts who can tell guests at dinner parties the details of Alberta's four coal categories.

Today's new coal policy activists may do that because, unlike some of the veterans of the campaign to get the 1976 coal policy, their mindsets aren't imprisoned or unduly shaped by what was desirable and possible in 1976. The views of the modern generation of activists are shaped by the circumstances we face in 2021, not by what we thought possible in 1976. Climate change, biodiversity/species-at-risk, selenium pollution – these are some of the concerns motivating many of the peoples who are now speaking out against resuscitating Alberta's metallurgical coal industry. Forty-five years ago, how many people gave those concerns the importance they have in the public mind today?

Several months ago I laughed to myself when I read that the UCP Caucus, in part, defended revoking the 1976 Coal Policy with these words: “Selenium is not even mentioned in the 1976 Coal Policy.” Of course it wasn't; it was 1976 and wasn't recognized then

as a threat to aquatic health. If selenium was seen that way in 1976 perhaps progressive conservatives and others would have joined together to ban coal mining all along Alberta's Eastern Slopes.

So I think that, if we want to take Keller's phrase to heart, we have to demand more than just returning to 1976. We should recognize that a new century has magnified the importance of different issues. To make a positive contribution to addressing those issues, I only see one option: Say “No” to coal everywhere in Alberta.

This brings me to Rachel Notley's Private Members' Bill 214, the *Eastern Slopes Protection Act*. I'm surprised and pleased the Bill made it through the Standing Committee on Private Bills in early April. I hope the Legislature will do what few Legislatures do, first debate and then pass a private members' bill into law.

But, as written, the *Eastern Slopes Protection Act* doesn't think big enough; it isn't bold enough. Like the 1976 Coal Policy and like the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act*, the former Premier's bill entertains the possibility that open-pit coal mining could proceed on Category 3 and 4 lands. What this means is that Notley's bill wouldn't, as a matter of course, prohibit coal mining projects like Grassy Mountain, Tent Mountain, or Chinook from applying for regulatory approval. The NDP leader's bill endorses the fiction in the 1976 Coal Policy that there is an ecological justification for categorizing some lands in the Rockies and Foothills as Category 2, others as Category 4. There isn't. As we saw during the Grassy Mountain hearing, legitimate, well-supported concerns were expressed about what this mine on Category 4 lands would mean for species-at-risk, for area landowners, and for water in the Crowsnest and Oldman River watershed.

Think Big, Act Bold, Be Brave and just say “No” to coal, full stop. This is the only certain route to protecting the Eastern Slopes in a fashion that respects what good living in the Twenty-first Century demands.

- Ian Urquhart, Editor



Decolonization requires action and new ways of seeing

By David Suzuki

The following article appeared in the October 27, 2020 edition of *Science Matters* (Vol. 22, no. 43). It's reprinted with the permission of the David Suzuki Foundation. For more information on the Foundation visit davidsuzuki.org.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, most of us have been living in a landscape defined by unknowns. This lack of certainty about how the world around us can change at any moment shows no sign of abating in the foreseeable future.

Dealing with the unknown is not something our modern society is used to or comfortable with. Over the centuries, we've whittled away at the things that once surprised us. We can now check the weather multiple times before we go out so we don't get caught in the rain, vet movies before watching them, research which hotel to stay in or restaurant to dine at, learn which potential mate likes what we do, and so on.

This can be seen as a continuum of the world view held by Western European settlers who colonized what we now call Canada. When they arrived, the enveloping wilderness frightened them. In response, their main ways of knowing it were mowing it down, shooting it if it moved, taming it and simplifying it in their minds.

Settlers who came here hundreds of years ago colonized nature by clearing forests, creating agricultural lands, rerouting rivers, introducing new species and, ultimately, building settlements. We still, in the main, uphold the dominion-over-nature story that they (and many of our religions) passed on to us.

The settlers also colonized Indigenous Peoples. Among other means, they parcelled land into packages to be owned and gave it to fellow settlers. They creat-

ed laws prohibiting Indigenous cultural and governance practices. They forcibly moved migratory nations to ever-diminishing land reserves. They removed children from their families and placed them in residential schools and foster homes where, to assimilate them into settler culture, they were forbidden to speak their languages and often abused.

Nature and people weren't the only ones to be colonized; relationships between people and nature were colonized, too. As Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor notes, "Water, in the dominant Western Euro-Canadian context, is conceptualized as a resource, a commodity to be bought and sold. Federal and provincial governments therefore make decisions about water based on a worldview, philosophy and set of values which stands in direct contrast to the views of First Nations people."

There's no question that the significant gains realized by settler society have been built on Indigenous Peoples' losses under colonization over the past several hundred years and continuing to this day.

These injustices are now widely acknowledged, with a growing desire by many to redress them, advanced as reconciliation. In the words of scholar Lorenzo Veracini, "Colonization was a false promise then; it is an exploded promise now." Veracini, a professor of settler colonialism, says the challenge now is how to become "a better human being and a worse settler."

This is a challenge many of us share.

One step we can take is to stop perpetuating the settler story of nature as property or resource. We can create and share stories

rooted in relationships that honour nature's complexity rather than diminish it. We can learn from Indigenous stories about seeing nature as kin, rather than object, and meaningfully include Indigenous Peoples in land-use decision-making processes.

Thinking about decolonization is new for many of us. But thinking about it is not the end game. Scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, authors of the article "Decolonization is not a metaphor," worry that "decolonizing the mind, or the cultivation of critical consciousness, as if it were the sole activity of decolonization" could undermine "the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land."

Land repatriation, in its various potential forms, lies at the heart of decolonization. In Canada, we have a number of avenues to "unsettle" the land: work to advance Indigenous sovereignty, support Indigenous land-use practices, shift land governance and change policies that, in the words of scholar Kyle Whyte, "undermine trust, diplomacy, and consent." We must also create new tools.

Our world isn't static; it's ever changing. We must not just learn to live with its new iterations; we must invest energy into shaping them in ways that right past wrongs. Exploring and implementing different forms of land distribution and governance are key to the task at hand. 🐾

David Suzuki is a scientist, broadcaster, author and co-founder of the David Suzuki Foundation. Written with contributions from David Suzuki Foundation Boreal Project Manager Rachel Plotkin.

Bringing linnii Home

By Alvin First Rider, B.Sc., A.A.S.



On Feb 12, 2021, the Kainai Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy in Southern Alberta released a small cultural herd of 40 linnii (Bison) on the North End of the Blood Reserve near Leithbridge, Alberta. The release is part of a bigger collective effort that began with the Buffalo dialogues of the Blackfoot Confederacy from 2008 onward. The Buffalo dialogues consisted of interviewing elders and knowledge holders from the Blackfoot Confederacy on both sides of the medicine line 49th parallel. The elders and knowledge holder's response were an overwhelming consensus that the kinship and ecological relationship between linnii and the Blackfoot people was missing and needed to be brought back to its rightful place. The Buffalo dialogues led to the signing of the Buffalo Treaty of 2014 in Browning Montana and the beginning of

a resurgence of returning linnii to the land it once roamed and shaped.

The Buffalo Treaty is an international treaty of cooperation, renewal, and restoration originally signed by twelve nations. Currently there are more than 25 Tribal nations across North America signed on to the Treaty. Details of the Treaty may be found here: <https://www.buffalotreaty.com>. The foundation of the Buffalo Treaty is the signatories' relationships to Buffalo and their intent to honour, recognize, and revitalize these relationships. The herd was provided by Elk Island National Park and is one of three herds provided to Tribal Nations in Canada in 2021. In Southern Alberta it was one of two released. In Waterton Lakes National Park a second herd of linnii was returned to the Miistakii (Mountains) after the Kenow fire of 2017. The Kainai linnii Holistic Manage-

ment Plan is guided by the Buffalo Treaty, traditional ecological knowledge, and western science.

As the hooves hit the ground, we were reminded of the reciprocity of our kinship relationships established since time immemorial. The earth begins a reharmonization of these deeper relationships that is facilitated by the return of linnii to the Kainai culture and traditions. The grassland ecosystem and bison are reunited, connected as one to grow and change throughout the seasons. Bringing back the bison will allow the Kainai to identify, appreciate, and study different ecological interactions that have been lying dormant since the removal of last linnii herds of the past in the 1870s. The ancient fescue grassland that evolved with the linnii is reunited with a species that shaped it over many centuries. The re-



linnii acclimatizing themselves to their new home on the lands of the Kainai First Nation. PHOTO: © A. FIRST RIDER

turn of linnii to the prairie begins a healing journey of cultural, spiritual and ecological relationships to the Kainai nation. Charlie Crow Chief, an elder from the Kainai Nation, states “that the linnii will unite us and bring us together, they will heal us.” linnii are populating the lands they once roamed in pockets on our maps; collectively, we hope to establish conservation and ecological targets in order to co-exist on the land with linnii, a keystone species.

The Kainai linnii holistic management plan is being implemented in phases to allow the plan to be adaptable and flexible. The reintroduction of linnii into the prairie will establish the first steps toward developing the Kainai eco-cultural framework. The framework will focus on and develop management objectives from a Blackfoot traditional knowledge perspective. The management plan has identified a biophysical community-based monitoring plan. That plan will research how bringing linnii back will affect the local ecology from the micro-level of microorganisms to the macro-level of the landscape. The project has already begun collecting baseline biophysical data on the linnii pasture that includes range health, traditional plant, migratory and breeding birds, water quality, herptiles and arthropods. The survey points for each dataset will be expanded in the pasture

where the linnii are being held to collect and monitor localized changes. The linnii and their new rangeland home will be closely monitored to ensure that stocking rates and the land’s carrying capacity is not exceeded. Once the carrying capacity is met the linnii will be rotated to a new rested pasture.

The prairie pasture where the linnii are being held has been rested since 2018. The range health trajectory of that land was declining due to over use of resources. The grassland is in a transition zone between mixed grass and fescue grassland eco regions, which makes the ecosystem much richer with biodiversity. The grassland on the north end of the Blood Reserve has been in a state of rest and recovery since 2018. The current range health scores are trending towards Healthy from Healthy with Problems. The linnii, a cultural and ecological keystone species, will become a successional driver on the land and will revive ancient interactions that have been absent from the grassland. This will assist the survival of listed species at risk, migratory species, and seed dispersal, as well as other interactions that depend on linnii. The field team has documented the return of other ungulate species to the area such as elk and antelope prior to the linnii’s arrival that have not used the North end for decades. The grassland will be managed as a corridor

to allow transboundary movements of local wild ungulate species.

Waterton Lakes National Park, Parks Canada, Nature Legacy Fund, linnii Initiative, WCS, as well as other organization too numerous to name have supported this project. The linnii Holistic Management Plan is designed to contribute to any national and provincial conservation targets set. Utilizing holistic management practices laid out in the plan will start the healing process of the land and the Kainai people by the rematriation of the ecological, spiritual, cultural, and traditional use relationships. February’s release of the Kainai herd marks a step towards working collaboratively with community and government to bring linnii back to Kainai. With each release the momentum to re-establish these relationships increases. We all are contributing to the bigger picture of protecting the land by establishing a genetically diverse population of plains bison. The project supports the desire to increase connecting corridors along the landscape and brings us one step closer to once again having free roaming bison along the Rocky Mountain Front Corridor from Yellowstone to Yukon. ▲

Alvin First Rider, a member of the Kainai First Nation, is an Environmental Researcher with the Blood Tribe Land Management Environmental Protection Division.

Featured Artist Jared Tailfeathers Sikohm Kokomii



Spring/Summer – Badlands at dawn, featuring an Antelope,



Autumn/Southern mountain borderland lakes, featuring a fox and hidden pictograph,



Winter - the Northern Porcupine hills as they enter the rolling foothills and prairies, featuring a Bison.

Commissioned work for Universal Geomatics Solutions Corp. PHOTO: © J. TAILFEATHERS

Mbe'cho/Bistcho Lake:

The Dene Tha' Proposal for an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area

By Ian Urquhart, AWA Conservation Director



Readers of *Wild Lands Advocate* likely will recognize the word “Aichi.” It refers to the prefecture in Japan where the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity met in 2010. A strategic plan for biodiversity resulted from that conference. For its part, Canada adopted a number of goals and targets. Our first goal, “Canada Target 1,” was to ensure that by 2020 at least 17 percent of Canada’s terrestrial areas and inland waters would be conserved through protected areas networks and other area-based conservation measures. For the country’s coastal and marine areas, the Aichi target was 10 percent.

As a federal state, with its division of powers between Ottawa and the provinces, and a country where Indigenous peoples are assuming more and more governance responsibilities, meeting this goal hinges on collaboration between the federal government, the provincial governments, and Indigenous peoples. Both a National Advisory Panel and an Indigenous Circle of Experts were created to recommend and advise government on how the Canada Target 1 could be realized.

The concept of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA) was born in the Indigenous Circle of Experts. The phrase describes a variety of conservation initiatives: tribal parks, Indigenous cultural landscapes, Indigenous protected areas, and Indigenous conserved areas. *We Rise Together*, the 2018 report from the Indigenous Circle of Experts, defined IPCAs as:

lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the

primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems. Culture and language are the heart and soul of an IPCA.

An IPCA would be Indigenous-led, establish a long-term conservation commitment, and raise up Indigenous rights and responsibilities. IPCAs are regarded as important vehicles with which to realize reconciliation with First Nations.

Canada reports that 52 Indigenous communities are receiving funds to either establish IPCAs or to do the initial planning and engagement needed to propose and then establish an IPCA. The Edézhíé Protected Area in the Dehcho region of the Northwest Territories is the first IPCA to be established since the Indigenous Circle of Experts report. At 14,200 square kilometres, it boasts unique and valuable ecosystems such as the Horn Plateau. Subsurface rights within this territory have been withdrawn for an indeterminate period of time. The protected is being co-managed by the Dehcho First Nations and the federal government.

After Chief James Ahnassay concluded his conversation with Cliff Wallis during the February Martha Kostuch lecture, Dene Tha’ member and environmental scientist Matt Munson spoke about IPCAs generally and the possibility of establishing an IPCA with Mbe’cho/Bistcho Lake at its heart. Bistcho Lake is the third largest lake located entirely in Alberta (fourth largest if you include Lake Athabasca which Alberta shares with Saskatchewan). Covering 426 square kilometres, Bistcho Lake is tucked into the

northwest corner of Alberta. With a maximum depth of just under seven metres, this shallow lake is only 17 kilometres south of the Northwest Territories border and 45 kilometres east of the B.C. border. Its waters ultimately enter the Arctic Ocean through the Petitot, Liard, and Mackenzie Rivers.

There’s no question that the Dene Tha’ connection with Mbe’cho goes back several thousands of years. Between 2013 and 2019 archaeologists, elders, and Dene Tha’ students conducted archaeological research around Bistcho Lake. Their findings were very impressive. Nearly 200 resources from the Indigenous history in the region were documented with a majority of the sites coming from the pre-contact period. Recognizing the region’s archaeological importance, Alberta Culture has declared that all of the quarter-sections touching the shoreline are places where excavations/on-the-ground investigation must be done before any activity is allowed to proceed.

A great deal of detailed land-use mapping has so far gone into preparing a proposal for an IPCA at Bistcho Lake. Matt shared one slide showing Willie Chambaud, a late Dene Tha’ elder, locating heritage trails on a map – helping to generate the level of planning and knowledge needed to advance an IPCA proposal. To the Dene Tha’ this mapping of heritage trails is an important step towards considering how low impact access to the region might be developed. The last thing the Dene Tha’ want is to establish all-weather roads that could lead to an explosive, and damaging, increase in human access.

Later, Matt invited James to say a few words about the work that has been done



Part of the boreal tapestry immediately southeast of Bistcho Lake that could be protected through an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area.
 PHOTO: © C. WALLIS

to record Dene Tha' place names, thereby illustrating the importance of culture and language to the development of this IPCA proposal. Mbe'cho, "giant sleep" in English, is thought to be a reference to stories about a giant – possibly visualized as ice remnants from the last Ice Age – sleeping where Bistcho Lake is today. To the northeast of Mbe'cho is Nahgah'yie – the warrior hills. Tache, the site of Meandering River, is the Dene Tha' name describing where a smaller river joins a bigger one, or where the little brother joins his bigger brother. One item on the Dene Tha' agenda is approaching the provincial government with a proposal to reintroduce Dene names to locations like those mentioned here. Political support

to do that would be welcome and may be needed to see some of those changes made.

Two existing reserves on the southwest part of the lake, Bistcho Lake 213 and Jackfish Point 214, would serve as the base camp for the IPCA and serve as a base of operations for further research. Indigenous guardians, composed of community members but also of people with an interest in restoring lands that have been affected by industrialization, would operate out of this area as well.

According to the Dene Tha's conception of the Bistcho IPCA it would further a range of important conservation and cultural goals. Sacred places, cultural areas, traplines, and traditional harvesting sites

could all be protected. Critical habitat for woodland caribou could be preserved; the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan could be supported. And, it would create an important co-management opportunity for the Dene Tha' and the Alberta government.

Listening to Matt and James talk about the Bistcho Lake IPCA proposal, watching the slides and videos Matt shared, it's hard not to conclude that the lands at the focus of the proposal are magnificent. It's impossible not to conclude that this is the type of proposal governments should support. AWA looks forward to the opportunity to offer our support and move this proposal forward. 🐾

First Nations and Coal:

Signs of Change

By Ian Urquhart, *AWA Conservation Director*



One constant refrain among those who want to bring coal mining back to the Crowsnest Past is: “We need the jobs and the income that will come with coal mining.” Sometimes that message is delivered in a desperate tone. Lisa Sygutek, Crowsnest Pass councillor, told CBC’s *The Current* in January that the residents of the Crowsnest Pass “are living in poverty, in a dying community that want their resource back, that want prosperity that you get through coal.”

