

VEGA

NATURAL AREA

Management Plan



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Approval Statement

The Vega Natural Area Management Plan is the official policy of the Government of Alberta for the management of the natural area. It is consistent with the provisions of the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act.

M. G. Barrett

Date March 19, 1999

Morley Barrett
Assistant Deputy Minister
Natural Resources Service
Alberta Environmental Protection

Endorsement

The Vega Natural Area Management Plan is recommended for approval and implementation.

Jim Skrenek

Date Feb 22, 1999

Jim Skrenek, Regional Director
Northern East Slopes Region
Natural Resources Service

Kyle Clifford

Date Feb 17, 1999

Kyle Clifford, Area Manager
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Ken Kroetsch

Date April 16, 1999

Ken Kroetsch, Conservation Officer
Natural Resources Service
Barrhead District

The team responsible for preparation of the management plan included Kyle Clifford, Ken Kroetsch and Elaine Nepstad, with help from many others. Jim Black, Northern Environments Landscape Architects LTD., prepared the Trail Map.

Thank you to the many people who participated in the planning process, particularly those local people who through dedication and persistence have achieved protection for the Vega Natural Area.

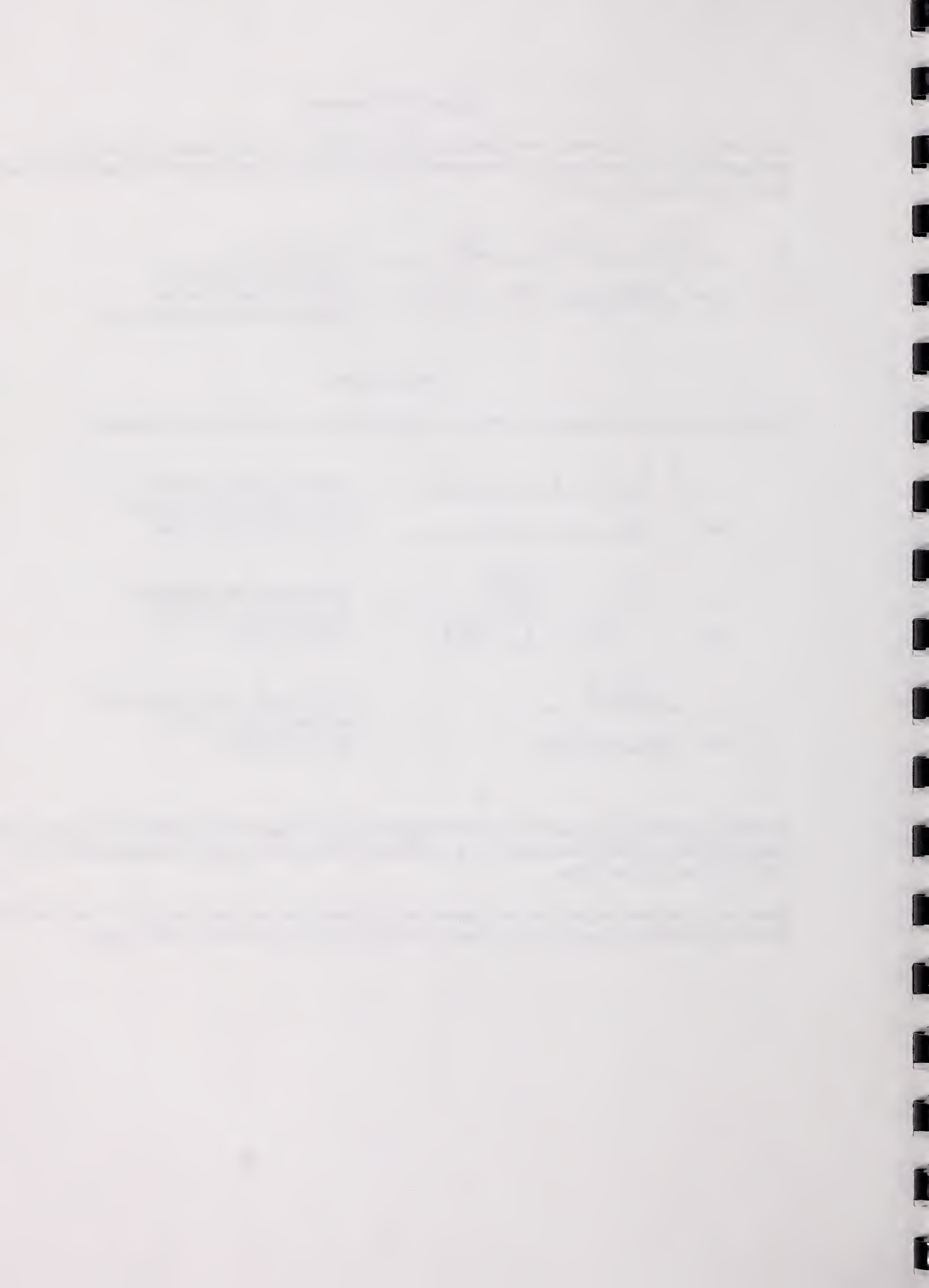
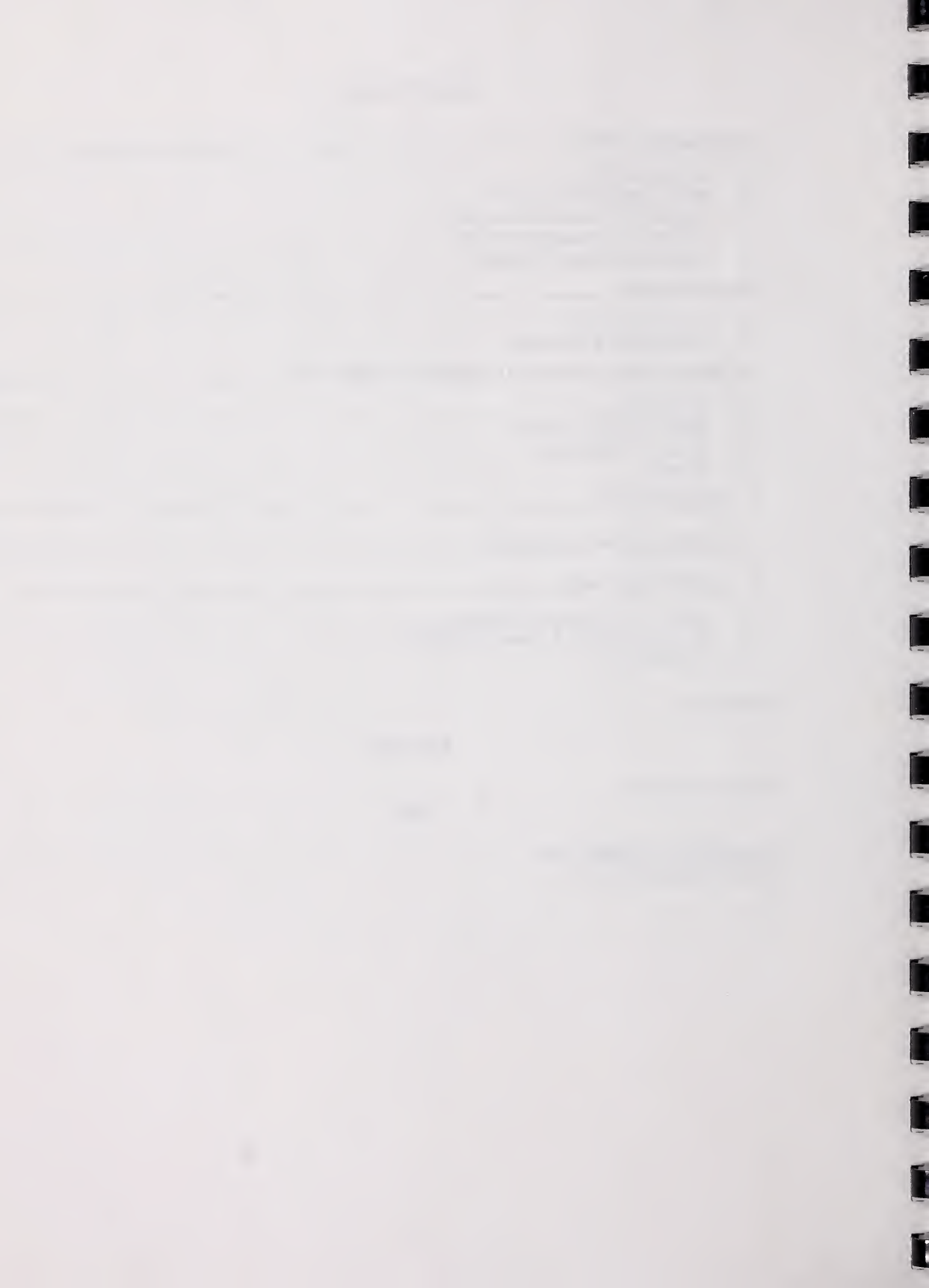


