

Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association (SAPAA)

NEWSLETTER NO. 16 MARCH 2007

SUMMER FIELD TRIPS

Mark your calendars!

May 26, 2007. Visit to Big Lake Natural Area and Provincial Park, near St. Albert, to be led by a member of the Big Lake Environmental Support Society (BLESS). For more information, or to register, please contact John Woitenko at 459-0475 or red20@telus.net for details and to register.

June 23-26, 2007. Field trip to Cardinal Divide area (Whitehorse Wildland Park) in the Coal Branch south-west of Edson. Alison Dinwoodie will be organizing and leading this long weekend. Contact her at 437-7183 or adinwoodie@shaw.ca. Look for more details in the next issue of this newsletter.

Another field trip that stewards may be interested in is the Alberta Native Plant Council annual Botany AB field weekend. This year it will take place June 8-10 at the Milk River Ridge north of Lethbridge. Contact Lorna Allen at lorna.allen@gov.ab.ca for more information closer to the date.

OTHER EVENTS

The provincial government's annual **Steward Conference** will take place **September 7-9**, at Crimson Lake Provincial Park near Rocky Mountain House. Stewards, campground hosts and other volunteers will be notified of the details by Coral Grove, Volunteer Steward Coordinator with the Department of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture (formerly Community Development).

SAPAA Annual General Meeting will be held once again at the Kerry Wood Nature Centre, Red Deer, on **October 20, 2007**.

REPORTS

Report on the AGM 2006, held at Hastings Lake Community Hall on October 21

This meeting, a change of venue from Red Deer, was kindly hosted by Peter and Linda Kershaw and their friends in the local community. The theme of the day was *industrial activity in Protected Areas*, and **Doug Bowes** of the provincial government and well-known biologist and conservation advocate **Cheryl Bradley** from Lethbridge kindly volunteered their time to educate us on this important topic.

Doug Bowes, Policy and Land Use Planner, Parks & Protected Areas (PPA), (then) Community Development, spoke first on "Land Use Challenges for Natural Areas." The Alberta government's policy is to honour existing mineral commitments in legislated provincial protected areas, and yet the prime objective of its *Provincial Parks Act* and the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act* is to protect the biological integrity and natural values of these areas. Consequently, there is potential for conflict in land use.

Doug described efforts by the PPA program to reduce the ecological footprint of non-renewable resource extraction, chiefly oil and gas, on Protected Areas in the province. Such measures include a centralized system of industrial referrals (when a company applies for a disposition) that all go through Doug's office (ensuring that the government knows what is going on). Currently, Doug and three staff members deal with over 3000 referrals per year. An increase in the number of staff is planned. Doug said that PPA works directly with industrial interests to ensure developments have as little impact as possible on Parks or Protected Areas. When necessary, PPA consults with Alberta Energy to ensure approvals are appropriately stringent. Better standards for reclamation of well sites are now required,

including reclamation with native plant species. No new dispositions are being issued in Protected Areas established after the Special Places program (1995-2001).

Doug emphasized that, by allowing continuation of existing dispositions in protected areas, PPA has obtained a larger land base than would be possible if land with existing dispositions had been excluded (e.g., Chinchaga). Honouring existing commitments under government policy may include renewing subsurface and surface dispositions, approvals and agreements (a possible source of confusion to affected stewards) but in these cases PPA does not allow surface access. This can result in protected areas becoming ringed by oil or gas wells, the so-called "doughnut effect." Low-impact seismic exploration technology means less disturbance of the land during exploration and fewer dry wells being drilled, again minimizing disturbance.

Doug admitted that more staff is needed in the field to do monitoring, inspection, etc., work that used to be done by Alberta Environment. Improvements in PPA's ability to control industrial use are expected, due to an amendment to the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act*. This allows the government to introduce regulations governing land use in Protected Areas, including regulations applying to dispositions, but it will all take time to have an effect.

The second speaker, Cheryl Bradley, specializes in conservation issues relating to southern Alberta, and has had a 30-year involvement in the management of Rumsey's protected areas. Cheryl presented a carefully thought-out talk, backed by statistics and personal experience, entitled "Industrial Activity in Protected Areas: Good in Theory, Bad in Practice!" She characterized with some humour the three major players in the drama of provincial resource extraction: Alberta Energy, rich, powerful, "bullyish"; Parks and Protected Areas (including, presumably, stewards), meek, grateful for what protection there is rather than subscribing to the culture of entitlement; and Sustainable Resource Development somewhere in between, trying to "do it all" as manager of Crown lands, balancing economic, social and environmental demands.