Statistics don’t offer any support to Sygutek’s claims. They are exaggerated and must not be taken literally. The 2016 Canadian census reported that the unemployment rate in the Crowsnest Pass was 8.8 percent, just slightly lower than Alberta’s unemployment rate (9.0 percent). Incomes? The average employment income in the Pass in 2015 was \$53,409. In Alberta, the average was \$59,343 – 10 percent higher. But, does that difference in incomes really support the claim that the nearly 6,000 people who live in the Crowsnest are “living in poverty” or that the community is “dying?” Hardly.

But when it comes to poverty and low incomes as reasons for supporting coal mining Sygutek’s comments would come closer to the mark if they came from a community just east of the Crowsnest Pass on Highway 3 – the Kainai/Blood reserve. The unemployment and income statistics from Blood Reserve 148 are very troubling. In 2016, Statistics Canada reported the unemployment rate on

the Blood Reserve to be 22.4 percent. The average employment income on the reserve in 2015 was \$24,810, less than half of the average income in the Crowsnest Pass. This picture of real hardship becomes starker when you consider the health impacts the community is experiencing from opioid abuse and COVID 19. For example, approximately 12 percent of Kainai population living on the reserve has tested positive for COVID 19; this is three times as high as the provincial infection rate. The Kainai Nation, despite the efforts of community leaders and the Nation’s administration, arguably is struggling with multiple crises.

Grassy Mountain

Given the economic circumstances faced by the Kainai, circumstances shared with other Treaty 7 Nations, Benga Mining’s Grassy Mountain Coal Project arguably offers a potential lifeline. If First Nations secured coal mining jobs, Grassy Mountain could be an economic positive. Benga/Riversdale Resources recognized the political importance of securing Indigenous support. To that end, the company succeeded in securing either letters of support or ones of non-objection from all Treaty 7 First Nations. In 2016 the Piikani Nation signed an Impact Benefit Agreement with Riversdale. Chief Kiaayo Tamisoowo’s letter of support hoped the mine “will reduce the unemployment rate, put our highly skilled members to work, increase the quality of life on reserve and create a brighter future for generations to come.”

The elected leaders of the Blood Tribe also supported Grassy Mountain. One of the benefits the Kainai secured from Benga was “an annual financial contribution to the Blood Tribe linked to production from the mine, these funds will be used for community purposes.” It wouldn’t appear, however, that Benga’s commitments to the Kainai with respect to jobs went further than a promise to work with the Nation on employment opportunities. In 2016 the Kainai’s Consultation Coordinator expressed the Blood Tribe’s interest in employment opportunities and expressed a concern that Grassy Mountain jobs might not be long-term. Benga met with the Blood Tribe on this issue and, according to Alberta’s Aboriginal Consultation Office, “will continue to work with Blood Tribe on employment opportunities for Blood Tribe members.”

When Benga’s Vice-President was asked about Indigenous employment opportunities at Grassy Mountain he suggested that employment targets were aspirational, not commitments that likely would be kept if and when Benga started its operations. Panel Member Hans Matthews referred to the Stoney Nakoda’s submission where they sought a 15 percent commitment with respect to employment and procurement. Matthews asked Houston if Benga believed Indigenous communities had the capacity to realize those ambitions. Houston replied:

we expect to have to build capacity through this project as opposed to finding it just lay-

ing on the ground ready to be picked up. So I – I think there’s going to be a – an opportunity here to work together and, again, use that 25 years to develop that capacity so that – so that 25 years from now, we’re in a different position.

One might interpret that answer to mean this. For the Stoney Nakoda the 15 percent commitments should be met immediately or very soon; for Benga, these commitments were aspirational. Perhaps Benga would take 25 years to meet the employment commitments the Stoney Nakoda Nation was looking for. They would meet them just around the time the mine proposed to close.

Changes Since Last Fall: From Specific Support to General Opposition

The Grassy Mountain hearing affirmed the support of elected band councils for that specific project. But, it also signaled the emergence of a grassroots challenge from the members of First Nations to their elected leaders. Latasha Calf Robe and Wacey Little Light, members of the Kainai and Siksika Nations respectively, raised the alarm that their communities had never been consulted by Indigenous leaders, or anyone else for that matter, about the Grassy Mountain Project. Their activism led to the formation of the Niitsitapi Water Protectors. To the Water Protectors, water is sacred, it is life. As such, protecting water trumps all other considerations. They have mobilized thousands of people to voice their objections to any and all coal mining proposals.

On November 12, 2020, the day after the Niitsitapi Water Protectors launched their Facebook page, the Blood Tribe Chief and Council updated the community on Grassy Mountain. While the Blood Tribe didn’t retract its support for the project or explain why members of the Nation were not consulted directly, the community notice made it clear the Kainai wouldn’t support more coal min-

ing: “The Blood Tribe has clearly communicated to the Government of Alberta that the Blood Tribe will not accept further coal mining development in the Crowsnest Pass Region.”

The Tribe acted on this position in November 2020 when the Kainai and the Siksika took the Alberta government to court over the Minister of Energy’s decision to cancel the 1976 Coal Policy. Niitsitapi Water Protectors congratulated the Chief and Council for this when the decision was publicized in January 2021. In February the Blood Tribe reiterated that it “will oppose any new applications for metallurgical coal projects in the Crowsnest Pass Region.”

Importantly, the Siksika and Kainai have broadened their opposition to coal since last November. When they requested the re-instatement of the Coal Policy last November, these First Nations did not challenge the distinction the Policy made between Category 2 and Category 4 lands. Under the 1976 Policy, since mining had taken place historically on Category 4 lands, surface mining on those lands “may be considered subject to proper assurances respecting protection of the environment and reclamation of disturbed lands.”

At the beginning of March the Siksika and Kainai made it clear that opposition to new applications included applications to mine on Category 4 lands. These two Nations were the first to request that federal Environment and Climate Change Minister Wilkinson use his authority to order a federal impact assessment of Montem’s Tent Mountain project. Like AWA’s designation request, the Siksika and Kainai do not believe areas of federal jurisdiction as well as Aboriginal and Treaty Rights will be given sufficient attention and weight in an exclusively provincial review carried out by the Alberta Energy Regulator. Whether Minister Wilkinson will use his authority under Section 9 of the *Impact Assessment Act* to designate Tent Mountain as a project requiring a federal assess-

ment should be known by no later than the May long weekend.

The Missing Piece of This Puzzle

AWA welcomes the evolution in the stance of First Nations towards coal mining in the Rockies and Foothills. The privileging of cultural values, ecological values and the simple magnificence of these lands is shared by many peoples in Alberta. AWA hopes other Treaty 7 Nations, the Piikani and the Stoney Nakoda, come to share the position of the Kainai and Siksika in the days ahead.

A government-sponsored alternative. That’s what’s missing from the puzzle we’re trying to piece together in an environmentally responsible way in the Rockies and Foothills. For years at the University of Alberta I listened to Presidents and politicians preface their speeches with the acknowledgment that we were on Treaty 6 lands. Important as land acknowledgments are, I wondered when the acknowledgments would be followed by reciting a list of the substantive actions the university and governments had taken to further reconciliation with First Nations. I never heard them.

If we expect First Nations to turn their backs on the economic opportunities that may come their way from coal, I think governments owe them a better strategy for economic betterment than we’ve delivered so far. They also owe a better strategy to all who live in southwestern Alberta. Later in this issue you will read about the important bridge Chief James Ahnassay imagines between traditional values, science, education, and working for the land. It seems to me ideas like those, those educational and training opportunities, are what’s needed to enable First Nations to better address the many challenges they face. 🌲

Killing Coal

By Roberta Rees



As someone who grew up near Grassy Mountain, whose family was involved in underground coal mining in the Crowsnest Pass and later surface mining in the Elk Valley, I ask us all to please do what we can to stop the Grassy Mountain Mining project and all other mining projects proposed in the Rocky Mountains, now and in the future.

From my experience as a child in a coal mining family on both sides of the family and both sides of the country, a person who has both benefited from and been harmed by the coal industry, who has first-hand experience and knowledge of the Rocky Mountains, I am of the opinion that there is no valid argument for allowing this or any mining project to go ahead in any area of the Rocky Mountains.

First and foremost is the environmental cost. Grassy Mountain is a watershed area that feeds Southern Alberta. I grew up in Bellevue, a village directly downstream, have waded in, immersed myself in, crossed the wild, clear Gold and Blairmore Creeks running down from Grassy Mountain. Moreover, I have seen deer, elk, moose, crows, ravens, drink from these streams, grizzly bears feed or sun in the meadows and draws running down from Grassy. I have fished and canoed and swum the Crowsnest and Oldman Rivers that are fed by these and other streams running from the Grassy Watershed and other watersheds in these Rocky Mountains.

Like all of the ecosystems in the Rocky

Mountains, the Grassy ecosystem is a complex, diverse system that many species of mammals, fish, plants, as well as many human communities, depend on. Despite the assurances by mining company lawyers, scientists and supporters, I am certain, from a century of family experience with the coal industry, that there is no way that ripping the tops off of mountains, ripping into mountains in any way, won't introduce and/or release harmful metals and chemicals into the water supply and food chains of animals and humans who depend on this water. I can also say from experience that the emotional, psychological harm of witnessing nature irreparably defiled and destroyed is profound.

Having grown up on a ridge overlooking the toxic spew of polluted water from an underground coal mine from the past century, a mine my paternal grandfather worked in, I know that coal mining of any type, but particularly a surface mine the size and scale of the Grassy project, will do irreparable environmental harm. No matter the promises made by resource mining corporations regarding the latest technologies for preventing leaching of harmful substances into the water and land, promises of clean up and reclamation, the damages done by the surface mines under review will cause long lasting environmental harm on a massive scale.

I am all too familiar with the types of promises made by coal company lawyers, scientists and supporters, just as I am all too familiar with the boom and bust na-

ture of resource extraction industries, the short term financial gain by single industry corporations at the expense of healthy diversification, the expense of human and environmental health. I am all too familiar with how expensive these jobs are to workers and the long term health of the plants, animals and people who live nearby and in ecosystems downstream.

My father worked as a blaster in the massive strip mining operation in the Elk Valley in BC, died young of a blood cancer medical experts agreed was most likely caused by handling the chemicals he used to blow the tops off of mountains he loved, working in an environment polluted with toxic levels of selenium released by the open pit process of coal mining. Despite the money and promises spent on reclamation and clean up, toxic levels of selenium are still poisoning the rivers and lakes in the valley, causing deformities and reproductive failures in the fish populations, the insects the fish feed on, as well as the water supplies of people living in the valley.

Like many miners, my father worked in coal in order to feed his family. It was a job in an area that depended on a single industry, rather than having diversified into more sustainable, healthier economies in one of the wildest, most beautiful places on earth. Harmer Ridge where he worked – once a beautiful mountain ecosystem that sustained wildlife, plant life, clean water – has been completely obliterated. When he started work there in the '70s he would talk about a grizzly sow with cubs who stood up on

her hind legs to roar challenge at the massive trucks destroying her environment. He admired that grizzly sow, her strength and defiance. In hindsight it is profoundly sad that the job he was doing contributed to making life impossible for that bear, for the chipmunks he used to play with, the deer, elk, birds that lived on that mountain, for himself. Yes, the job gave him pride of work, of feeding his family, but at what cost?

My family's experience is one small example of the types of harm that environmental degradation of the type and nature of the Grassy Mountain mining project poses for humans and wildlife. The Grassy Mountain project is a short-sighted, destructive project offered to people suffering financially in a province that has relied too heavily on resource extraction, at a time when people are suffering the duress of a pandemic.

I have sympathy for the people who still live in the Crowsnest, who are struggling to feed their families, who find the prospect of mining jobs hopeful. At the same time, I am deeply troubled by the ratio-

nalization that because Grassy Mountain was disturbed by an abandoned mining venture in the past, it would therefore be justifiable to open it up again to a to an enormous surface mine that would essentially destroy the mountain, inevitably release toxic levels of selenium into the creeks and streams that feed the rivers that feed all of Southern Alberta. My family and I have hiked up Grassy many times over many decades, are familiar with the scars left by the abandoned surface mining venture there – the ripped flank, the exposed coal seams, desolate coal slags. We've also hiked the grassy ridge above this exposed flank, explored the flank that escaped destruction, marveled at the lush meadows, the deep wooded draws and valleys, the creeks, the deer and elk and bears. We've also driven many times over many decades past the open pit mine in BC where our father worked, grieved at the utter devastation of a mountain, the massive dead wound where the mountain used to live.

While it may be tempting for some, I submit that we would be wise to: avoid

falling for promises of royalties and short term jobs in an increasingly mechanized industry; resist corporate and provincial governments' attempts to minimize an enormous environmental cost that would be borne by Albertans for a very long time; reject assurances by mining corporations standing to benefit from the projects that they have mining technologies' that can prevent environmental harm; heed the scientific facts, data, and experience of mining and environmental experts who are warning us about the irrevocable environmental harm that is inevitable if any of these projects proceed.

Please, let us not be lured into raping any of the ecosystems in the Rocky Mountains, now or in the future.

Let us recognize and respect the fact that a healthy natural environment is invaluable. ▲

Roberta Rees is an award-winning Calgary writer who grew up in the Rocky Mountains of the Crowsnest Pass. She has published three books, many essays, poems and stories.

Featured Artist Jared Tailfeathers Sikohm Kokomii



Wentworth Manor mural, 2019, 20' x 8' Commissioned work for the Brenda Stratford Foundation.
PHOTO: © J. TAILFEATHERS

Coal in Their Veins

Lorne Fitch, *P. Biol.*



My uncle was an underground miner who worked for decades in Crowsnest Pass coal mines. He was a tough, stocky man, accustomed to hard work and a hard life. As he was dying in the Pincher Creek hospital, a nurse tried to wash his hands, blackened by a lifetime of exposure to coal dust. He endured the scrubbing for a while and finally bluntly told the nurse “the coal’s not on me, it’s in me”. Indeed, coal dust was imbedded in his skin and the nurse was unlikely to get his hands white again.

One might speculate what my uncle’s lungs resembled, if his hands were so impregnated with coal dust. His other health issues were not as evident but were linked to his career as a miner. At a personal and a human level this is a legacy of coal mining.

Mining, for my uncle, might have been genetic. My grandfather emigrated from Finland, fleeing famine and lack of opportunity, to coal mines in Wyoming and east of Great Falls, Montana. I never knew my grandfather but I’ll bet he would have said Canada’s *Homestead Act* saved him from a life of mining and maybe a premature death.

My grandfather moved to what would become Alberta in 1900 and bet the government \$10 against a quarter of land he could stick it out for three years and claim the land as his. He eventually acquired other land and became prosperous, but not enough so all his sons could be set up with their own farms. My uncle took mining jobs at Drumheller and later the Crowsnest Pass. I doubt if he would have called himself prosperous, other than owning a small miner’s cottage and later in life, the occasional new car, pol-

ished and immaculately maintained.

My aunt and her family emigrated from northern Italy, to work in coal mines on the B.C. side of the Crowsnest Pass. Despite the multiple booms and busts, uncaring mine owners, often dishonest mine bosses, worker strikes that turned violent, minimal safety standards, no benefits and being unable to hang her laundry outside except for Sundays for the coal dust, she remained fatalistically optimistic about new mine openings. She would have cheered on the proposed Grassy Mountain mine.

Without alternatives my uncle and aunt were trapped in the spiral of unsustainable and ephemeral promises of coal. They had coal in their veins and perhaps coal on the brain—they were perhaps unable to assess the reality of their situation and envision another future.

My uncle was an angler and a hunter, both pursuits that tune one’s observational powers. Yet, he never commented on the Crowsnest River turning black with coal fines in the spring or after every rainstorm. He participated in, but never acknowledged the decline, collapse and eventual extirpation of bull trout from the upper Crowsnest watershed. The loss of bighorn sheep from Grassy Mountain, a consequence of early mountain-top coal strip mining, never registered, even though he toiled in the underground mine beneath the mountain and hunted its slopes on his days off.

No one, including him, would have discerned the invisible contaminants and toxins liberated from the caprock over the coal and flushed downstream. If my uncle and others were concerned about the changes to

the landscape, the eroding coal spoil piles, the dust, despoiled rivers and streams, they said nothing.

As Upton Sinclair observed: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” I can’t fault my uncle’s silence. In contrast to Plato’s admonishment that, “(i)n the land of the blind, a one-eyed man is king,” one who can see is treated as a heretic who needs to be silenced, shouted down, and discredited by the blind mob.

Coal mining has costs. These costs occur at multiple levels—at a human level, a community level, a landscape level, as well as politically, economically and ecologically. We can’t, or shouldn’t, remain blind to this reality. When we get beyond the boosterism and hype to do a proper accounting it becomes clear the costs outweigh the benefits. Repeatedly, taxpayers bear the costs, especially the ecological ones, and corporations escape with the benefits while a dumbfounded set of politicians won’t own up to being suckered.

Ironically, it is the mine workers who also end up cheated, led on by the boosters, lured into jobs that may not last and often suffering health related illnesses that could rob them of a long life.

