

Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association (SAPAA)

NEWSLETTER NO. 29, SEPTEMBER 2013

This Year's Volunteer Conference

On September 13-15, Alberta Parks hosted yet another great volunteer conference. This year we got to visit a truly beautiful part of Alberta, the area around Pincher Creek. It all began Friday, on a warm clear night at the Bloomin' Inn B&B, with a delicious supper followed by Blackfoot Star Stories (Juanita Tallman, Writing-On-Stone Park Interpretive Supervisor), a Cosmic Q&A session (James Van Leeuwen, Astronomer/Astrophysicist) and some star gazing.

After breakfast on Saturday morning we were bussed to Castle Mountain Resort for a Stewards' information session. Coral Grove, Steward Program Coordinator, gave a brief summary of the number of Stewards and Protected Areas. There are 275 Stewards and 57 groups, looking after 139 sites. Most Stewards (81%) look after Natural Areas, and of the areas with stewards, 81 are recognized by an Order-in-Council (O/C) and 32 still have only a Protective Notation (PNT). 6 Stewards look after Ecological Reserves and 5 are associated with Provincial Wildland Parks. A few Stewards drop out each year and are replaced, but there does not seem to be a great push to extend the system.

Kevin Wirtanen, Acting Manager, Learning and Stewardship Services, then explained that they are still working on an updated Parks Act, similar to previous efforts but much improved and with more consultation with Parks staff and an attempt to meet some of the IUCN criteria for site classification. The public should also be given a chance to comment once it has been brought forward to the Legislature. However, it is very low on the government pecking order, so it is unlikely to come up for the next year or so.

A question was raised about the proposed Designated Administrative Organization (DAO), which may soon govern trails and their maintenance, as Environment and Sustainable Resources Department (ESRD) does not have a mandate to maintain trails. Alison Dinwoodie expressed concern that the names and definitions of various trail types have the potential to be extremely confusing to the general public, and this could make it very difficult to implement and enforce regulations in the future. She suggested that replacing 'Mixed Use Trail' with 'Motorized Trail', and replacing 'Multi-Use Trail' with 'Non-Motorized Trail' would help to avoid confusion.

Another concern that came up was the need to get letters of intent sent to NAs whose leases are about to run out. Coral said she would see what she could do.

There is also a problem with some island NAs (Hastings Lake Islands NA, in particular), which are no longer islands because of lower water levels. Where are their boundaries? Kevin mentioned that with the Land Use Framework planning, there will eventually be a better definition of boundaries etc.

Guy Swinnerton reported that the Beaverhills Initiative to obtain UNESCO recognition has had to re-apply, due in part to changes in the nomination procedure. More detail is required explaining why the Beaverhills is being nominated, the impact of development on its significant biodiversity, native and local involvement and municipal and county support. Other discussions included noxious weed problems, blue green algal blooms, and government poisoning of coyotes in a grazing lease adjacent to a NA. Not all questions found good answers, but the discussion raised awareness of some Stewardship concerns.



Helpful hands made river crossings a lot easier

The Stewards' session was followed by a wonderful outdoor lunch by the river, and an interesting talk about the Crown of the Continent Geotourism Project (Dylan Boyle, Geotravel Consulting, LLC). Then we all dispersed for hikes around the river or for courses on sketching or photography. That evening we were treated to a banquet at the Heritage Inn, and had a chance to applaud the winners of Alberta Parks' annual volunteer awards. This year the winners of the Individual Stewards Awards were **Guy and Noni Swinnerton** (Hastings Lake Islands NA) and **Doug Kielau** (Threepoint Creek NA). **Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition** won the Outstanding Group Steward Award. Congratulations to you all!



Sunday began with an on-bus tour of the Trans-Alta Wind Farms around Pincher Creek. Our excellent guide answered a steady stream of questions with detailed information and understanding. We appreciated learning more about this important source of renewable energy.

Our final stop was at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump World Heritage Site. We toured the world-class museum, watched a remarkable movie re-enacting the buffalo hunt and walked along the cliff top to see the sites where the buffalo were killed. After lunch and many fond farewells, we all headed home again.

These Steward gatherings with Parks staff are great for exchanging information, getting updates on legislation, and dealing with common problems. It was too bad the Stewards' Mini-Conference in the summer had to be cancelled, but staff had a lot more to do dealing with the floods in the south. We hope we can continue with these useful sessions.

Alison Dinwoodie & Linda Kersahw

The View From The Other Side

What does Whitehorse Wildland Park (WWP) look like when viewed from the centre of an active coal mine? This summer we had a chance to find out, when Cardinal River Operations (CRO) arranged a bus tour of the mine areas, and took us to a viewpoint above Prospect Creek valley (see photo below). The dark tree-lined ridge in the distance is Drummond Ridge and behind that lie the Whitehorse Creek hills in the WWP. The access trail to Drummond Ridge runs through the trees on the far right.



Ryan, CRO geological engineer, describes the work to date

Reclamation calls for elk and sheep habitat, with mixed forest on north-facing slopes and more open

grassland for drier south-facing slopes. Steep slopes are also contoured to provide sheep escape routes. If possible, topsoil is stored temporarily and spread in suitable areas to encourage more natural revegetation and greater diversity of species. It is also all home country for grizzly bears.

Hunting with horses has always been allowed, but Off-Highway Vehicles (OHVs) are not permitted at present on the mine site. The reintroduction of OHVs and increased hunting could be very destructive to the mine's reclaimed areas, and by extension will also have serious impacts on vegetation and wildlife in the Wildland Park. The WWP stewards propose that future recreation on the west side of the Grave Flats Road should be limited to non-motorized activities. See SAPAA's June newsletter (#28) for more details of this proposal and a map of the area. Regeneration is very slow at these high altitudes, so it will be a long time before these reclaimed slopes develop into a pleasant, green, biologically diverse landscape. I may not be around to enjoy that in the next 50 years, but hopefully the next generation will have a chance to experience some of the mountain landscapes we have enjoyed in the past.

Alison Dinwoodie

Riverlot 56 Celebrates 30 Years!

On Sunday, Sept 22nd, Riverlot 56 celebrated its 30th Anniversary with displays and guided walks, starting at Red Willow Park in St. Albert. It was a perfect fall day, and lots of people came out to wander along the trails in the lower lot. The Riverlot 56 Society has produced an excellent brochure/trail guide, and their web site (<http://riverlot56.ca>) has lots of information about the area. This natural area is definitely worth a visit!



Another warm, sunny fall day – perfect for a walk in the woods

For more information about other Natural Areas, Ecological Reserves, Wilderness areas and Heritage Rangelands, visit <http://sapaastewards.com>.

Linda Kershaw