

## Recreational Access Recommendations for the Bighorn Area May 2002

### Context

The Bighorn Advisory Group was asked to provide recommendations<sup>1</sup> about recreational access into the Bighorn area, which includes prime protection zone, critical wildlife zone and multiple use zone within the Eastern Slopes planning framework. The work of the Advisory Group was initiated after the Local Committee working on the Bighorn Candidate Site under the Special Places program noted that "the major outstanding issue within the Bighorn is management of access" and made the following recommendation to the Alberta government:

*An Access Management Plan shall be prepared for the Bighorn Backcountry, excluding only the Job Lake and Panther Corners forest land use zones... Upon completion of the ...Plan, [it] shall be implemented through a Forest Land Use Regulation.*

The Local Committee also noted that:

*... there is a land management strategy covering the Bighorn (Eastern Slopes Policy and the IRP) that has protected the land and resources of the area and will continue to do so.*

Management of recreational access into the Bighorn is a challenge because a majority of the area is designated as prime protection zone under the Eastern Slopes policy. The Advisory

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of the terms of reference and the discussion and consultation process that led to these recommendations, please refer to the report by Equus Consulting Group Inc. entitled "Discussion and Consultation Process Leading to Recommendations of the Bighorn Advisory Group."

Group recognizes that the intent of this zone is to "preserve environmentally sensitive terrain and valuable ecological and aesthetic resources." The Advisory Group notes there is less need to restrict recreational access in the portion of the Bighorn that is zoned for multiple use, but are concerned about the impacts of increased access in portions zoned as critical wildlife habitat and prime protection.

Integrated Resource Plans approved in the 1980s describe guidelines for appropriate use of the area. Forest Land Use Zone (FLUZ) regulations were implemented to support these policy guidelines in some portions of the Bighorn; however, they were not applied to the entire area. Over the past 15 years, increased recreational demands negatively impacted some areas within the Bighorn. Many trails and camping areas are showing signs of overuse, and congestion is an increasing problem in staging areas.

The Bighorn Advisory Group worked within the policy direction established by the "Red Deer-Nordeg Integrated Resource Plan" and "A Policy for Resource Management of the Eastern Slopes, Revised 1984." They are most concerned about protecting the prime protection zone. This area protects the sensitive and beautiful "high country" and the source waters of the Red Deer and North Saskatchewan Rivers. However, this area is also a highly valued recreation area for Albertans, and merits investments to ensure that it is protected while remaining a valued place for people to visit. Education of users about the importance of protecting this area is essential. Increased management of recreational access, and increased investment in appropriate staging areas, trails, camping sites, and reclamation sites will be necessary if recreational use of this area is to continue.

## Recommendations

1. There must be legislation changes to establish regulations that will support effective management of recreational access and use in the Bighorn.
2. There must be adequate resources to ensure that regulations can be effectively enforced. The Advisory Group supports programs to involve citizens in monitoring and enforcement, but cautions that the provincial government must also have adequate resources in place. The Advisory Group supports the use of relatively high penalties for infractions as a deterrent to unacceptable access (e.g. entering prohibited areas, going off-trail, damaging natural sites, etc.).
3. User education is essential. Every person entering the prime protection zone should be well aware that they are entering highly valued and protected lands and that they must use "minimal trace" methods for travel and camping. There should be clear guidelines for "minimal trace" conduct for all recreational users, and it may be necessary, in some cases, to require good conduct through regulation. Guidelines should include desired etiquette among users (e.g. sharing trails, camps).
4. Adaptive management approaches must be initiated and used as the basis for management decisions. This will require development of a process to gather and analyze

data about fish and wildlife populations, natural habitat conditions, watershed integrity or traditional aboriginal sites. There must be a systematic effort to gather information about the resources in the area, and about best approaches to manage recreational activities in the area in a way that conserves the area for future generations. Activities allowed in this area will be restricted or delayed if present levels of activity are shown to compromise environmental integrity.

5. Where major changes are implemented, pilot programs should be established to monitor actual changes and results. A monitoring program that measures specified conditions and outcomes should be established prior to implementation of changes so that baseline data can be collected for comparative purposes. Monitoring must continue throughout the pilot program and the project should be re-visited if there is evidence that undesired outcomes are occurring as a result of the project.
6. There must be a source of manpower and funds for capital upgrading and maintenance of staging areas, trails, and campgrounds. The Advisory Group felt that user groups should be engaged directly in stewardship programs, giving them more responsibility for facility improvements and maintenance, but cautioned that the provincial government must also have adequate resources in place. The Advisory Group also supports the investigation of a potential role for the volunteer, private and municipal sectors in capital upgrading, expansion, operation, and maintenance of key staging areas and campgrounds.
7. The Province should work proactively with users to manage recreational use areas by establishing stakeholder advisory committees to deal with recreation issues discussed in item 8, below.
8. Temporary or permanent closures should be implemented in areas where continued use of those areas will have negative effects on fish and wildlife populations, natural habitat conditions, watershed integrity or traditional aboriginal sites. Government biologists should consider whether hunting or fishing in these areas leads to increased stress associated with other recreational activities. Where changes are necessary, users should be directed to alternate destinations.
  - a) There should be an inventory of recreational facilities (staging areas, trails, campsites) that shows their current condition. Closures and re-locations should be managed within this inventory. A recreational use stewardship group should provide ongoing advice on access management decisions.
  - b) Where areas have deteriorated from over-use, these areas should be restored to natural conditions. This is especially true of areas around alpine lakes. Appropriate measures must be taken to ensure that the damage will not re-occur.
  - c) Where trails or campsites are too close to sites habitually used by ungulates or carnivores, these facilities should be moved or closed. In some cases, it may be necessary to restrict backcountry camping to designated campsites.

- d) Seasonal restrictions on recreational access should be considered where necessary to protect wildlife during critical periods such as pregnancy, birthing and rearing.

## **OHV Access**

OHV access was the most discussed recreational issue during the review process. Advisory Group members recognize that OHV users value access to this area. However, the group was divided on how to accommodate OHV use: some favoured allowing OHV use in multiple use zone only, while others would also allow OHV access into the prime protection zone on designated trails. The difference of opinion is based upon the following:

- Some members believe that OHV use in the prime protection zone is specifically prohibited by existing policy. Other members believe that designated trails would be consistent with existing policy.
- Some members believe that OHV use causes damage to terrain and disruption to wildlife and people in areas they access. Others believe that OHV users will be highly responsible and will be positive contributors to the protection of the area, and the maintenance of trails and facilities.
- A case has been made for treating winter access differently than summer access. Some members believe that winter access is minimally disruptive to animals and terrain, while others do not believe this.
- Decisions about regulating OHV access and activity in the prime protection zone could establish a precedent for decisions affecting other areas along the Eastern Slopes.