I never asked my uncle if he would have preferred another occupation, maybe farming, where despite the financial risks and the small rewards he could have sidestepped the possibility of violent injury or death, worked in sunlight rather than the glow of a miner’s lamp, in fresh air, all the while being his own boss. Maybe he didn’t sense he had a choice. We do, and it doesn’t involve digging huge

holes in the Eastern Slopes.

My uncle's silence on the costs and inevitability of coal mining fortunately doesn't have to pass to us. That was then. In light of history and better information we can be smart enough to not get sucked into a vortex of economic hype, unrealistic promises, and destroyed landscapes. We need to pause, and ask our politicians to pause and consider carefully the costs and consequences of trying to resurrect a coal mining economy, to liquidate one asset at the expense of so many others. This is not an issue to be complacent about.

In Alberta the existing metallurgical coal mines are under "care and maintenance" meaning they are essentially shut down. Teck has made it clear it has no intention of continuing its Cardinal River operations. Alberta mines have gone broke, reclamation bonds proved insufficient and royalties are meagre, throwing a considerable financial burden onto taxpayers. That should tell us something about the reliability of economic forecasts for coal and uncertainties in markets. Recent evaluations of three B.C. met-

allurgical coal mines found the companies' rosy projections for jobs, royalty payments, and economic benefits were vastly overstated. Given these circumstances, it is a mystery why the Alberta government is promoting new coal mine development.

A long legacy of environmental failures in all phases of coal development— exploration, mining and reclamation— especially in mountain and foothill landscapes, should make even the most optimistic of us question if it is ever technically feasible to mine coal and protect water quality, species at risk, recreation attributes, or other, more sustainable land uses in physically challenging topography.

It would be instructive, and should be mandatory, for our government to conduct a comprehensive survey of all mines in Alberta to capture what was said in initial impact assessments, versus what actually happened, as a guide for future decisions on coal development. The bright light of truth would be a good antidote to the impulse to fall, once more, for a new litany of unrealized and empty promises.

It appears the UCP government has coal in their veins and coal clogging their brains. If we are to proceed with the fantasy of coal as our economic salvation, all coal development proposals should be vetted through joint federal/provincial hearings to ensure no area of federal responsibility is missed, like protection of species at risk. This might also be an essential curb on current political short-sightedness and economic myopia.

As citizens with a social and ecological conscience we would do well to express, forcefully, to politicians seemingly in the pocket of foreign companies a singular truth— we've seen enough now to know that our economic salvation doesn't lie with blasting the tops off mountains, burying valleys (and native trout) in overburden, turning our drinking water toxic and contributing to the same human health issues that killed my uncle.

For such truth is, now so clearly, self-evident. ▲

Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired provincial Fish and Wildlife Biologist and a former Adjunct professor with the University of Calgary.

Featured Artist Jared Tailfeathers Sikohm Kokomii

*Alberta / Nevada Night and Day, 2012,
Ceiling mural 10' x 6' Commissioned work for JJJ Productions.
The mural details two places of significance to the artist and
his appreciation of their landscapes and sunsets.*
PHOTO: © J. TAILFEATHERS



The Indigenous Public and Grassy Mountain: Sampling the Public Registry

By Ian Urquhart, Nissa Petterson, and Joel Van Riper

In the past year, Alberta has witnessed a surge of proposed coal mining projects slated for the Eastern Slopes, with Benga Mining Limited's (Benga) Grassy Mountain Coal Project at the forefront of this drive to resuscitate coal mining. AWA first drew attention to the possibility of a Grassy Mountain Mine in 2014. Designated for a joint federal and provincial review in 2015, Grassy never received the type of media attention shown to a project like the Northern Gateway Pipeline. If the media didn't pay a great deal of attention to Grassy Mountain, the public certainly did. Nearly 5,000 comments were left on the project's public registry by the time the public comment period closed on January 15, 2021.

AWA volunteer Joel Van Riper combed through the registry to prepare a scorecard of the public comments left on the Registry. Opposition to Grassy Mountain was overwhelming. Of the 4,411 individual comments he identified, a stunning 98 percent were opposed to the project. Only 69 people (1.6 percent) spoke out in favour of the project; in Joel's opinion, 25 comments weren't sure about whether the project should proceed.

What did Indigenous commenters think about the Project? Not surprisingly given the overall findings, they were opposed to Grassy Mountain. Nissa Petterson sampled those Indigenous opposition voices and her assessment is the basis for what follows.

One thread joining First Nations comments was a reverence for the environment, the belief that sacred places would be put at risk. One commenter from the Kainai Nation worried about the mine's proximity

to Napi's playground, in the Oldman River watershed (Napi literally means Old Man. He is the creator deity of the Blackfoot people.). A Niitsitapi woman saw ecological health as sustenance for her people. She put it this way: "...this coal mine serves to do irreversible damage to the land, water, and animals that have nurtured, nourished, and sustained us as a people..."

Water figured importantly in First Nations comments, as they did more generally. Aohkii lih'tai'paita'piyot – water is life – wrote the Kainai/Blood Tribe Chapter of Idle No More.

Sacrificing the future for short term gains concerned one Metis commentator. She wrote: "I am so very tired of such short term gains taking away our beautiful natural landscapes, water and impacting wildlife. Why must money always trump nature and common sense?"

Consultation figured prominently in the comments of individual members of First Nations. Elsewhere in this issue of the WLA we note that, while the elected leaders of Treaty 7 Nations didn't oppose Grassy Mountain, some members of those communities protested that they had never been consulted. The following comments capture that dimension of the opposition to Grassy Mountain:

- "I am a Blood Tribe member, this is the first I have heard of this project..."
- "If there has been any support obtained from the Metis Nation for the disruption of the natural eco system in this area - then I want to clearly state that any such support was given without consultation of its members."

- "No community level consultation with members of each community was done."
- "Blood Tribe Chief and Council quietly gave their approval of this project in writing without consulting the public (ie. members of the Blood Tribe)."

Support for these Aboriginal voices of opposition was striking among non-Aboriginal respondents. One expressed her solidarity with those voices with these words: "I ask you to please consider the words of Indigenous Peoples across the country who have used these lands far longer than we have and listen as they share their wisdoms and knowledges of the lands which will be affected by this foreign proposition."

Solidarity. As the comment above suggests, there was an impressive level of solidarity between the comments left by Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. One member of the Kainai Nation expressed this solidarity in these terms: "Cowboy hats. Mountaineers. Environmental Groups. Climate Change Advocates. Politicians. Indigenous Peoples. First Nations. Siksikaitsitapii. This is who we are. It was never outright spoken, but it is the essence of all of us, unified."

One of the most encouraging conclusions from reviewing the comments left on the Grassy Mountain Public Registry was the amount of consensus characterizing the views of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal commentators. With less than two months until the deadline for the Joint Review Panel's report on Grassy Mountain we hope the Panel's recommendations reflect the consensus of these publics. 🌲

Coal:

A May 2020 to February 2021 Retrospective

By Ian Urquhart, *AWA Conservation Director*



This article offers a synopsis of AWA's efforts to stop metallurgical coal mining in Alberta. For the past year, *Wild Lands Advocate* hasn't said much about coal in Alberta – the issue that should compete with the government's Parks initiative for the distinction of being the most important Alberta environmental issue in 2020. The sparse attention here came despite the fact that AWA staff, primarily Nissa Petterson and myself, put a great deal of effort into AWA's coal file. The WLA also never acknowledged the impressive work that AWA Board Member and First Vice President Record Second and Ifeoma Okoye of Ackroyd Law did on behalf of AWA and the Grassy Mountain Group of landowners at the Grassy Mountain hearings. Richard, Ifeoma...thank you very much.

If you'd asked me a year ago if I thought most of my time since last fall would have been spent on advocacy around keeping coal mining out of Canada's Rockies and Foothills I would have answered: "Not bloody likely." Sure there was the Grassy Mountain project in the Crowsnest Pass – AWA had drawn attention to that possible venture in 2014, well before it was designated for a federal environmental assessment in 2015. I knew we would be opposing that before a joint federal-provincial review panel. And, sure there were a lot of coal leases along the Eastern Slopes and there were rumours about companies wanting to turn them into open-pit sores.

But, the credible metallurgical coal miners, the ones with a long history in the business, didn't figure in those rumours. Teck Resources, although it had regulatory approvals in hand to expand its Cardinal

River operations, announced in May 2019 it wouldn't go ahead with the Mackenzie Redcap project. In fact, with this decision Teck signaled it was done with coal mining in Alberta. Teck still intended to remain Canada's preeminent supplier of metallurgical coal to world markets. But, that coal was going to come from its B.C. mines alone. Grande Cache's metallurgical coal mine was doing what it's always done – operate for a while, shut down for a longer while. While government policy may have darkened the future of thermal coal mining in Alberta, the market seemed to be doing exactly that to metallurgical coal mining.

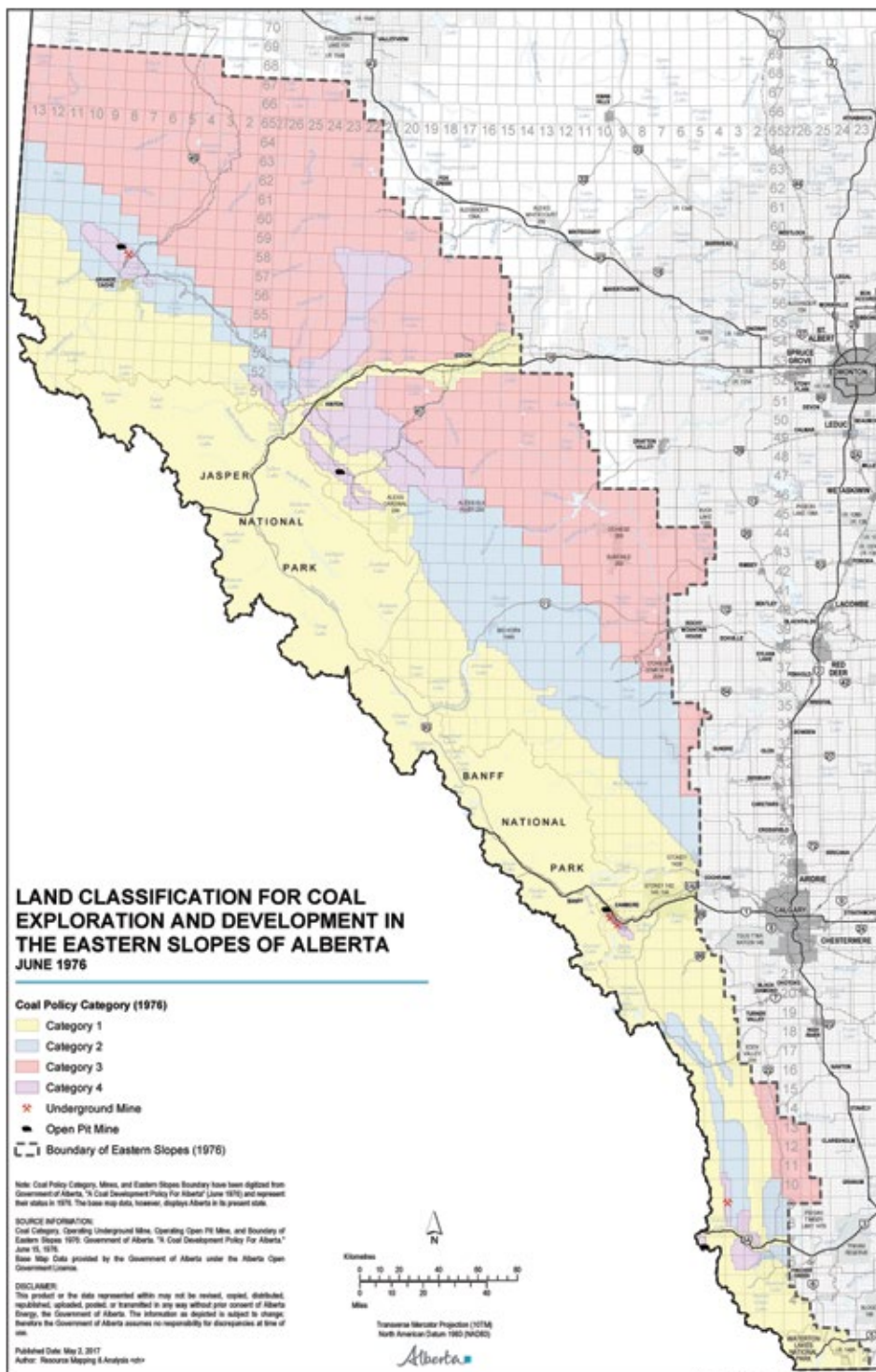
I also told myself that, if the market and corporate prioritizing wasn't enough to stop most open-pit mining in Alberta, the 1976 Coal Policy would do the trick. By now many opponents of coal mining may be able to recite by heart the de facto prohibition the policy established for most mining in the Rockies and Foothills. Category 1 lands were lands "in which no exploration or commercial development will be permitted." Category 2 lands were lands "in which limited exploration is desirable and may be permitted under strict control but in which commercial development by surface mining will not normally be considered at the present time." Industry economics came to preclude the underground mining option available to companies with leases on Category 2 lands. With the exception of Grassy Mountain, I was convinced that the dreams of the Australian penny stocks and private companies who fancied coal mining in Alberta, like the dreams of most speculators, would come to nothing. I didn't believe the provincial gov-

ernment would promote aggressively an industry that employed fewer than 1,600 workers in 2019. Surely they would see that other industries offered a healthier future for Alberta than Old King Coal.

June to December 2020: Rescinding the 1976 Coal Policy

I was badly mistaken. In May 2020, Energy Minister Sonya Savage announced that our de facto regulatory backstop, the Coal Policy, was going to be rescinded on June 1. Governments too often dismiss policies they don't like with exaggerated charges. The Coal Policy rescission announcement was a good example of this. Savage's news release repeatedly called (four times) the policy and its land use restrictions "outdated;" Alberta needed "modern oversight." The imagery conjured there of the 1976 policy was of a good "early attempt at land use planning" that needed to be retired and replaced with modern regulatory processes. Put the dial up modem in the bin; sign up for WiFi. The Alberta government's portrayal of the Policy "as archaic and outdated" disturbed David Luff, a former provincial public servant who helped draft the Policy. He went on to tell Andrew Nikiforuk: "It was 40 years ahead of its time." As I am sure Luff believed, important values like protecting headwaters are never outdated.

Nikiforuk's reporting in *The Tyee* has been the most sustained, detailed coverage of the coal issue in Alberta. But, his coverage didn't begin until July. The initial media reaction to the announcement was virtually non-existent. AWA's Nissa Petterson figured prom-



inently in the one story published within a week of the announcement. Along with Kevin Van Tighem she was quoted in the few media stories about coal that appeared in major print and television media in the first week after the announcement. AWA member Jennifer Saunders likely gets the distinction of having the first letter to the editor about this policy reversal published (*Calgary Herald* May 25, 2020). Other than the one article mentioned above (by Bob Weber of The Ca-

nadian Press), no reporter from the *Calgary Herald*, *Edmonton Journal*, or *The Canadian Press* wrote about the Coal Policy from the day it was rescinded until the end of October.

Last June we wrote to Premier Kenney urging him to reinstate the Coal Policy (<https://albertawilderness.ca/letter-to-premier-kenny-re-instate-albertas-coal-policy/>). There we challenged the idea that the land categories and land use guidelines in the Policy were “outdated.” We also said AWA had no confidence

whatsoever that the AER’s regulatory process would value the suite of environmental values that coal mining could erode. After all, Premier Kenney already had criticized the AER for taking too long to approve industry applications. Information later uncovered about expedited drilling approvals confirmed the short shrift the AER was likely to give to those values.

That letter to the Premier also advocated for a broad, public consultation with Albertans about the future of the Coal Policy. We found it ironic that Alberta Environment and Parks Minister Nixon was so eager to support what the government announced in May. It was Minister Nixon, after all, who tabled a petition in the Legislature in 2018 on behalf of more than 17,000 people who said they hadn’t been consulted about the Bighorn Wildland Provincial Park proposal. At least there had been some public consultation about the Bighorn through work on the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan. There hadn’t been any public consultation about discarding the Coal Policy (here I’m sorry to suggest that government meetings with the Coal Association of Canada don’t count as “public” consultation).

Close on the heels of the rescindment decision, AWA spearheaded the formation of a Coal Policy Working Group. Since last spring the Group has served as a forum for sharing ideas and information among the groups and individuals convinced the government’s choice is unhealthy for the future of the Eastern Slopes.

November and December 2020 saw the provincial government make it perfectly clear it hadn’t heard or seen anything from the public yet to make it backtrack on the pro-coal mining position it set out in the spring. In November more light was shone on the government’s interest in increasing industry’s share of the water set aside through the Oldman River Basin Water Allocation Order. One of the first public indications of this interest came from the *Crowsnest Pass Herald* in July. Atrum Coal, sire of the Isolation South and Elan South Projects, appeared before the Municipal Council. When asked about water for these projects, Atrum’s Senior Director,

Regulatory and Stakeholders said:

Our water source is currently under investigation. However, we are advised that there will be an allocation available under the existing order of the Oldman River. Alberta environment 20 years ago, reserved a significant amount of water for commercial, industrial and irrigation purposes. We understand that Alberta Environment is seeking to modify the order to make that commercial allotment, which has been available for 20 years and unaccessed, available to additional interested parties that may have an industrial purpose.”