Cheryl observed that the effect of industrial activity on protected ecosystems depends on three things: ability to control the industrial footprint, resiliency of the ecosystem in question, and government resources to manage and monitor the outcome. She concluded that although exploration itself has little impact, it opens the door to development, which is not well controlled. For example, in Suffield there can be as many as 70 wells per section; in the Suffield National Wildlife Area, there are 16 wells per section, not to mention thousands of km of access roads and vehicle movements per day. Regarding ecosystem resiliency, Cheryl noted that although industry is funding research into rough fescue restoration, results to date are not impressive. Most of the province's protected areas are too small to be resilient. Invasion by weeds remains a problem. Cheryl also indicated the myriad ways in which industry fails to follow regulations or best practices, and the inadequacy of the government agencies to police these shortcomings.

An interesting discussion involving both speakers and the audience followed the presentations. Doug stressed the need for public support of PPA's initiatives, including letting provincial representatives (MLAs) know about issues to do with natural areas. However, stewards pointed out that PPA does not seem to do enough to inform the public, or invite citizens into their confidence. Indeed, there is a moratorium on admitting new stewards for protected areas that have land use conflicts or whose future is uncertain. Liability issues for stewards who might be involved in conflicts are clearly a problem for the government. Doug introduced the government's current initiative for a Land Use Framework, which would look at cumulative activity in the province and direct/restrict development.

During the lunch hour, courtesy of Tony Blake and some of our techno-whizzes, we enjoyed an interesting video developed by the Pekisko Group (several ranchers in the foothills west of Clareview, who belong to the Southern Alberta Land Trust). Copies of this tape are available from the Group.

A birding field trip to Cooking Lake, led by Linda and Peter, rounded out a productive day.

Did you know ...

... that just over 4% of Alberta is in provincially protected areas?

“Existing surface or subsurface commitments within a protected area cannot be used as a basis to access new subsurface rights within a protected area (e.g., whether to access new subsurface deeper rights, new lateral subsurface rights, or additional new rights)? By definition, any new subsurface disposition or subsurface right does not qualify as an existing commitment, as it came into effect after the protected area was established.”

“As the mineral resource associated with existing commitments inside protected areas is developed and depleted over time, it is expected that protected areas will eventually contain no existing mineral commitments.”

Source: Information letter 2003-25, Alberta Energy, September 10, 2003

... that companies may purchase subsurface mineral rights, even though under current regulations they are not allowed to drill? The government gets immediate revenue and the companies buy the right for possible future use. Subsurface mineral sales represent a contribution to provincial coffers of \$10-11 billion per year. In 2006 this is expected to be \$15 billion.

New Strategic Plan for Parks and Protected Areas

As was announced at the last Stewards Conference and at our own AGM, the (former) Parks and Protected Areas (PPA) Division recently put forward a new Strategic Plan as a blueprint for the future. We met in October with Scott Jones, the Manager of the Planning Section, PPA Division, and more recently I attended a meeting with him organized by FAN, AWA and the Grasslands Naturalists. Scott explained that the Strategic Plan had been drawn up as a divisional document, after extensive consultations with staff across the province, but there was minimal stakeholder input because this would cause more delay.

The main concern of the group was that the Plan appeared to be more people-oriented rather than geared towards conserving ecosystems for their own sake, as in the past. As a result, recreation impacts could increase. This change in direction is intended to make the plan more acceptable to politicians, (which accounts for some of the fuzzy wording) and to counter any impression that the public are being excluded from their Parks. PPA is still committed to protection and conservation through their goals and policies, but these were not well-defined. The Federation of Alberta Naturalists (FAN) has recommended that there be clearer definition of terms, such as ‘ecological health,’ ‘cultural heritage,’ and ‘appropriate recreational activities.’ In addition, there is no indication of how the Strategic Plan will be implemented. Glen Semenchuk of FAN suggested there should be definite commitments or links to action plans, with clearly defined measurements of acceptability.

The take-home message for Stewards is to make sure that your MLA, land manager, and PPA staff are kept reminded of the importance of your specific Natural Area and of parks in general, and the threats these areas face unless Government takes more action, and provides more resources to ensure their future.

