

Site Name: **Saskatoon Mountain**

Site Type: **Natural Area**

Status: Order-in-council (OC)

Subtype: Education

PASite ID (Map Ref #): 420

O.C. No. (Land Ref. Manual): 519/95

Site # (Parks Website): 502

Reserved Area: 0.00 ha. (0.00 ac.)

Designated Area: 715.00 ha. (1766.77 ac.)

Total Area: 863.27 ha. (2133.13 ac.)

Additional Protected Areas: see PNT area

Lat/Long Co-ordinates: 55.2257670647 N, -119.289832332 W

Natural Region: Boreal

Natural Subregion(s): Dry Mixedwood

IUCN Classification: II

Operated By: Grande Prairie Co. (campground)/ Parks Division

Info Phone: 780-512-0722 (day use area)/ 780-538-5350

Steward(s) Aug2002: Volunteer(s) 2+

Steward(s) Aug2003: Volunteer(s) 2+

Steward(s) Dec2011: yes

Petroleum & Natural Gas Surface

Access Aug2002: No Surface Access

Day Use Site(s): Saskatoon Mountain

Recreation Activities: Birding, Cross-country skiing, Hiking - front country, Horseback riding, Wildlife viewing, Non-groomed trails

Access: Easily accessible by vehicle

Notes: Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area (7.15 km²) near Beaverlodge is the highest feature on the landscape west of Grande Prairie. Once the site of a military radar base, the site provides expansive views of the surrounding landscape and the Rocky Mountains to the southwest. The 70-metre-high hill with both steep and gradual slopes is an island of foothills forest surrounded by agricultural land. Vegetation includes diverse forests of aspen, balsam poplar, white spruce and birch are interspersed with wetlands and small sloughs. It provides habitat for a variety of flycatchers, warblers and other songbirds as well as mule deer, moose, coyote, snowshoe hare and Columbian ground squirrel.

This site lies in the Boreal Forest Natural Region, Dry Mixedwood Sub-region. The Dry Mixedwood Sub-region is the only Boreal Forest sub-region that does not have excellent representation within Alberta's parks and protected areas network. There are still significant shortfalls in the glacial lakebed, ground moraine, sandplain and sand dune natural history themes. This site was established or expanded as part of the Special Places program (Alberta Parks web site, 2012).

**SASKATOON MOUNTAIN NA:
IS THIS THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME?
(Comments in brackets by Alison Dinwoodie)**

Alberta Parks is currently holding a public consultation on its proposed re-designation of Saskatoon Mountain NA (SMNA) as a Provincial Recreation Area (PRA). This appears to illustrate the way they are dealing with plans for Natural Areas (NAs) in the future. See <http://www.albertaparks.ca/albertaparksca/about-us/public-consultations/archives/saskatoon-mountain-na-proposal.aspx>

The County of Grande Prairie initially wanted to re-designate Saskatoon Mountain NA as a Provincial Park, because off-highway vehicle (OHV) use had increased significantly causing a lot of damage. Management had become more difficult and the NA required a higher level of protection. (Sound familiar? But this time it was the local authority that was pushing for action.)



Wetland at Saskatoon Mountain NA

At that time, local public response did not support these plans, mainly because OHV use would not be permitted in a Provincial Park. (Why should a vocal minority scupper the whole plan aimed at protecting the area and providing more opportunities for other users?)

The County persisted, and public consultation is now underway on a new plan to convert the NA to a PRA, on the grounds that more controls can be put in place under the Provincial Parks Act. (Once again, it's a local authority, not Alberta Parks, that is pushing for change to the more legally controllable situation.)

Recommendations for the new PRA include a designated access trail (DAT) network for OHVs limited to the west side of Range Road 92, where the land is considerably disturbed by previous use. RR 92 bisects the NA. The less disturbed and more ecologically intact eastern side would still be open to low-impact activities like hiking. An OHV staging area would be based at the southern edge of RR 92, allowing access to the OHV DATs on the west. (The less disturbed eastern area is just across the road from the staging area, and OHV

users may be tempted to stray there. It will certainly require monitoring and enforcement to make sure this does not happen.)

The plan provides for inclusion of some previously excluded lands in the centre of the area to create one distinct unit which would allow for more effective management of recreation (and conservation?). This relatively undisturbed land and the current NA east of Range Road 92 have the highest ecological value and so no high-impact development is planned. (A very positive move.)



Incised quad trails on the sandy slopes of Saskatoon Mtn NA

Public responses to a survey carried out by O2 Consulting identified that, apart from extensive OHV damage to various trails, a major negative impact on visitors arises from user conflicts between motorized and non-motorized activities. Other frequent comments related to a lack of clear management and enforcement responsibility. We are told that reclassification from a NA to a PRA will enable more effective management of recreational use by providing a wider range of tools (e.g., campground development, trail designation, signage) that are not accessible or are incompatible with a NA. (Who will effectively monitor and enforce these tools? Parks has neither the money nor the personnel at present.)



More quad damage in Saskatoon Mountain NA

Alberta Parks will have responsibility for managing the new PRA, but will look to the County of Grande Prairie and other stakeholders to assist in operations and facility development, such as a new campground on previously disturbed land. The OHV community and other stakeholders will be expected to help build & maintain designated OHV trails and to assist with reclamation of the many random trails elsewhere in the PRA. (Will stakeholders with vested interests be the only ones involved? Is this the beginning of privatization in our parks under another name?)

Hunting will continue with the requirement that hunters first obtain a firearms discharge permit from Alberta Parks. This was previously administered by Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, which will no longer be involved. (Does Alberta Parks have qualified personnel to oversee this new activity?)

Alberta Parks appears to be promoting this sort of reclassification plan for NAs, because it does not have the legal tools to manage them effectively at present. Suggested zoning changes may look good on paper, but unless they are clearly explained and publicized, they can create further problems. Parks would like to re-classify or get rid of NAs, with or without PNTs, as they are at present, because of this lack of clarity. But without major changes to the Parks Act (which seems to be perennially on the back burner) it seems that they are doomed to fail (if the Bruderheim and Sandhills NA experiences are anything to go by). Better legislation and regulations would be wonderful, but without a significant increase in trained Parks personnel for monitoring and enforcement, not to mention adequate funding, such a positive step would be meaningless.

What can we do to help Parks in general, when so much is at stake? Fill in questionnaires and write your own responses if you don't agree with loaded survey questions. Send in your comments on the Saskatoon Mountain plan as an example - see link above. With respect to your own NA, get your local community on side (as above). Get to know your local councilors, land managers and other authorities. Write more letters (!), particularly to your MLAs and local newspapers. And if you have the energy and lots of friends and contacts, organize projects to initiate or improve a visible project. More public education is needed at all levels. Stewards' reports help to document the state of affairs in protected areas, but more action is still needed, particularly to outside authorities. Perhaps by being proactive, we can avoid the need to be reactive down the road.

Alison Dinwoodie (SAPAA Newsletter Aug 2014)

Images:



Photo - Alberta Parks web site, 2012