In November, Livingstone Macleod MLA Roger Reid met with a number of groups in his constituency to discuss proposed amendments to the Allocation Order. In light of “several major non-irrigation projects proposed in the Crowsnest region” (code for metallurgical coal mines) AEP had identified how the Allocation Order could be changed “so that a significant barrier to new projects and growth opportunities – access to a new water license – could be mitigated in the upper Oldman watershed.” Of course, MLA Reid suggested, making more water available for industrial activities like coal companies washing their coal, wouldn’t come at the expense of the “vital” need to maintain ecologically-vital instream flow needs.

On December 4th, nearly 2,000 hectares of coal leases in Coal Policy Category 2 lands were put up for auction by Alberta Energy. This auction came one day after the close of the evidentiary proceedings of the Grassy Mountain hearing. AWA didn’t regard this timing as accidental. Interveners appearing before the Joint Review Panel had warned that Grassy Mountain was the thin edge of the coal mining wedge. Had the sale been announced during the hearing people could have pointed to it as evidence of the merit to their claim that Benga Mining was just the first in a queue of promoters who would seek government permission to strip mine for coal in the Rockies.

AWA estimated these offerings would bring

the total lands leased for coal in western Alberta to roughly 840 square kilometres (approximately the size of the City of Calgary). One of the more galling features of this auction was that it added more than three kilometres to the length of the Livingstone River, a tributary of the Oldman River, that would run through lands leased for open-pit coal mining. Approximately 10 kilometres of the Livingstone would be surrounded by coal leases where the de facto prohibition of mining on Category 2 lands had been lifted. If this territory was mined, it would generate potentially adverse effects to the headwaters of the Oldman.

To add insult to injury, selling these 18.52 square kilometres of the Eastern Slopes to Benga Mining and Montem Resources raised a measly \$66,563. That’s how little the province was prepared to accept for the right to mine coal there.

Furthermore, on Christmas Eve AWA issued a news release showing that Energy Minister Savage knew that when she revoked the Coal Policy without any consultation her actions flew in the face of legislative commitments in the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act*. The departmental advice to Savage was that since the Coal Policy was not a law “it can be rescinded unilaterally by Alberta Energy at any time.” This information came courtesy of an affidavit filed in November in the case of *E. Macleay Blades et al. v. Her Majesty the Queen in the Right of Alberta et al.*

Grassy Mountain

Last fall AWA endeavoured to get the public to get involved in the Grassy Mountain Coal Project Joint Review Panel hearing. The hearing ran from the end of October to the beginning of December. At the first day of the hearing, AWA joined with the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, Extinction Rebellion, Livingstone Landowners Group, and Timberwolf Wilderness Society to hold a news conference/Day of Action about Grassy Mountain. There we made the case for rejecting the project and hundreds of members and supporters contacted Environment and Climate Change Minister

Wilkinson to express their opposition to the project. If approved, Grassy Mountain will sacrifice the public interest and deliver significant adverse effects to lands and waters in the Crowsnest Pass. The possibility that Grassy Mountain’s fate could be precedent-setting for other coal mine project applications made it imperative for AWA to inform and mobilize as many people as possible to voice their opposition to the federal government. A Grassy Mountain blog was added to the AWA website where we posted commentaries on the evidence that was being presented to the Joint Review Panel (<https://albertawilderness.ca/publications/grassy-mountain-blog/>). Posts assessing the opening remarks to the Panel, the state of global demand for metallurgical coal, the royalties expected from the Project, the adequacy of Benga’s environmental assessment regarding white-bark pine, and the companies behind the Project are found there.

January and February 2021: The Pressure Builds

January and February were intense. On the oppositional front, the opposition grew exponentially. Its rapid expansion was distinguished by court challenges, celebrity concerns, and the growth of a very significant anti-coal social media presence. Southern Alberta ranchers, generally regarded as a pillar of conservative party support, added court challenges to the other means they had used to challenge the Kenney government’s marriage to coal (the M.D. of Ranchlands, the Livingstone Landowners Group ranchers and other rural landowners were important vocal opponents to Grassy Mountain). The Blades case mentioned above went to trial in January. It sought judicial review of the government’s decision to rescind the Coal Policy. It wanted to ask for an order from Alberta’s Court of Queen’s Bench quashing that decision. It sought a declaration that the government had a duty to consult with them, a duty established by legislation and the common law principle of procedural fairness. Minister Savage shirked that duty. Alberta Wilderness Association, Livingstone Landowners

Group, CPAWS, and other concerned parties appeared before Justice Neufeld to argue they should be able to intervene in this case. The Alberta government sought to prohibit the participation of all potential interveners in this case and asked Justice Neufeld to strike the application. After Justice Neufeld adjourned to consider the arguments he heard, Clint Docken – AWA Board member and attorney representing AWA, felt optimistic that Justice Neufeld would rule in favour of Blades et al. and that he would approve AWA's submission for intervener status.

Corb Lund headlined the list of celebrities who expressed their concerns about the course of action. The seriousness of Lund's concerns was underlined first by the numbers of times he discussed the issue with provincial and other officials. It's also underlined by the number of times he reached out to experts to better understand the impacts accompanying a resuscitated metallurgical coal sector and by his continued dedication to ensuring coal doesn't get to play on the Eastern Slopes stage in the future.

The explosive growth in the social media opposition to coal must be explained in part by the media attention Lund's public criticisms of provincial policy generated. But, while Lund's intervention may have fueled commentary there it didn't spark the creation of those opposition platforms. The Niitsítapi Water Protectors, now followed by more than 2,500 people on Facebook, were born during the Grassy Mountain Hearing and have used social media well to challenge the wisdom of coal mining on Niitsítapi lands. The prize for the most spectacular growth in the social media presence likely goes to the sextet who administer the Protect Alberta's Rockies and Headwaters Facebook group. This group, a rich source of commentary, was established in December 2020 and now has more than 36,900 members.

January and February 2021: False Hope

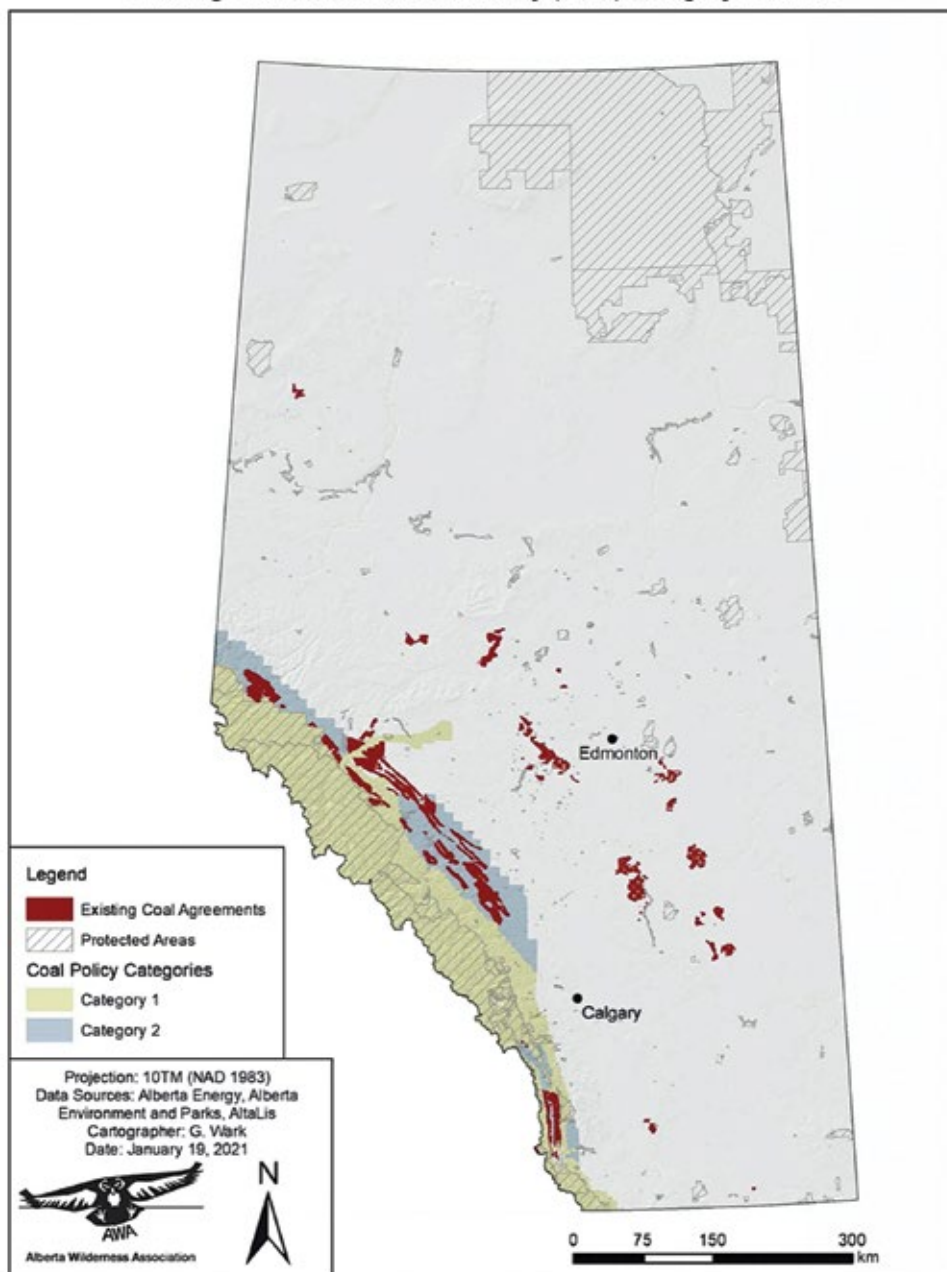
AWA works to help governments see the error of their policy ways and select better options. In the mind of this political scientist, the widespread opposition to coal

mining poses a serious, possibly existential, threat to the UCP's electoral prospects in 2023. In early February Think HQ offered data supporting this assessment. Their provincial poll revealed that 69 percent of the Albertans who were aware of the coal issue disapproved of the government's initiative to open the Eastern Slopes to coal mining. The firm found this disapproval to be "wide and deep." Even a majority of people who identified as UCP voters (56 percent) said they were opposed to mining in areas that previously had enjoyed de facto protection. Furthermore, 56 percent of voters said they didn't trust the UCP government to find the

right balance between economic and environmental concerns.

Given the political risks attached to mining the Eastern Slopes, AWA hoped the Minister of Energy would reverse course when she held a news conference on January 18th. Then she took the tiniest of steps backwards – fellow political scientists might classify her remarks as "symbolic politics." She canceled leases in the Eastern Slopes – but only the 11 leases the government sold in December. She took away, in other words, only about 19 square kilometres of leases from the more than 800 square kilometres already leased to coal companies. She also said that the gov-

Existing Coal Leases on Coal Policy (1976) Category 2 Lands



ernment would “pause” for an unspecified length of time auctioning any more leases on Category 2 lands. The government showed no interest in canceling or buying back the previously leased lands along the Eastern Slopes on which Atrium Coal, Cabin Ridge, and other companies already had scarred with access roads and drill sites/holes. It did nothing to prevent them from continuing the exploration programs causing that damage.

AWA congratulated the government on this announcement but the congratulations were muted. They were commensurate with how little impact the government’s announcement actually promised to have on coal mining exploration and development. Of course, AWA said the announcement was a positive, but it was a very tiny positive given how much remained unaffected along the Eastern Slopes.

Getting information from the provincial government is too often like pulling teeth. The January 18th announcement exemplified how reluctant government is to provide essential information. Minister Savage said: “This decision has no impact on existing coal projects currently under regulatory review.” What did this statement mean? What types of applications were under the “currently under regulatory review” umbrella? Did this exemption apply to projects that had Coal Exploration Programs since such programs would be established through the Alberta Energy Regulator?

On January 22, 2021 AWA put that question to the Minister. It took the Minister’s office until April 13, 2021 to answer – nearly 12 weeks. The response said the phrase didn’t apply to companies with Coal Exploration Programs. Only Coalspur Mines, Montem Resources, and Benga Mining were considered to have projects under regulatory review. But, as the Minister made clear in early February, companies with AER-approved exploration programs also could continue with those exploration programs. Atrium Coal, Cabin Ridge, Montem Resources, and Valory Resources were unaffected by the January announcement. Very little had changed on the ground in the Rockies and Foothills.

Personally, the largest dose of false hope Minister Savage delivered in the beginning



PHOTO: © D. URSENBACH

of the year came in the early February announcement just alluded to. This was her February 8, 2021 news conference. There Energy Minister Savage declared the government was reinstating the 1976 Coal Policy. This reversal came less than one week after Premier Kenney had declared the Coal Policy to be “a dead letter.” During Premier Kenney’s February 3rd interview with Edmonton’s CHED, the Canadian Press reported the Premier said the 1976 policy “was obsolete and had been superseded by stronger rules.” (Ironically, some reports of Kenney’s remarks claimed they were made in Edmonton Kentucky.)

Two days after the Premier dismissed this dead letter, his director of strategic planning suggested some of that policy would be reincarnated. Minister Savage opened her remarks with an extraordinary *mea culpa* about the rescission. She said: “first, to every single Albertan that has expressed their opposition to this decision, your government has heard you. Further, I want to thank you, thank you for being engaged and passionate, thank you for caring about your province and your future, and thank you for speaking up and being heard.” She admitted the government had made a mistake and came to the podium to fix it. These are words too seldom heard from politicians and she should be commended for having the political courage needed to make that admission.

To fix the mistake, the Minister announced the government would reinstate the “full” 1976 Coal Policy. Key language from her remarks are emphasized below. She recognized the government’s actions in 2020 “has caused tremendous fear and anxiety that Alberta’s majestic Eastern Slopes would be forever damaged by mountain top and open-pit coal mining. Let me be clear, this will not happen in Alberta.” To complement this policy reversal, the Minister issued two directives to the Alberta Energy Regulator. She said the first directive told the AER that: “No mountain top removal will be permitted and all of the restrictions under the 1976 coal categories are to apply on surface mining in Category 2 lands.” She said the second directive told the AER: “All future coal development and coal lease sales on Category 2 lands is to be paused indefinitely pending consultations on a new modern coal policy.” The Minister went on to say there were six projects on Category 2 lands that were “being explored for potential development.”

Since the government reinstated the 1976 Policy is there any merit to the claim the Minister delivered false hope, especially since she issued additional directives to the AER? My reaction rests first on important differences between what the Minister said during that news conference and what she wrote to the AER. It’s also based on the meaning attached to words like “future” and “potential.”

The Minister's spoken words clearly said that mountain top mining would not be allowed. AWA's reaction to that news took Minister Savage at her word. We welcomed the promise in the policy reversal. AWA also thought her "Let me be clear" statement meant that the Eastern Slopes – all of the Eastern Slopes – would be spared from open-pit coal mining. Worst case scenario, these landscapes would be spared at the very least until consultations were completed on the modern coal policy she was intent on crafting.

The directive to the AER states something very different. It says "no mountain-top removal in the exploration for or development of coal will be permitted on Category 2 lands." Category 2 lands...period. This is an important qualification. It meant that mountain-top removal could occur on Category 4 lands in the vicinity of Crowsnest Pass now, perhaps in the future in the Coal Branch area south of Hinton. If the open-pit mines proposed for Tent Mountain and Chinook may be regarded as mountain-top removal projects then they could join Grassy Mountain and all apply for approvals to proceed.

One reason the qualification is important is because there is no ecological distinction between Category 2 and 4 lands in the Crowsnest or anywhere else in the Rockies. Fred Bradley, currently a member of the Coal Consultation Committee, suggested as much during the Grassy Mountain Hearing. The lands where the Tent Mountain, Chinook, and Grassy Mountain projects would be located are Category 4 lands because in the early 1970s they had "active mine – mining dispositions."

All Category 4 lands in the Rockies were exempted from what the Minister's spoken words suggested was a blanket prohibition against mountain-top removal.

But, at least mountain-top removal would be prohibited in that impressive swath of the Eastern Slopes located in Category 2, right? Sort of...it all depended how the Regulator and the Kenney government defined "mountain-top removal." The general understanding is that, in mountainous terrain, mountain top removal and open-pit mining are syn-

onymous. I thought Minister Savage, in the quotation above, regarded those lands that way...as identical.

Sharon Riley, in her investigative reporting for *The Narwhal*, discovered that the AER and senior staff in the Premier's Office maintained that open-pit mining in mountainous regions of Alberta wasn't mountain top removal mining. "Mountaintop removal and open-pit mining are different methods of surface mining," the AER wrote. "Mountaintop removal completely removes the top of a mountain (overburden) in order to access a targeted coal seam, whereas open-pit mining is more selective in overburden removal practices." (The Premier's Office used this exact phrasing in its answer to Riley's questions) If the mountainous landscapes of western Alberta could speak, would they call this a distinction without a difference?

False hope arose then because the government adopted a narrower and narrower delineation of the lands where open-pit mining would be prohibited categorically. The closer you looked at the what Minister Savage actually instructed the AER to do the clearer it became the government was not adopting a sweeping prohibition of coal and development activities in the Rockies and Foothills.

What type of, or how many, coal mining activities did the Minister's directive to the AER prohibit? First, the Minister's directive only prohibited proposed exploration or development of coal activities on Category 2 lands; future projects like Tent Mountain and Chinook on Category 4 lands were not prohibited. Second, a prohibited exploration or development activity on Category 2 lands had to satisfy the AER's narrow definition of mountain top removal. Open-pit coal mining in Category 2 lands was not prohibited.