Submitted by Alison Dinwoodie

Canadian Nature Network

On February 20, Alison Dinwoodie, John Woitenko and Patsy Cotterill met with Gary Seib, Prairie Regional Coordinator with the Canadian Nature Network program. Funded by Environment Canada and Nature Canada, the program involves a national fact-finding mission to determine how the Network can assist naturalist groups with their activities. SAPAA representatives outlined some special difficulties of a network group such as SAPAA, an NGO representing stewards in a government program, and challenged with achieving effective representation and communication on a province-wide scale.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Non-intrusive Activities in Protective Areas

by Alison Dinwoodie, co-steward of Whitehorse Wildland Park

What's in a word? Under SAPAA's bylaws, members are required to be in general agreement with the purposes of the Association. This includes promoting preservation, protection and restoration of the ecological integrity of Alberta's Protected Areas, and using these areas for educational, research and non-intrusive nature-oriented activities, compatible with each individual site.

At SAPAA's last AGM (Oct 2006), the Board was directed to come up with a definition of 'non-intrusive activities,' so that stewards or potential stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas understand what is meant by this phrase. This is not as easy as it sounds, because so much depends on unique site characteristics, such as ease of access, number of users and types of activities, not to mention the ecological sensitivity and size of the site. Ideally, each site should have its own management plan to define its particular policies.

Non-intrusive recreational activities

Leaving aside industrial use, which is another whole can of worms, and dealing only with recreational use, non-intrusive activities can be defined as **"activities that can be sustained without impacting the biological diversity and integrity of an area, or impinging on the enjoyment of other minimal impact users"** (i.e., showing "respect"). (This is my own definition, as are the following comments. Other suggestions would be gratefully received!) This definition is not intended to deny use by the public, but to prevent activities that are incompatible with a particular area.

A number of parameters might be considered when evaluating whether activities are non-intrusive:

NOISE: Any activity that generates sufficient noise to be heard at a distance so that it intrudes on the peace and quiet of a Protected Area is intrusive. Motorized activity is usually incompatible with the enjoyment or study of the natural world, because intrusive noise precludes activities such as listening to bird song, or hearing small noises in the undergrowth, which could be anything from a chipmunk to a bear. *Noise can also be detrimental to wildlife, e.g., birds rely on vocalizations for communication, maintaining normal behaviour; predators may rely on hearing to detect of prey.*

POLLUTION: The deposition of garbage and human wastes should be minimized, and activities that leave waste material behind should be discouraged. Motorized vehicles create air pollution, which is both environmentally and aesthetically intrusive. We cherish our Natural Areas as places to get away from city fumes!

Biological pollution is causing increasing problems through the introduction of invasive species. Weeds may come from increased horse use and contaminated hay. Certain provincial parks specify the use of weed-free hay, and weed-free hay should be used in all Protected Areas where horses are allowed.

EROSION: A non-intrusive activity should *leave little sign of its having taken place*. Many activities can destroy vegetation and create deep ruts and channels that make travel unpleasant and even impossible for other users (a case of "disrespect"). Exposed soil provides habitat for weeds and creates muddy run-off, which can destroy aquatic habitats. Established trails often become wider and deeper with increased use, unless expensive hardening and road-making is involved. Unfortunately, such trails also require continued maintenance.

Because of their size and speed, motorized vehicles have the greatest impact, but mountain bikes can also be destructive. Horses can create incised trails, especially on wet ground, but their trails are usually much narrower, and woody roots are stepped over, rather than torn up, as happens with wheeled vehicles. Large numbers of people (e.g., in competitive events or group camps) are also potentially more intrusive. Trails are often widened by design (e.g., for safety) or by accident (e.g., due to damage or destruction of edge vegetation), or are ignored completely (e.g., in orienteering).

WILLFUL DESTRUCTION: It goes without saying that destructive activities such as vandalism, unauthorised cutting of trees, unauthorised camping or lighting of fires, and dumping of garbage are unacceptable in Natural Areas. These are common problems in many places, but offenders can be subject to fines, under the *Public Lands Act*.

WILDLIFE DISTURBANCE: Hunting, when permitted, should be controlled by the local land manager or Fish and Wildlife officer. Stewards should work with officials to ensure adequate bylaws are in place, with strict “no hunting” regulations where necessary (e.g., in small or heavily used areas).

Dogs should be strictly controlled in areas where they can cause wildlife disturbance. This is particularly problematic where there are large dog populations near urban centres or acreages.

When the removal of plant materials is justified (e.g., berry-picking, cutting of willow whips, seed-harvesting), it should be conducted with consideration for the environment. The Alberta Native Plant Council has produced some helpful wildcrafting and seed collection guidelines that can be viewed on their website at www.anpc.ab.ca

Natural Areas near urban centres or with easy accessibility may require more stringent regulations. Good communication is required so that people understand the purpose of these Protected Areas and the importance of maintaining their natural biodiversity to be enjoyed in the future. Natural Areas are not just public playgrounds!