Finally, this meant the six open-pit mining projects promoted by Atrium Coal, Cabin Ridge Project Ltd., Montem Resources, Ram River Coal, and Valory Resources all could apply to the AER for permission to proceed. These companies owned the six projects Minister Savage said were "being explored for potential development." In the Minister's coal policy world, "potential" development is different from "future" development – how-

ever much that interpretation offended the well-understood meanings of those words in the English language. The indefinite pause on future coal development imposed by Alberta Energy did not apply to the Aries, Blackstone, Cabin Ridge, Chinook, Elan South, or Isolation South projects. Correspondence with AWA from the Minister's office said these exploration projects could apply to the AER to proceed if their owners chose to. All of those projects, except for Chinook, were located on Category 2 lands.

The bottom line is that, despite Minister Savage's words, there was nothing in her directives to the AER or the AER's understanding of mountaintop removal that would prevent coal mining companies from turning the Eastern Slopes into an Alberta version of what Teck's Elkview operations have done just east of Sparwood.

Conclusion and Looking Ahead to the June/July Issue

This article has attempted to provide an overview of how the coal issue has unfolded from last May until the end of February. On the one hand, those nine months were a remarkable time in Alberta's history of conservation. It's difficult to identify another time in the province's history when so many people mobilized so quickly and spoke so powerfully and passionately about the lands we have the privilege to steward. This is only appropriate given the scale of the land rush that coal mining could bring to the Eastern Slopes. Its scale is like that of the tar sands boom in the mid-1990s and coal's impacts on land, water, and air could be just as significant. On the other hand, despite government "thank yous" for speaking out, very little had changed. The door to open-pit coal mining throughout the Eastern Slopes was still open.

The June/July issue of the Advocate will look at the record from March to June 2021. Among other things, it will detail AWA's efforts to shape the Terms of Reference for the Tent Mountain Mine Redevelopment Project and to convince Environment and Climate Change Minister to designate that project for a federal impact assessment. It also will look



Teck's Elkview Operations, one of four Teck open-pit/mountaintop removal mines in B.C.'s Elk Valley

at the Coal Consultation the government established at the end of March. Finally, I dearly hope we'll be able to share some good

news about the fate of Benga Mining's Grassy Mountain Project. 🏔️

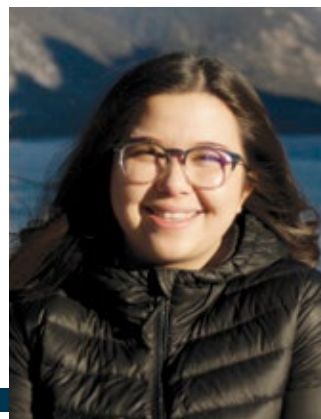
Examples of AWA Outreach On Metallurgical Coal Mining

- Formation and Coordination of a "Coal Policy Working Group" after rescinding the 1976 Coal Policy was announced on May 15, 2020
- Virtual Town Hall Series: Coal and Health, February 16, 2021
- Virtual Town Hall Series: Coal and Economics, March 23, 2021
- Virtual Town Hall Series: Coal and Communities, May 18, 2021 (upcoming)
- Invited Speaker: No Coal For Christmas, Calgary Chapter of the Council of Canadians, December 13, 2020
- Invited Speaker: Say No to Coal, Edmonton Chapter of the Council of Canadians, February 10, 2021
- Invited Speaker: Mountain Child Valley Society – Piikani Nation, March 1, 2021
- Invited Guest: Danielle Smith Show, 770 CHQR, January 15, 2021
- Invited Guest: CBC Alberta, Alberta at Noon, January 19, 2021
- Invited Guest: CBC Saskatchewan, Blue Sky, February 4, 2021
- Invited Guest: CBC Alberta, Alberta at Noon, February 9, 2021

Transparency and Trust:

Another Alberta Parks Freedom of Information request with more questions than answers

Grace Wark, AWA Conservation Specialist



Gaining access to public sector information can be increasingly compared to experiencing a solar eclipse. Infrequent, potentially amazing, although needing a few resources to be valuable. During the 2017 solar eclipse, I learned an interesting trick. In a pinch and without proper solar glasses, one need only a piece of paper and a pushpin to create what's called a "pinhole projector." By piercing a hole in the paper, you can catch a glimpse of sun's projected image on the ground as it's eclipsed by the moon. While not the same as safely staring at the sun through protective glasses, it's a way to keep from missing out on the experience.

Recent attempts to gain information on land and resource management in Alberta feel much like staring at the sun through a pinhole projector. Small pieces of information come through, but they're filtered, provide an incomplete view, and leave a lot to be desired.

The Government of Alberta is not a picture of transparency. Most days, information sharing on public policy decisions takes the form of a news release or mail pamphlet with a few short, reassuring words. We are primarily informed *after* decisions have been made and often only with the government's politically preferred reasons for doing so. Further to this, recent instances of documents quietly disappearing from government websites, such as disappearing the list of 164 parks and provincial recreation areas that were slated for removal from the parks system, haven't instilled confidence in government transparency.

Government transparency should require

more than just publishing budget documents or disclosing the incomes of political staff. At the same time, it doesn't necessarily require access to raw, unfiltered government data. In fact, what would be most useful is a happy medium somewhere between too little and too much information. Most Albertans don't have the time or the inclination to spend hours poring over government databases and interpreting lengthy documents. It shouldn't be too much to ask for clear, summary rationales for public policy decisions, supplemented by facts and data. This is necessary so that the public has a good understanding of a decision and so that we're better-equipped to provide appropriate and meaningful feedback to hold our government accountable for its decisions.

After all, each year billions of provincial taxpayer dollars go towards the provision and management of public resources. When it comes to our public lands, we should be able to trust our government to manage landscapes in a way that reflects our interest and well-being. So when a government makes a potentially unpopular or damaging decision, the public has a right to expect a thorough explanation of why the decision was made.

In recent months, I've discussed Alberta Parks at length and don't intend to belabour how important parks are for both public recreation and wilderness conservation. However, as we pass the one-year mark of 'Optimizing Alberta Parks,' I think it's necessary to reflect on why this decision sparked significant public anger and distrust and to share some recently released information which supports the view that not all was well behind the gov-

ernment's curtain of optimization.

A case for greater transparency

Last August, dissatisfied and skeptical in the press releases and boilerplate emails that Alberta's parks "aren't going anywhere," AWA submitted a request under the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIP) into the exact criteria that led to the potential closure, delisting and alternate management of 175 Alberta Parks sites. The Optimizing Alberta Parks decision intended to cut public spending on parks and allow the department to refocus efforts on provincial Crown jewels; however, potential loss of critical parks protections and recreational access, for minimal financial benefit, gave significant cause for concern. How and why particular sites ended up on what AWA has called the "hit list" of parks and other protected areas remained a mystery. The Minister didn't make the situation any clearer when he offered little more than general statements that sites were underused or had little to no conservation value. AWA sought to find out detailed reasons.

Gaining access wasn't easy. Our initial information request was submitted in August. It took two extensions, a missed deadline, and a complaint to the FOIP commissioner before the government finally coughed up some information in January 2021. The lack of answers was frustrating, not least because a final decision could be made at any time through an Order-in-Council.

While parks protections seemed to be secured at the end of 2020 when the Minister announced that "all sites will remain protected in law" and will hold their existing Alberta



It's all about trust. So when a government official says that some of Alberta's parks have "little to no conservation value," AWA hope they aren't referring to Highwood PRA or 139 other sites on the Optimizing Alberta Parks list which contain habitat for threatened and endangered species.

PHOTO: © N. SCHMIDT

Parks' designations, AWA hoped that when we received the FOIP documents in January we would get a welcome glimpse into the background conversations that led to the government's decision.

Upon reviewing the documents, the sheer volume of redactions was the first thing to get our attention. One-third to one-half of the document consisted of large greyed out columns of information, redacted under *FOIP Act* section 24(1)(a). This section of the *FOIP Act* allows public officials to refuse to disclose information which could reveal "advice, proposals, recommendations, analyses or policy options developed by or for a public body or member of Executive Council." In other words, liberal reliance on this section would rob us of the insights we might otherwise get into why the Minister decided to delist and deregulate parks. This was the information we had requested and what we still believe

should be on the public record.

Most redactions were related to the selection criteria for sites under the Optimizing Alberta Parks list (originally called "Right Sizing Alberta Parks" or RSAP). Redactions were made to hide detailed comments on why sites were chosen, the current condition of parks and their infrastructure, and whether or not the park should be deregulated, divested or closed. These were but a few of the columns redacted from the document's 408 pages.

Did we get much insight into the criteria guiding the optimizing parks process? No. But, our request generated useful information and data on occupancy and conservation values.

Do you remember the repeated statement from Minister Nixon and UCP MLAs that sites chosen were largely "underused" by the Alberta public? He offered the rather dra-

matic example of a site which only received 36 visitors in the previous year. The FOIP documents appear to tell quite a different story... Alberta Parks doesn't actually know how many visitors provincial sites see in a given year. A disclaimer at the beginning of the FOIP document states that the majority of sites do not use the online reservation system; instead they are occupied on a first-come/first-served basis. For these sites, *no occupancy data is collected*. True to form, within the FOIP tables, 72 percent of Optimizing Alberta Parks sites had "no data" or "na" listed under "occupied campsite nights." So, in the absence of occupancy data, how could one confidently say that sites are underused?

Beyond this, some of the sites the government intended to remove from the parks system were in fact quite popular. Of the sites with camping night data, at least four were at or near capacity on most weekends; the most

popular of these was Kinbrook Island, which had 13,395 camper nights in 2018 and an average weekend occupancy of 100 percent. The data confound the picture of underuse the Minister tried to paint to justify removing these sites from the Parks system.

Even if sites weren't extremely popular, does this mean they have no value as parks? Certainly not. Data from the same document found that more than half of the sites overlap with Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs) and that a whopping 85 percent of sites contain species at-risk. This confirmed what we already knew and what the *Provincial Parks Act* makes abundantly clear – the purposes of Alberta's Parks involve much more than recreation. The FOIP document suggests that many of these sites are ecologically rich and include important habitat, waterfowl staging areas, and connectivity for many species. Those species included grizzly bear, caribou, burrowing owl, arctic grayling, and harlequin duck – all species considered threatened, endangered or 'of special concern' under provincial or federal registries.

While we're still missing key pieces of information, what is very clear is that these places, in fact, have real value and that official

justifications for proposing to excise parks from the provincial parks system were weak.

One takeaway from this FOIP experience is that we have to keep up the pressure on government to increase its transparency. Even with the current checks and balances under the *FOIP Act* and the Open Government program, it took multiple months and follow-ups to extract only some of the information needed to answer our question – why were these sites chosen? If anything, I've come away with more questions than answers as there's no discernable theme within this list of sites – small and large, popular and quiet, distant and close. If the government is going to make bold claims that some of Alberta's parks are no longer valuable public assets, then we should have had access to camper nights, average occupancy, site conditions, and environmental inventories. A thorough and meaningful period of Indigenous and public consultation should have taken place before the "hit list" was composed.

Democratic politics demands doing better...

The issues with information sharing

surrounding Alberta Parks are merely a piece of a much larger, ongoing issue in contemporary governance. Motions, cabinet orders and legislation affecting future land-use and environmental governance in Alberta are advanced with very little information about the "why" – why has government chosen its policy directions. To make a point you'll see later in our examination of the new public lands camping pass – a healthy democracy is one where citizens are well-informed. We deserve more full-some explanations from government, not catchphrases, for their behaviour.

The fact that it's like pulling teeth to gain information erodes public trust in provincial decision making and fuels frustration and resentment in the hearts of Albertans. In the absence of government making a sincere effort to become more open and transparent, we may continue to see the same degree of public discontent that characterized Alberta in 2020.

We're not asking to stare directly at the sun, but please don't leave us in the dark.

For access to AWA's FOIP of the Optimizing Alberta Parks selection criteria, visit: tinyurl.com/optimizing-ab-parks-criteria ▲

Featured Artist Jared Tailfeathers Sikohm Kokomii



This 2020 Mural is based on the traditional pictographs of the Blackfoot on a simulated sandstone rock, depicting the location of Ramey pre-settlement. Commissioned work for Ramsey Housing Co-op
PHOTO: © J. TAILFEATHERS

Hunting for Reason:

Explaining How Alberta Introduced Its Hunt for Sandhill Cranes

By Ian Urquhart, AWA Conservation Director



Just over a year ago now, *Wild Lands Advocate* published our objections to the proposal from the federal government to allow Alberta to open a hunting season for sandhill cranes. Those objections focused on the possibility of mistaking sandhill cranes for whooping cranes. Since then AWA lodged a *Freedom of Information and Privacy Act* request with the provincial government in order to try to better understand why Alberta wanted to introduce this hunt. We have now received the first fruit of that request.

Not surprisingly, many sections in the 66 pages of documents we received were redacted. We currently are challenging the bases for those redactions. But the unredacted portions of those documents tell an interesting story about the values, influences, and data Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) sought and relied on to add the sandhill crane to Alberta's list of game birds.

In an interview with *Alberta Outdoorsmen* magazine in March 2020, Minister Nixon was quoted as saying "I have challenged my department to open a season, and to work through the process of dealing with migratory birds." According to FOIP documents he had already received that recommendation in October 2019, approved it, and forwarded it to Ottawa in November 2019. Since sandhill cranes are a migratory bird, the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) has jurisdiction over their management. Alberta needed CWS approval.

There is no suggestion in the documents AWA received that Alberta anticipated any objections from the federal agency as the CWS had supported the hunt on two previous occasions. Furthermore, the language

of the policy advice to Minister Nixon suggested that CWS would routinely approve the required changes to the federal Migratory Bird Regulation.

The Rationale for Hunting Sandhill Cranes

If you glance superficially at the rationale for the hunt, it might be compelling. There were a range of factors justifying the hunt. Economic interests, presumably defined as guides, outfitters, and related businesses, mattered. This new hunt would increase "Alberta's potential as a valued destination for migratory bird hunting." A hunt also would help farmers limit the damage cranes could inflict on crops. However, unlike Manitoba's request for a hunt where this problem was documented, Alberta has not presented any supporting data. Furthermore, stakeholders loved the idea – since 2007 they "perennially proposed a sandhill crane hunting season in Alberta." AEP staff identified hunting as a priority and so the hunt aligned "with AEP's intent to develop new hunting opportunities for Albertans." The population, defined as the "mid-continent sandhill crane population" is increasing; it is being hunted elsewhere in its range "with liberal seasons and bag limits."

Reasons Without Reason

If you interrogate the foundations for the department's rationale you might conclude there are many reasons for AEP's enthusiasm, but not much reason in the recommendation. First, look at AEP's consultation with stakeholders. You would be mistaken if you thought AEP made an effort to talk to a wide

range of groups with an interest in migratory birds. Instead, AEP confined its outreach to hunting stakeholders – where the new hunt was supported unanimously. In the wildlife management corridors of AEP, multi-stakeholder consultation on this hunt meant talking only to those interested in killing cranes (hunters and farmers).

Perhaps this narrow consultation was simply an oversight, an honest mistake. That's possible but pretty unlikely when you read the department was anticipating that "some non-hunting stakeholders may not be in favour of the hunt." These words suggest that, while the department recognizes there are non-hunting stakeholders on this issue, it decided not to consult with them. Those who might question the wisdom of hunting sandhill cranes simply weren't welcome. In the government's eyes, only hunting and agricultural groups had valid claims to be consulted about hunting cranes. Another reason for this consultation approach likely was that, in the past when the public learned of these proposals there was considerable backlash and the plans to hunt cranes were withdrawn.

But, is this lack of consultation so terrible if the mid-continent sandhill crane population is increasing and currently well-above the management objectives? If there are hundreds of thousands of "excess" sandhill cranes in the skies and fields, why not open them up for hunting? Do managers have the data to justify a hunt with liberal seasons and bag limits for the sandhill cranes that frequent Alberta?

Migratory bird managers in both the Canadian Wildlife Service and Alberta Environment and Parks certainly claimed the

data was on their side. In April 2020, Jim Leafloor, a manager in the Prairie Region of CWS, alerted 11 other government members of the Prairie Waterfowl Technical Committee that AWA was “not done opposing the sandhill crane hunting season in Alberta.” He attached an article from the *Journal of Wildlife Management* by Pearse et al. (2020) and recommended Committee members familiarize themselves with it. Jason Caswell, AEP’s provincial waterfowl specialist and a former student researcher for Delta Waterfowl, seemed to agree. (Delta Waterfowl, a member of AG-PAC, credited their decade of advocacy for helping to get the hunt. It describes Jason Caswell as “a strong ally.”) Just minutes after Caswell received Leafloor’s email he forwarded it to some colleagues in AEP. “As Jim suggests,” Caswell wrote, “Fact and data are our best response to questions arising from AWA’s recent comments.”

There’s the rub. The article Leafloor recommends as a communications resource, “Population and Harvest Dynamics of Midcontinent Sandhill Cranes,” actually raises potential concerns about how sandhill crane hunting seasons are established and managed. The key to the potential concerns is this – the midcontinent population is managed as a collective. This is an aggregate population, the sum total, of cranes. In the spring, most of the midcontinent population is found in the Platte River Valley in Nebraska. This is “the” staging area for midcontinent sandhill cranes where they congregate after leaving their wintering ranges before heading north to their breeding territories. While cranes are gathered in this small area biologists annually estimate the population. A 2018 U.S. management guidelines document suggests that the estimates from the Platte River staging area “are expected to provide reasonable indicators of trends” in this population. Pearse et al., however, stated: “We viewed annual estimates from the spring survey with skepticism.”

The potential concerns rest in the fact this is an *aggregate* population. It is made up of four different groups of cranes, termed

“breeding affiliations,” that have different breeding grounds and do not intermingle. Management decisions based on the aggregate population may ignore significant population declines to one or more of the four sub-groups. “So,” retired provincial wildlife biologist Hugh Wollis wrote to Environment and Climate Change Canada, “it doesn’t matter how large the midcontinent population is if one segment – the affiliation to which Alberta bred birds belong – is taking the brunt of the hunting pressure.” The breeding group that frequents Alberta, which, incidentally is listed as “Sensitive” in the Species at Risk delineation, is the West-central Canada – Alaska group (WC-A). Waterfowl managers, Wollis continued, have no idea about how much of the pre-2020 crane harvest is from this breeding affiliation and how many harvested birds, whether taken in Saskatchewan or the United States, are Alberta birds. “The corollary is,” Wollis continued, “they don’t know if the WC-A breeding association, or the Alberta sub-population, is being disproportionately overharvested.” This suggestion is based on telemetry studies and was made in an earlier paper by Krapu et al. (2011). Krapu was one of the authors of the 2020 Pearse et al. paper. The introduction of a sandhill crane hunting season in Alberta was based then only on an assumption. The assumption was that if the numbers of the midcontinent population as a whole are healthy then the population trend of Alberta sandhill cranes must be healthy too. It’s just an assumption.

An irony here is that the study Leafloor and Caswell recommend as an antidote to the negativity coming from groups like AWA actually supports Wollis’s position. Back then to the Pearse et al. study. This peer-reviewed article notes that governments have managed the midcontinent population of sandhill cranes as a single entity “yet this management population has a more complex structure of 2 genetically distinct subspecies and 4 breeding segments with unique breeding areas, migratory pathways and chronology, and wintering sites.” If hunter harvest isn’t

distributed equally among the four segments: then distinct groups of sandhill cranes could be increasing in numbers and others decreasing, while the entire group exhibits modest overall growth. Ignoring geographic variation in vital rates when developing population models can lead to biased growth projections.

Might this be the case now? Pearse et al. conclude we can’t say since they didn’t have the data needed to see if the harvest and long-term recruitment rates differed among the four breeding segments. The possibility pointed out by Pearse et al. was one criterion used in preparing management guidelines for the midcontinent sandhill crane population in 2018. This criterion was “the potential need to differentially manage populations.” The three U.S. Flyway Councils (Central, Mississippi, and Pacific) allowed for the value of differential management if data on population trends, harvest pressure, and recruitment/harvest rates. But, no monitoring was being done to assess these factors. Without the knowledge such operational monitoring programs could provide, migratory bird managers opted for the business as usual approach – manage four breeding populations as if they were one.

All of this suggests a need to do what university-trained biologists should want to do before they recommend changes in wildlife management regulations: more research. Not surprisingly, this is exactly what prominent researchers (Pearse et al. and Krapu et al.) have recommended. From that research managers may acquire the reason needed to confidently manage the Alberta population of sandhill cranes.

So where does AWA go from here? We’ll continue to pursue our Freedom of Information request in the hope of getting more satisfactory answers. Also, we’ll engage with the Canadian Wildlife Service on the next round of changes to Migratory Bird Regulations. 🐦

I would like to thank Hugh Wollis for his input into and review of this article.

Kananaskis:

A Poorly Designed Pass Catering to a Special Interest

By Ian Urquhart, AWA Conservation Director



There may be as many peaks in K-Country as there are flaws in the \$90 Kananaskis Conservation Pass Environment and Parks Minister Nixon announced near the end of April. But, the Minister was right in one key respect. His department should be “about managing demand and supporting environmental sustainability.” The conservation pass, unfortunately, is likely to disappoint on both counts.

Managing demand is where the pass should see some success. Based on the Washington State experience the Minister’s \$90 annual vehicle fee should reduce the number of cars traveling to K-Country. In 2011 Washington introduced much more modest vehicle fees (annual:\$30; daily: \$10). Any vehicle entering state parks and recreation lands was required to pay one of these fees.

In 2020, Republican Mark Schoesler tried to abolish the fee because he believes the fee seriously reduced visits to state parks. They fell by an “average of seven million visits per year” relative to the numbers of visitors to state parks in the two years prior to the imposition of the Discover Pass.

Alberta’s \$90 fee may succeed in managing demand by reducing K-Country vehicle traffic. But, if environmental sustainability is as important to the Minister as he claims, it’s a blinkered approach. Where will day-trippers and campers go if the fee deters them from visiting Kananaskis? Isn’t it likely the pass will simply shift their attention away from K-Country onto other equally special places in the Rockies and Foothills. Those alternative destinations may be at least as,

or even more, vulnerable to damaging human impacts on the land. Don’t forget that many of last year’s examples of excessive visitor pressure in parks and public lands came from outside Kananaskis. Shifting demand away from K-Country onto other areas is a haphazard way to manage demand.

It’s poorly designed in another way – it’s blind to the circumstances lower income Albertans, circumstances aggravated by COVID-19.

Minister Nixon’s Conservation Pass dismisses the less well-off in at least two ways. First, his \$90 fee isn’t, as the Minister suggests, “modest” to them. AWA has heard stories of the added strain the fee places on people who have suffered financially from the pandemic. In one email we received, income and job losses due to COVID meant that – in the pre-Pass world of this multi-generational family– a camping trip to Kananaskis was the only vacation they could afford.

Second, the timing of this fee was insensitive, if not callous. Lower income Albertans were part of this year’s rush to book Kananaskis campsites when the reservation system opened. They did so without any hint from Minister Nixon that a new fee was going to be stacked on top of the campsite and reservation user fees their camping trip already demanded. This point was underlined in another email AWA received – from someone who had helped 20 low income families/seniors on fixed incomes book campsites in July. A well-planned initiative should have provided people with a head’s up about this fee. They never got one.

When you consider who doesn’t have

to pay the new Kananaskis Conservation Pass it’s hard not to see off-highway vehicle (OHV) users as a special interest that has Minister Nixon’s ear. McLean Creek is the focal point of one of four Public Land Use Zones (PLUZ) in K-Country. The McLean Creek Off-Highway Vehicle PLUZ, as its name suggests, is land dedicated for OHV use. McLean Creek is the only area in K-Country where you don’t need to purchase the \$90 vehicle permit. OHV users don’t have to pay the Conservation Pass when they come to ride their machines at McLean Creek.

This special treatment further erodes the credibility of the Minister’s claim about managing demand in a way supporting environmental sustainability. The damage irresponsible OHV users have done to McLean Creek has gone on for decades. Surely those users do more damage to the land than the family who decide to have a picnic at Elbow Falls. Only the picnicking family will pay the Conservation Pass.

The Minister tries to defend treating OHVs with kid gloves by saying he doesn’t want to stack one fee on top of others. Yet, fee stacking is exactly what he endorses in every case where people drive to Peter Lougheed Provincial Park to camp. Campers will pay the new \$90 fee, their campsite fee, and perhaps a reservation fee.

Albertans deserve political leaders who manage our love for parks in equitable ways, ways ensuring those who do the most damage to Alberta’s lands bear the financial burden of restoring those lands. The Kananaskis Conservation Pass simply doesn’t deliver either of these goals.

A Conversation with Chief James Ahnassay:

A Conversation with Chief James Ahnassay:

By Ian Urquhart, AWA Conservation Director

Several features distinguished AWA's 2020 awards season. The coronavirus pandemic required a change in the format of AWA's annual lecture series. It demanded the virtual delivery of remarks as a replacement for our customary practice of gathering at our office in Hillhurst Cottage school. Although we've missed the face-to-face gathering and its accompanying conversation Zoom has allowed many more members from all over Canada and parts of the United States to attend our lectures. If more normal times are here this fall we'll merge both modes of delivery – meet in-person at AWA's office and Zoom the presentation across the province.

There were two other novel features of the 2020 season. This was the first year we invited more than one person to deliver a Martha Kostuch lecture. Kevin Van Tighem, Linda Duncan, and James Ahnassay all received Wilderness Defenders awards and were invited to deliver lectures. James' selection was novel, and special, in another way. It was the first time AWA had bestowed this award on a member of a First Nation.

During his years as Chief of the Dene Tha' First Nation James has championed conservation values and delivered conservation victories for the Dene Tha' and for the lands that are central to their identity.

Those accomplishments include playing a key role in creating the Hay-Zama Wildland Provincial Park in 1999. That park protects much of the internationally important wetland contained in the Hay-Zama Lakes Complex. It is one of only 37 sites in Canada distinguished as a wetland listed in



the Ramsar Convention. This international agreement seeks to conserve and use wisely "all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world." Chief Ahnassay also worked hard to twin Hay-Zama with another Ramsar site half a world away – the Dalai Lake National Nature Reserve in Inner Mongolia.

James isn't finished with conservation yet. He is very interested in establishing the Bistcho Lake (Mbe'cho) Indigenous Protected Conservation Area. An IPCA there could be a vehicle for pursuing his interest in engaging Dene Tha' youth in efforts to conserve and manage traditional lands.

One of the first values to arise in James' conversation with AWA Director Cliff Walis was humility. James started their conversation by saying how important Dene Tha' elders, Council members, and staff were to conservation efforts in his community.

He extended his appreciation to the companies and ENGOs that played a positive role over the years in bringing protection to the Hay-Zama Lakes Complex. "I just want to capture all the people involved, companies, entities because anything that needs to happen, that results in a favourable outcome... it takes a lot of people, a lot of work to get there."

James was born in 1957 in Habay, Alberta – a Dene Tha' community on the northeast shore of Hay Lake that now "only exists in people's minds." Located about 11 kilometres nearly due north of Chateh (formerly called Assumption), a major flood in 1962 forced the residents of Habay to relocate to Chateh to the south.

James has good memories of life at Habay. A canoe trip with his mother and cousin the year before the great flood stands out. So too do the spring and fall migrations of geese and ducks and how noisy they were to a four-year old boy. Today he misses that noise, misses those sounds. Dene Tha' grandmothers and mothers oversaw two of the major events of spring. They harvested eggs from nesting waterfowl and they trapped or herded molting ducks. The latter efforts led to major feasts of waterfowl in the spring.

After discussing James' early childhood Cliff asked how things changed and whether the Dene Tha' had much input into those changes. Petroleum companies discovered oil underneath the wealth of nature in Hay-Zama. Looking at Google Earth images of the area around Chateh and Habay today, dotted as it is with well sites – crisscrossed as it is by roads and seismic lines,

you start to appreciate the land rush that swept over Dene Tha' lands decades ago now. Dene Tha' elders worried about the arrival of the energy companies; they worried about all the cutlines that were cut into the earth. When energy companies moved onto the waters and surrounding lands in Hay Zama many things changed. Traditional pursuits, such as egg harvesting, suffered in the shadow of industry.

While wells and pipelines brought jobs for some community members they also brought tragedy. One of James' first memories of the oil and gas era came when he was in the Assumption residential school; a community member working on a pipeline construction crew became entangled in the machinery and died. A particularly evocative memory and story concerned Jean-Baptiste Talley. Talley (sometimes spelled Tally or Tallay in various documents) was one of the elders who played a role in furthering the community's interests in a variety of government/industry processes. For example, he presented to the Joint Review Panel established to study the Mackenzie Gas Project (the Dene Tha' had to go to the courts in order to be consulted about that project). Talley's trapline was

important to the community. In 2011, the Dene Tha prepared a report on traditional land use for TransCanada Pipelines and the National Energy Board. That report noted that at least 14 Dene Tha' trappers, in addition to Talley, used his trapline.

After reading this I wasn't surprised to hear James say that his story about Talley involved a situation when Talley, "as usual," was out on the land. He was returning from the lakes in the southwest corner of the wetland complex. Thirsty, tired, he came across a clearwater spring. Since the water was very clear and cold Talley thought it would be okay to drink from it. Shortly after dipping his cup into the water and drinking...Talley lost consciousness and fell down. He was lucky not to have drowned in the shallow water where he collapsed. When he came to he realized just how lucky he was to be alive. He has told James that story a few times over the years and, to this day, James still wonders what could have caused that. Were there traces of a petroleum gas in the water that led him to collapse? "Those are the kind of profound moments," James said, "where the effects of the activity on the lake really come out to face you."

Cliff asked James to reflect on the aftermath of creating the Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park in 1999. Have governments respected Dene Tha' aboriginal and treaty rights within the 486 square kilometre park? Does the Chief regard the creation of this park as a positive accomplishment? For James, this was certainly a good thing to do together. While the process was long and sometimes difficult, in part due to the revolving door of oil and gas companies involved there, he feels good about what the Dene Tha', AWA, governments, and the petroleum industry accomplished there.

As for aboriginal and treaty rights, I could hear the steel in James' soft-spoken words when he said the Dene Tha' will never shy away from insisting that government respect those rights. Early tensions, when government was on the verge of charging Dene Tha', were resolved. But James made it very clear that, if those sorts of tensions arise in the future, the Dene Tha' will insist that government respect what it agreed to. When James used the phrase "we were there from time immemorial" he talked about the Dene Tha', Hay-Zama, and traditional territories as if they were one. Robbing the Dene Tha' of their lands erodes the essence of who they are as a people.

The Chief joined Cliff and AWA's Christyann Olson in 2009 in Inner Mongolia where they celebrated the 2008 twinning of Hay-Zama with the Dalai Lake Nature Reserve, another Ramsar Convention site. One of the aspects of the trip that impressed James was the tenacity of his Indigenous counterparts in China. He smiled when he recounted the feast on the grasslands their hosts provided them with. The scale of the grasslands in Inner Mongolia/northern China is simply mind-boggling. They cover 400 million hectares, 40 percent of China's land mass. The 87 million hectares found in Inner Mongolia "is a significant constituent of the Eurasian Steppe – the largest contiguous biome in the world." The feast symbolized the efforts of Mongolia's Indigenous population to hold on to their way of life despite the ravages of industrialization and land conversion. That's exactly how



Oil rig in the Hay-Zama wetland complex. Securing the agreement of oil and gas to leave these wetlands helped to make the creation of the Hay-Zama Wildland Provincial Park a major conservation victory in 1999. PHOTO: © AWA



A marsh in the Hay-Zama wetland complex. PHOTO: © C. WALLIS

James sees his own people.

That feast and, more generally, that cross-cultural experience affirmed for James just how important intact wild spaces are for all peoples, Canadians as well as the Dene Tha. Valuing our ancestors' experience becomes a powerful reason for wilderness preservation as it will help present and future generations appreciate what our ancestors enjoyed.

The conversation ended with James reiterating the message of hope he had shared with Cliff and me in an earlier discussion.

The Dene Tha's Mbe'cho/Bistcho Lake Indigenous Protected Conservation Area (IPCA) project is one vessel where that message appears. For James, the IPCA is a way to engage Dene Tha' youth to acquire the knowledge and background needed in order to work on the land in a fashion that respects traditional knowledge and western scientific knowledge. He imagines a future where the Dene Tha' youth of today acquire those knowledges and assume prominent positions as conservation officers, fish and wildlife officers, archaeologists,

and geologists. He is encouraged by the University of Alberta's interest in developing a curriculum where future conservation officers would be informed with an Indigenous perspective that would complement the usual western approaches. Traditional knowledge would become part of that training.