Role of stewards

Stewards have a major role to play in ensuring that the principle of non-intrusion is recognised and implemented by government, land managers and local people. Stewards can help to persuade these people that appropriate use, rather than abuse or over-development, is the secret to maintaining our Natural Areas for the future! Diligent monitoring and reporting of activities and occurrences in each area can provide invaluable evidence for determining future policies.

It should be noted that Stewards generally consider Protected Areas to be those lands set aside under the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands (WAERNAHR) Act*, the *Provincial Parks Act (PPA)*, (covering Provincial Recreation Areas, Provincial Parks, and Wildland Provincial Parks) and the *Willmore Wilderness Park Act*. However, when the Alberta Government talks about Parks and Protected Areas, it is really referring to two different situations. “Parks” under the *PPA* are more legally regulated and have more funding, personnel, and infrastructure, along with management plans defining their policies, to allow for more intensive recreational use. On the other hand, Protected Areas under *WAERNAHR*, have very little government financial or personnel support. Natural Areas in particular have no other legal protection and, with very few exceptions, no management plans to direct use in these areas.

The latter situation is of considerable concern to Volunteer Stewards, because most of them are stewards of Natural Areas, and often it is only by their efforts that this large number of Protected Areas remains on the Government radar at all. Unfortunately, the public often equates Protected Areas with Parks, and regard both as their public playgrounds. This situation is liable to get worse. With recent department shuffling under the new government command, the **Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture Department** (Minister: Hector Goudreau) was created, with a mandate to “make parks more accessible to the public.” This is an indication of the direction that Parks and Protected Areas are

now heading in. (See also my article in this newsletter on the New Strategic Plan for Parks.) Natural Areas are now under the **Division of Parks, Conservation, Recreation and Sport**, within this new department. Are Protected Areas on their way to being lost in government bureaucracy? If we want to have any truly "Protected" Areas, stewards' (and SAPAA's) activities become even more critical!

BOUQUET

To Linda Kershaw for creating a new edition of the SAPAA brochure, with some assistance from Alison Dinwoodie and Marilyn Shannon. Copies can be made available to stewards and other interested parties upon request.

CORRESPONDENCE CORNER

Tony Blake writes:

"I just finished Part II of Shirley Bray's series in the latest *AWA Wildlands Advocate*:

I must say that we really owe her a debt of gratitude for documenting the volunteer stewards' unofficial history. The story puts so much into perspective for a relative newcomer like myself. Hats off to you and all the other veteran stewards who have remained faithful to the original vision, despite the betrayals and disappointments you have endured through the years."

Editorial note: This was in response to Alison's heads-up about the first instalment in the *AWA Wildlands Advocate*, Dec 2006, Vol 14, #6, of an excellent overview by Shirley Bray of the early days of the Volunteer Stewards program, "the Golden Years", August 1987 - 1993, when it was 'reorganised' under the 'new' premier, Ralph Klein. Subsequent instalments are planned. The website address for the December (Part I) issue is

SAPAA Officers, 2006-2007

President – **Peter Kershaw**
Vice-President – **Hubert Taube**
Treasurer/Membership Secretary – **Marilyn Shannon**
Recording Secretary – **Alison Dinwoodie**
Directors: **Jim Pratt, John Woitenko, Tony Blake**
Newsletter – **Patsy Cotterill, Linda Kershaw**

For more information on SAPAA, please contact Marilyn at 780-438-8071,

mshannon@oanet.com or Alison at 780-437-7183, adinwoodie@shaw.ca.

SAPAA would welcome an additional board member, and is always looking to groom successors for the executive.

Communicate via our ListServe (operator: Rod Olstad)

You can view our Group home page at any time at <http://ca.groups.yahoo.com/group/sapaa>.

To join the ListServe, complete the appropriate box on the membership form. The Group email address is sapaa@yahoogroups.ca. When you receive messages from the ListServ, all you need to do if you wish to reply is to send an email back to everyone via the ListServ. Note that when you send a message, it is automatically addressed to all members of the group. If you wish to respond privately, you must cut and paste the individual's private email address into your email message. If you decide you no longer wish to be part of the ListServe, simply click on 'Unsubscribe', at the bottom of the Listserv messages.

The next instalment of the *Graminoids* article will resume in the spring issue of this newsletter.