Wilderness protection, tradition, science, and education all are important pillars in the better world Chief Ahnassay imagines. This is a dream AWA shares and will try to contribute to making a reality. ▲

Bev Mazurick's Species at Risk Note Cards

A Generous Gift for AWA and for the Wild Spaces We Defend

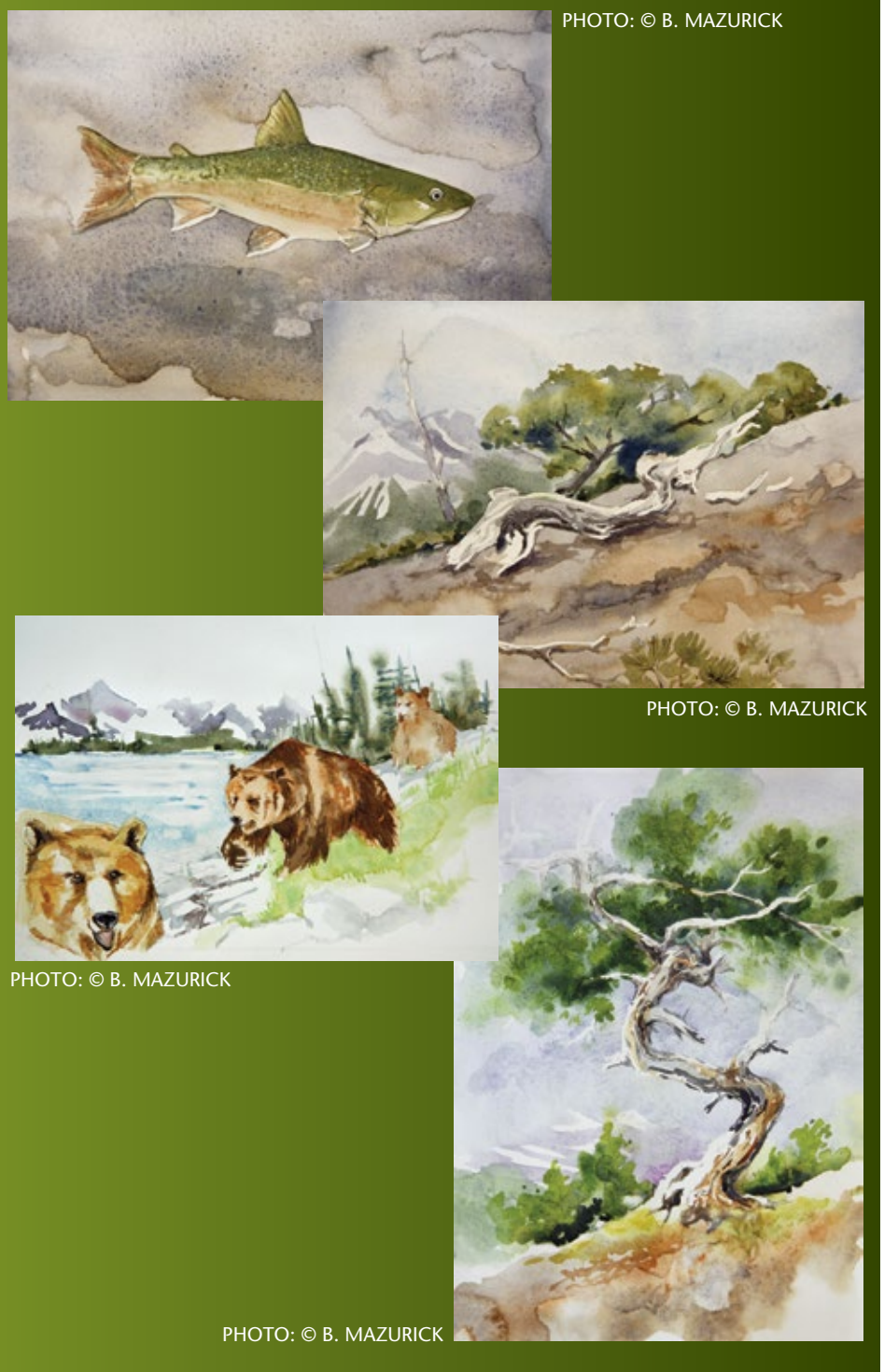
By Ian Urquhart, *AWA Conservation Director*

A week doesn't go by at AWA where our members and supporters don't impress the staff with their passion and generosity. Bev Mazurick, a Lethbridge-based artist with a love of nature and a keen interest in environmental issues, has created her own personal fund-raiser for AWA. She's created a "Species at Risk" note card series. As you can see from these photos, four Alberta species at risk are the subjects of the series: bull trout, grizzly bear, whitebark pine and limber or high country pine.

Bev's motivation for developing the "Species at Risk" note cards was triggered by the news that the Alberta government had decided to open the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies to open-pit coal mining. It's inconceivable to Bev that any person would believe that the relatively short-term financial gain from mining could offset the irreparable destruction coal mining would do. Wilderness areas will be destroyed. Our water resources, already at risk from climate change, will be put at greater risk.

Bev's cards are as stunning as the species coal mining puts at risk. The linen finish cards are 5 by 7 inches and are for sale for \$6 each (plus shipping). The net proceeds of sales will be donated to AWA. Orders may be placed by emailing Bev at bevmazurick@gmail.com or by visiting her website www.bevmazurick.com

AWA thanks Bev for her generous effort to support AWA and our work on issues such as coal mining and species at risk. We hope you'll take advantage of her generosity and support AWA by purchasing Bev's cards. 🍀



A4W Spring 2021 Adventures

Feeling an itch to get out of the house and into wilderness?
Happy springtime, Wilderness Adventurers!

By Sean Nichols, AWA Program Specialist

It is very often the case when thinking or writing about our adventures, that I start gazing out the window, to the (sometimes) leafy Hillhurst street where you'll find the AWA office and my home-away-from-home. Today as I engage in this ritual, I keep returning to one train of thought:

- Technically those leaves have yet to appear and the tree branches are bare.
- Technically there are still a few dwindling piles of snow, in the shadier spots.

But the sun is shining, my computer tells me its 17 degrees out, and those piles of snow are shrinking fast. There's a pair of running shoes in my backpack and I can't wait for the day to be done so I can get out for a good run. It's spring as far as I'm concerned!

That means that, as I imagine you also are, I'm feeling the annual yearning to shake off the gauze of hibernation and leap

into nature...

For example, I made a quick trip to Banff to take part in Jamie Jack's Strava-based *March Snow Sport Challenge* and while there was definitely still snow left there, you could feel spring in the air, even in the mountains. For reports on all of these past adventures and more check out the "Past Adventures" link at adventuresforwilderness.ca

Speaking of mountains, that's where most of our adventuring has taken place so far in 2021. Jamie led a fun cross-country ski trip around the Mount Shark Loop in Kananaskis.

In early March, Heinz Unger led a snowshoe-hike up the Waiparous Creek canyon in the foothills of the Ghost.

You can read about Christyann's early spring Crocus Hunt. This event, organized to honour the memory of AWA volunteer Margaret Main, was a tremendous success – 10 crocus buds on March 24th!

But of course, that's only the beginning. As always we encourage you to read on - as you'll be sure to find something coming up this spring and/or summer that will sate your own hunger for adventure.

We have several more adventures on deck that I'm super excited to tell you about — but we're still finalizing some details, so can't quite draw back the curtain on them just yet. But keep an eye on the website for updates!

Finally, you can always check out all our photos and stories from 2020 to get an idea of how past adventures have gone (Follow the Past Adventures link on adventuresforwilderness.ca). And, explore the 2021 Adventures link to join, sponsor, or create your own adventure.

Happy Adventuring!

Sean

Upcoming Adventures

Pollinator Power! Take 2!

This Adventure is designed to help you learn more about pollinators and why they need help from us. It is a self-learning Adventure because Covid is keeping us from being together. Last year 65 native bee nesting boxes found homes across the province. This year 112 native bee nesting boxes will find homes through this great Adventure. Your nesting box comes with natural cotton stuffing that our native bees love to nest in, instructions and fact sheets and a way for you to participate in some important citizen science with the Alberta Native Bee Council. We only have 53 boxes left so it's time to get your



sponsors and raise the minimum to participate in this fun adventure soon!

Keep It Wild, Help Us Clean

All summer long: Nathan and Katrina have launched a summer long Adventure that is a cleanup of parks, byways and natural areas throughout the province. This Adventure ran last year too and the need for people like you to help clean up is great. You can help clean up litter and garbage that could harm wildlife and ecosystems. Come on out and spend some time with Nathan and Katrina - throughout the summer they will select locations that are large enough to allow for safe social distancing for picking up garbage. Garbage bags, gloves, sanitizer are provided and they coordinate with the city to pick up collected garbage. Come and join people like you who care – stay for an hour or longer if you like! Details on the Keep It Wild, Help Us Clean Adventure are on the website.

May 29: Ice, Glaciers, Gravel and Oil – Cochrane North Field Trip

Tako Koning promises an adventure filled with things to learn about glacial geology, drilling and oil production and gravel mining

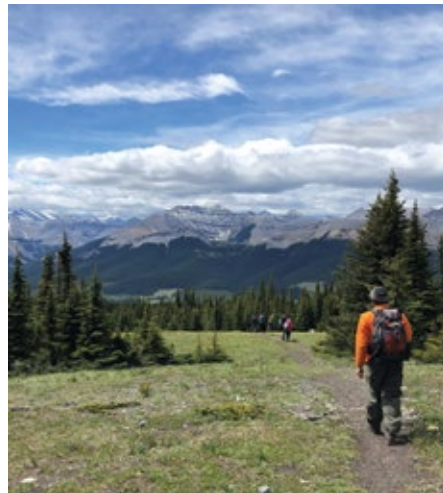


as you explore the Cochrane, Lochend and Dogpound areas.

June 26: Jumpingpound & Hounds Hike

Kate Van Pernis is calling all lovers of mountains, wildflowers, hikes, and dogs!

Join us for a moderate trek up Jumpingpound Summit in Kananaskis. Dogs (on a leash), children, and adults who are children-



at-heart are all invited to enjoy the woods, wildflowers, summit views, and company on this favourite jaunt.

June: The Great Alberta Parks Bike-a-thon 2021

Follow Sean this June as he bikes around Alberta on a 3,500+ km odyssey, visiting the 164 parks slated for delisting by the Government of Alberta in 2020. Sean will be posting regular updates, photos and videos from each park, telling the stories from this emerald archipelago that we came so close to losing.

The trip will end at #164 on the list, the

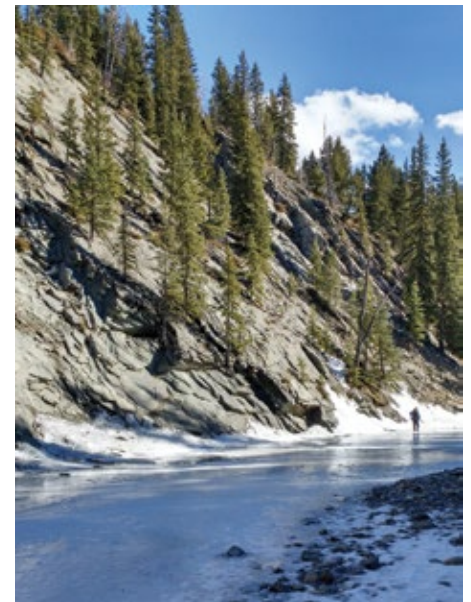
Strathcona Science Provincial Park in Edmonton on Canada Day where we will celebrate the occasion with a picnic luncheon, to which supporters are invited to join in!

Sponsor Sean in support of AWA's work protecting Alberta's Provincial Parks.

Check the website for many more upcoming Adventures – some are already booked and sold out – so don't delay!

What is Adventures for Wilderness?

Adventures for Wilderness is AWA's annual program to engage Albertans in wilderness conservation. We believe an Adventure can be anything from climbing a mountain, to walking by the river, to enjoying the beauty of nature in your own backyard Visit www.adventuresforwilderness.ca to learn about the Adventures this season and how you can support Alberta Wilderness Association. 🌲



Updates

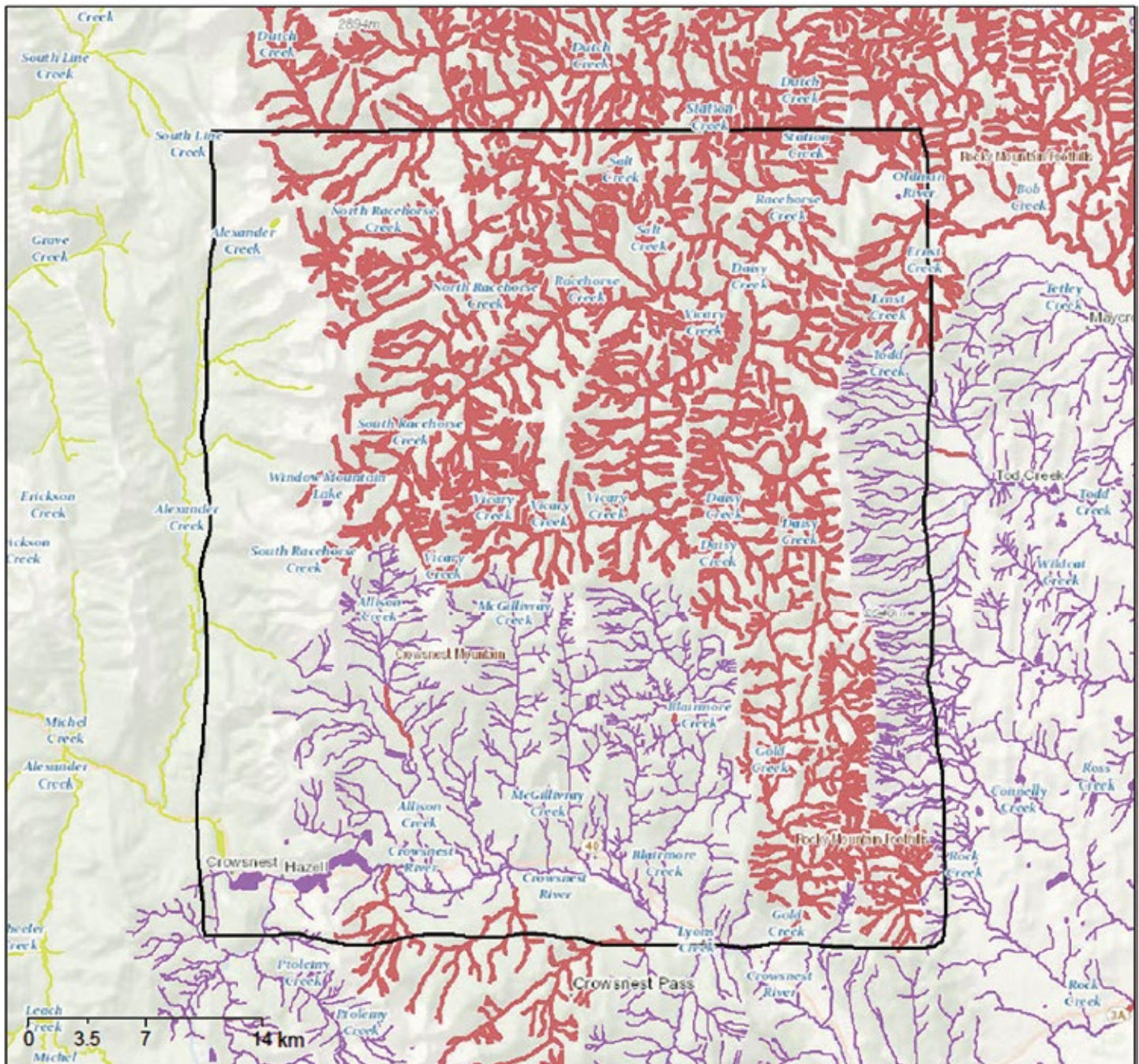
Federal Critical Habitat Order for Alberta Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*)

AWA is pleased the federal government issued a critical habitat order for both the Athabasca rainbow trout population and the Alberta (Saskatchewan-Nelson Rivers)

bull trout population. Athabasca rainbows are listed as endangered under Canada's *Species at Risk Act*; bull trout are listed there as a threatened species. The March 31, 2021 order extends legal protection to the critical habitat of these species.

AWA also congratulates the Timberwolf

Wilderness Society and the University of Calgary's Public Interest Law Clinic for the pressure they put on the federal government to comply with its own legislation. While Ottawa was 22 days late in issuing these orders, this tardiness was far less than was the case with the federal



Critical Habitat for Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout That Would Be Affected Adversely by Montem Resources Chinook Project. Streams identified in red are critical habitat; purple streams are waters where these species have been extirpated. CREDIT: GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. Contains information licensed under the Open Government Licence – Canada.

critical habitat order for westslope cutthroat trout. The latter order was issued 20 months after the legislated deadline to issue that order had passed.

It is plausible, perhaps likely, that the federal government took the action it did at the end of March because of the threat of legal action from Timberwolf. Drew Yewchuk, the Public Interest Law Clinic counsel for Timberwolf, filed a demand letter with the federal government on March 10th. It warned Ottawa that Timberwolf would take legal action to force the Canadian government to comply with its own legislation if the orders weren't issued by April 15, 2021.

For AWA, the federal critical habitat order for bull trout strengthens the need

and the case for the federal government to insist on a federal impact assessment of Montem Resources' Tent Mountain Mine Redevelopment Project in the Crowsnest Pass. Montem's appeal to investors is based on its hope that Tent Mountain will give the company the cash flow needed to proceed with the Chinook project. In Montem's own words: "Our plan is to use the free cash flow from the restart of the Tent Mountain mine to fund the development of the larger Chinook project."

Chinook, sprawling over nearly 10,000 hectares, likely promises to do tremendous damage to the threatened populations of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout immediately north of the Crowsnest Pass. Vicary Creek, Racehorse

Creek, North Racehorse Creek, South Racehorse Creek, Daisy Creek, and Salt Creek are among the streams on the map on the previous page that the federal order identifies as critical habitat for bull trout (all but Salt Creek are critical habitat for westslope cutthroat trout). Since cumulative effects of projects must be considered and since the Chinook project will consume critical habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout AWA believes it's imperative for federal Environment and Climate Change Minister Wilkinson to order a federal assessment of Tent Mountain.

- Ian Urquhart

Alberta's Forests Act and Indigenous Consultation

Treaty 8 First Nations have requested that the Government of Alberta suspend the new *Forests Amendment Act* (Bill 40) so that concerns regarding Treaty rights can be addressed.

The *Forests (Growing Alberta's Forest Sector) Amendment Act* was introduced in October 2020, passed its third reading in the legislature by the end of November, and will come into effect on May 1, 2021. This bill, in conjunction with other recent policy decisions and changes for the forestry sector (e.g. increased annual allowable cut), introduced a number of provisions to "reduce regulatory red tape" and improve industrial access to fibre. Both Treaty 8 First Nations and environmental NGOs are concerned that industrial logging will increase in Alberta's already heavily allocated forests and that a layer of regulatory oversight to protect forest ecosystems is being stripped away. In the absence of meaningful Indigenous and public consultations before the *Forests Amendment Act* was tabled, these concerns were never addressed.

The lack of consultation highlights a

significant gap in Alberta's forest management processes, that there's no written requirement within Alberta's forest laws for the Minister to consult with Indigenous communities or the public about proposed legislative or regulatory changes. Typically, Indigenous and public consultation take place only during the operational planning phase, meaning for individual Forest Management Agreements and Plans. It generally does not take place for broad overarching legislation. It's our perspective that consultation needs to be built into every phase of forest management, starting with the *Forests Act*, so that strong, legally-binding measures to protect Indigenous and community forest values can be put into place from the beginning of the process.

More than 90 percent of the province's annual allowable cut (AAC) falls within the northern regions of the province (North and South Peace, and North and South Athabasca) These regions constitute much of Treaty 8 territories. Despite the obvious importance of these regions to Treaty 8, Bill 40 made no attempt to protect Treaty rights, biodiversity, waters, or forest ecosystems. Under Treaty 8's own laws, these Treaty Nations are

responsible for "ensuring that [their] territories remain healthy and protected for current and future generations to pursue their traditional way of life and livelihood." Changes to forest management could have a significant impact on Treaty 8 territories and rights.

From AWA's vantage point, we suspect the government only consulted with the forest industry, having completed "extensive consultation" with 41 timber companies from across Alberta. This contrasts sharply with the total absence of Nation to Government consultation. "The Province should have consulted with us from the outset on a government-to-government basis to make sure that our rights were protected," said Alberta Grand Chief Arthur Noskey. "Instead, it went ahead and passed the bill into law without talking to us."

It's not too late to change this. Alberta should suspend bringing the new legislation into effect and uphold the honour of the Crown by fulfilling its constitutional duty to consult with and accommodate First Nations.

- Grace Wark

The World's Largest Swath of Protected Boreal Forest is Getting Larger

There hasn't been a wealth of positive news coming out of Alberta Environment and Parks in 2021. One important exception came in February when the province announced an impressive expansion of Kitaskino Nuwenêné Wildland Provincial Park. Created by the Notley government in 2019, the Kenney government proposed to expand this 160,000 hectare Wildland Provincial Park by an additional 143,000 hectares. What government already described as "the largest contiguous area of boreal protected land in the world" promises to be even larger.

The government celebrated this initiative as one that will protect landscapes important to species such as bison and woodland caribou, support the traditional activities of First Nations, and create recreational opportunities.

The habitat value, as well as the size of

this proposed expansion of Kitaskino Nuwenêné Wildland Provincial Park, make it a significant conservation measure. The boreal highlands it will protect will connect with already protected lands in the existing Birch River Wildland Provincial Park to the west. The territory selected for this expansion includes significant range lands of the threatened Red Earth woodland caribou population. From a watershed perspective, it will protect more lands south of Wood Buffalo National Park whose waters flow into the Peace Athabasca Delta. The Delta is one of the world's largest freshwater deltas, supporting globally significant wildlife populations.

The proposed expansion of this 'buffer zone' Wildland Provincial Park is an important step in addressing one of the shortcomings in federal-provincial management of the Peace-Athabasca Delta, as identified in 2017 by UNESCO investigators. More issues remain to adequately manage cumulative impacts and risks from oil sands and

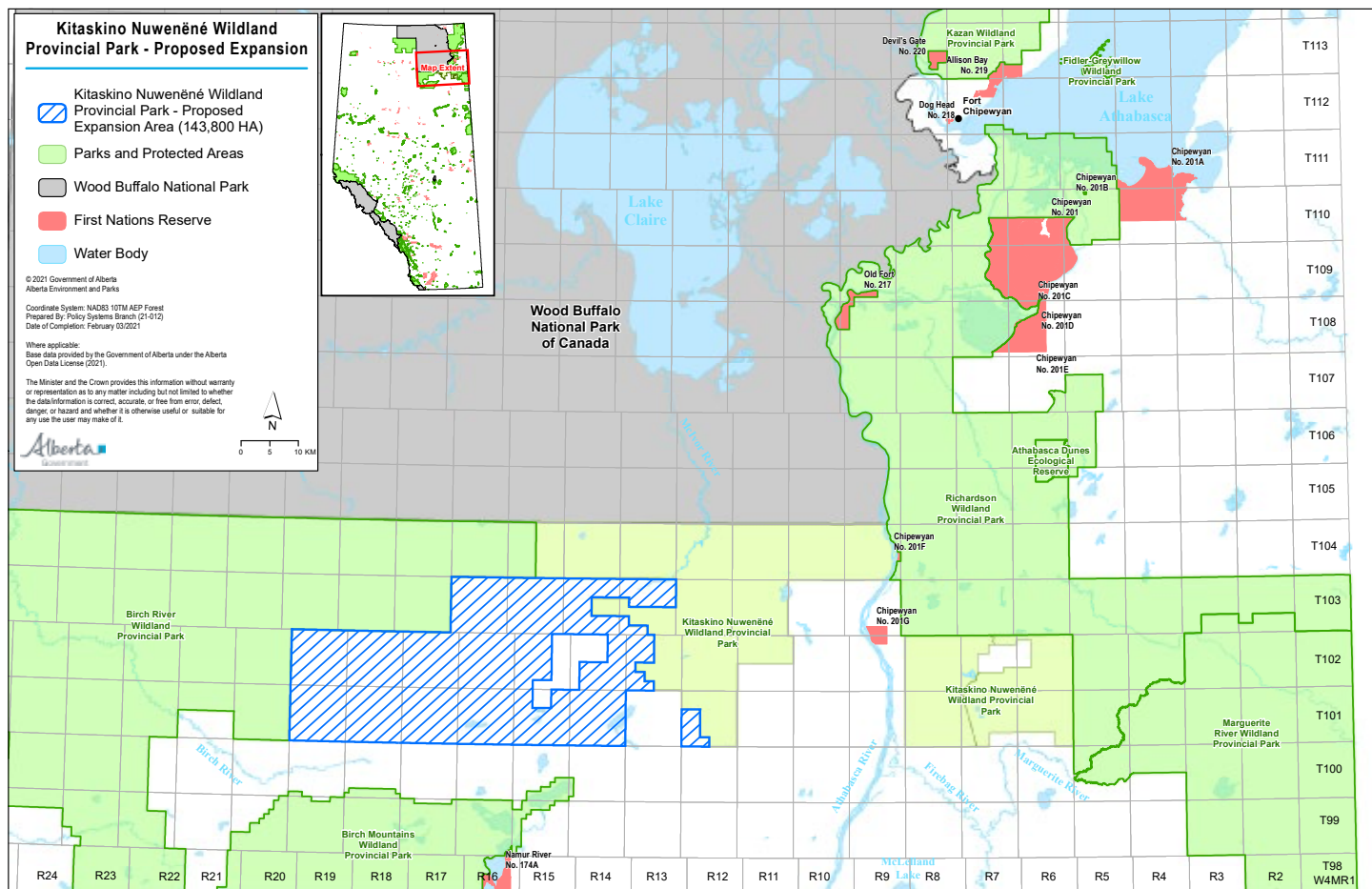
hydroelectric industries to the Peace-Athabasca Delta.

The Mikisew Cree First Nation deserves much of the credit for this important addition to Canada's protected areas network. The Mikisew initially proposed that lands should be set aside through this Wildland Provincial Park. The original Park was intended in part to support Mikisew Cree traditional pursuits.

Industry too deserves credit for this initiative. Both Cenovus and Athabasca Oil Corporation relinquished lands they had leased in order to make this expansion possible. Athabasca Oil Corporation gave up the lion's share of those leases, 95,000 hectares.

AWA is happy to congratulate the First Nations, corporations, and the provincial government for collaborating on this proposed expansion of the Kitaskino Nuwenêné Wildland Provincial Park possible.

- Carolyn Campbell/AWA Staff



CREDIT: GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

Caribou Task Forces and Draft Subregional Plans

In November 2019, Alberta Environment and Parks Minister Jason Nixon announced he had created three sub-regional task force teams to help Alberta's threatened caribou population recover. The task forces are meant to develop plans that will coordinate cutblocks, access routes and other infrastructure to enable sustainable resource development and achieve caribou habitat objectives over time. Minister Nixon stated at the time that, in his support for caribou recovery and a working landscape, he would "work toward solutions that are practical, balanced

and grounded in socioeconomic analysis and respect for our land and biodiversity".

AWA was invited to participate on the three initial task force committees: Bistcho Lake, Upper Smoky and Cold Lake. Board member Cliff Wallis and Conservation Specialist Carolyn Campbell have represented AWA on those committees. Alberta's 2020 caribou conservation agreement with the federal government to finish range plans in five years has added some welcome urgency to overdue Alberta land-use decisions that are needed to support caribou.

In March, 2021 the government released the draft Subregional plans for Bistcho and

Cold Lake. At the time, Cliff Wallis said "there were a lot of good recommendations in the Bistcho Lake Task Force's report to the government." AWA is reviewing the draft plans, and we will encourage our members and the general public to participate and provide some guidance on how to respond in the coming weeks. Carolyn Campbell said "the draft Cold Lake plan includes some valuable measures to reduce and consolidate industrial footprint over time."

AWA will continue to seek enforceable range plans that will make a difference and will help caribou to not only survive, but thrive, in Alberta.

- Christyann Olson

Camping Fees: Breaking a United Conservative Party Election Promise

Words matter. Healthy democratic politics depends on a well-informed public. These are two truths to keep in the forefront of your mind when you consider the provincial government's claims about Bill 64, the *Public Lands Amendment Act*. This Bill proposes a new Public Lands Camping Pass. If the Bill becomes law, as of June 1, 2021 the government's pass must be purchased by any person, 18 or older, who stays overnight anywhere on public land (outside of a campground, provincial park, national park) in a wide swath of western Alberta. This new fee zone covers all public land west of Highway 22/southwest of Highway 43.

The words Minister Nixon endorsed in his April 12, 2021 news release want you to believe the United Conservative Party committed to this pass when it campaigned for your votes nearly two years ago. They want you to believe the pass was announced in the 2021 budget. In other words, there's nothing new about this initiative.

To this end the government's April 12, 2021 news release states: "*This pass was a 2019 platform commitment and was included in Budget 2021 as part of Alberta's common-sense conservation plan.*"

AWA scoured Budget 2021 documents for any mention of this new camping pass. We searched the Fiscal Plan, Ministry Business

Plans, Entity Financial Information, and the 2021-22 Government Estimates. That search came up empty. We couldn't find any mention of this user fee anywhere in those documents...none.

The same result came from searching the United Conservative Party's 2019 election platform. There is no position there suggesting that all users of Alberta's backcountry would be charged a fee to camp in the backcountry outside of official campgrounds...none.

What the 2019 UCP platform committed to was a \$30 fee that only would be assessed to off-highway vehicles. The platform promised that, if elected, the UCP would: "Apply a mandatory \$30 trail permit fee to Off-Highway Vehicles (OHV) and camping trailers to pay for restoring and creating OHV trails and preventing damage in Alberta's great outdoors, and to hire additional enforcement officers."

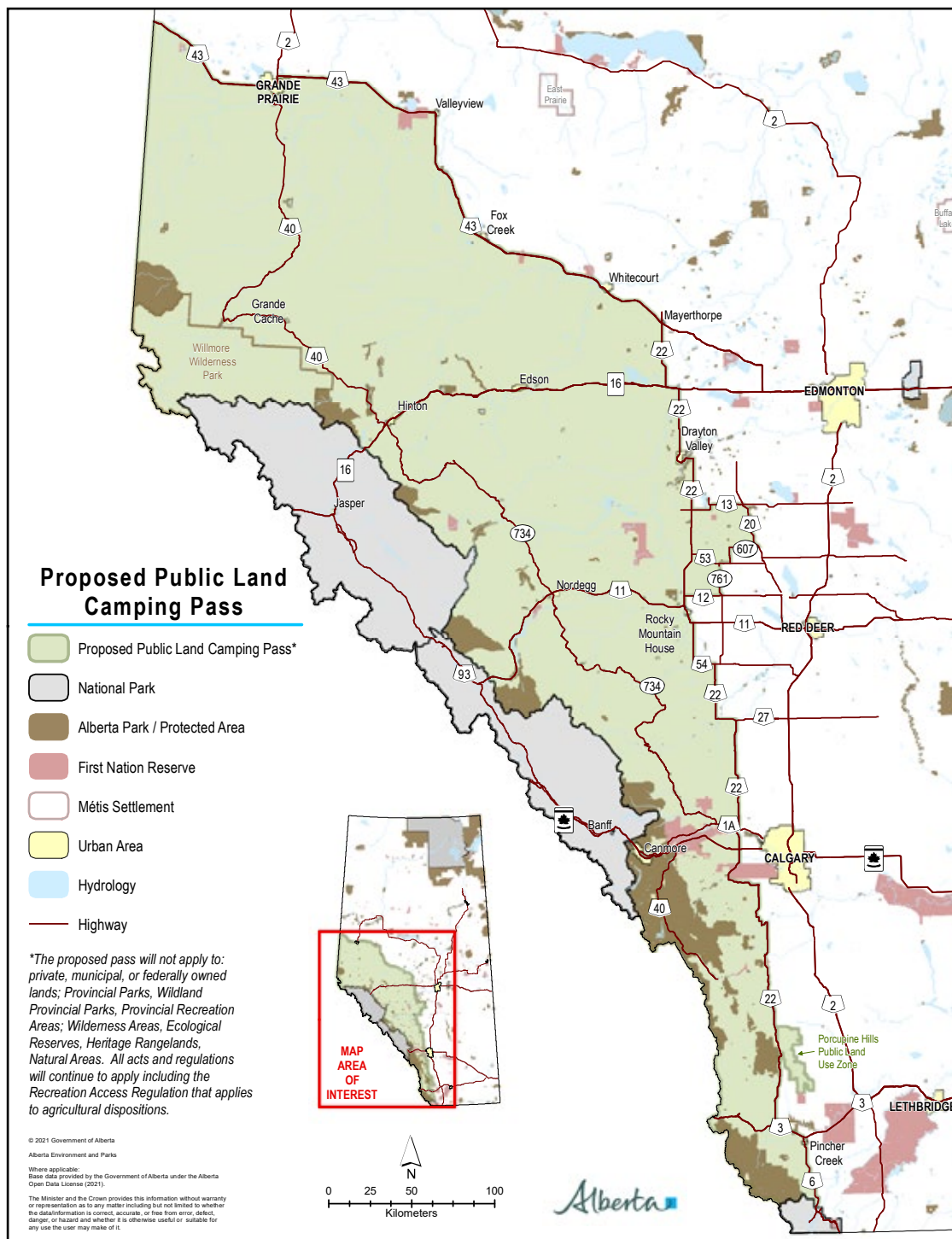
A trail permit fee is mentioned in Budget 2020. There it's described as a "trial" fee of \$30 intended to support the "development, maintenance and longevity of recreation trails on Crown land." The trail permit fee appears again in the 2021-22 Government Estimates. Again, this was a fee that would be charged exclusively to off-highway vehicles and camping trailers. The Estimates described the fee this way: "Revenue collected from Off-highway vehicles (OHV) and camping trailers will be used towards enforcement, education, trail maintenance,

stewardship and community response." It was anticipated to raise \$4.5 million in the 2021-22 fiscal year.

A review of the record suggests powerfully that the proposal for a new Public Lands Camping Pass is an entirely new initiative. It has never been introduced previously in an election platform; it has never been discussed in budget documents.

Misleading people aside, is a Public Lands Camping Pass good policy? AWA doesn't think so. We opposed more park user fees when the government trotted out the idea in a survey last summer. Then the government asked a select group of park visitors what they thought about paying additional fees for activities such as using hiking trails, cross-country ski trails, boat launches, beaches, educational programs for schools, and interpretative programs for visitors. AWA believes now, as we did then, that more user fees threaten public accessibility to parks. When Washington State introduced its Discover Pass (a permit all vehicles required to enter state parks) statewide parks visitation reportedly fell by seven-million visits per year from pre-pass levels. A pandemic seems to AWA to be one of the last times when you want to introduce policies with a potential to discourage people from visiting the outdoors.

Here AWA stands with a significant minority of the people who completed the government's survey on user fees this past



winter. Nearly 50 percent of respondents did not support user fees. AWA is concerned that, with no language to the contrary in Bill 64, this legislation won't be the last time an Alberta government looks to user fees, instead of the taxes Albertans pay, to fund the stewardship of the province's parks and public lands.

The government advertises its Camping Pass as "Improving sustainable recreation, protecting public land." If the government

insists on using user fees to do this it should return to the real promise the UCP made to Albertans in 2019 – slap a \$30 trail permit fee on off-highway vehicles and camping trailers. Damage in the backcountry is much more likely to come from off-highway vehicles than it is from hikers on a multi-day backpacking trip. AWA's multi-year monitoring in the Bighorn certainly offers evidence for this conclusion. A camping pass, by capturing low impact activities such as

backpacking trips, avoids the potentially damaging political repercussions that an OHV trail fee might invite.

For these reasons AWA believes Bill 64 should be withdrawn. If a user fee in aid of sustainable recreation and protecting public land is introduced AWA hopes the government will take a hard look at where the threats to the integrity of our public lands come from and act accordingly.

- Ian Urquhart

What is Adventures for Wilderness?



What is Adventures for Wilderness?

Adventures for Wilderness is AWA's annual program to engage Albertans in wilderness conservation. We believe an Adventure can be anything from climbing a mountain, to walking by the river, to enjoying the beauty of nature in your own backyard. Visit our website to learn about the Adventures this season and how you can support Alberta Wilderness Association.

www.AdventuresForWilderness.ca



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