Table of Contents

1.0 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 BACKGROUND	1
1.2 WHAT ARE NATURAL AREAS?	1
1.3 PURPOSE OF VEGA NATURAL AREA	3
1.4 PURPOSE OF MANAGEMENT PLAN	3
1.5 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS	3
2.0 OVERVIEW	3
2.1 LOCATION/ACCESS	3
2.2 BIOPHYSICAL RESOURCES	4
3.0 OBJECTIVES AND MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES	4
3.1 PROTECTION	4
3.2 HERITAGE APPRECIATION	6
3.3 OUTDOOR RECREATION	6
3.4 TOURISM	7
4. DISPOSITIONS	7
5. SURROUNDING LAND USE	7
6. ADMINISTRATION	7
6.1 ROLE OF VOLUNTEER STEWARD	7
6.2 ROLE OF NATURAL RESOURCES SERVICE	8
6.3 PLAN REVIEW	8
Bibliography	9

Appendices

Permitted Activities	10
Maps	
Athabasca River Sandhills Map	2
Map of Vega Natural Area	5



1.0 Introduction

Vega Natural Area was designated by the Minister of Alberta Environmental Protection in February 1997. It protects 80 hectares of the east side of the Athabasca River valley about six kilometers southwest of the Vega Ferry Crossing.

1.1 Background

In 1988 a planning process was initiated to resolve a number of land use issues in the Athabasca Sandhills area. This planning process resulted in the Athabasca River Sandhills Local Integrated Resource Plan (LIRP 1994) and the Athabasca River Sandhills Access and Protection Plan (1997).

The LIRP laid the groundwork for management of crown land in the Athabasca Sandhills. It divided the area into zones ranging from prime protection to multiple use.

The Access and Protection Plan addressed the issues of protection and recreational use within the LIRP area. It identified five areas that satisfied a range of protection and recreation objectives, defined their boundaries, and outlined their appropriate use (see Athabasca River Sandhills Access and Protection Plan Map).

The five areas are:

1. The *Holmes Crossing Sandhills Ecological Reserve* provides the highest level of protection to preserve the nationally significant sand dunes, and allows only foot access for low impact recreational activities.
2. The adjacent *Holmes Crossing Forest Land Use Zone* has a lower level of protection and permits recreation activities not allowed in the reserve, such as trail riding and snowmobiling.
3. Farther east along the Athabasca River, the *Fort Assiniboine Sandhills Wildland Provincial Park* protects a large area of sand dunes, a variety of wetlands, and associated

vegetation and wildlife. It provides opportunities for backcountry recreation, with minimal development. No motorized activities are allowed, except for on one connecting snowmobile trail. The wildland provincial park is on the south side of Secondary Highway 661.

4. The *Timeu Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area*, on the north side of this highway, provides a site for off-highway vehicle use.
5. *Vega Natural Area* is a relatively small site that protects a section of the valley, provides a panoramic view of the Athabasca River, and allows nature-based activities on foot. Before its designation it had been a candidate Natural Area.

This management plan provides more specific management direction for Vega Natural Area.

1.2 What are Natural Areas?

Natural areas are "areas selected as representative, special or sensitive natural landscapes and features of the province which are set aside to protect their natural values and provide opportunities for nature appreciation, education and low intensity recreation" (Alberta Environmental Protection 1995).

Natural areas are currently designated under the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act. They can be designated for purposes of conservation, recreation, education or a combination. **Vega Natural Area has been designated for conservation purposes.**

Natural areas are one of several categories in the spectrum of protected areas. These categories allow for varying levels of protection and use in Alberta's protected areas. Collectively they achieve the four broad objectives that define the mandate of the recreation and protected areas program. For Natural Areas these objectives are:







Protection

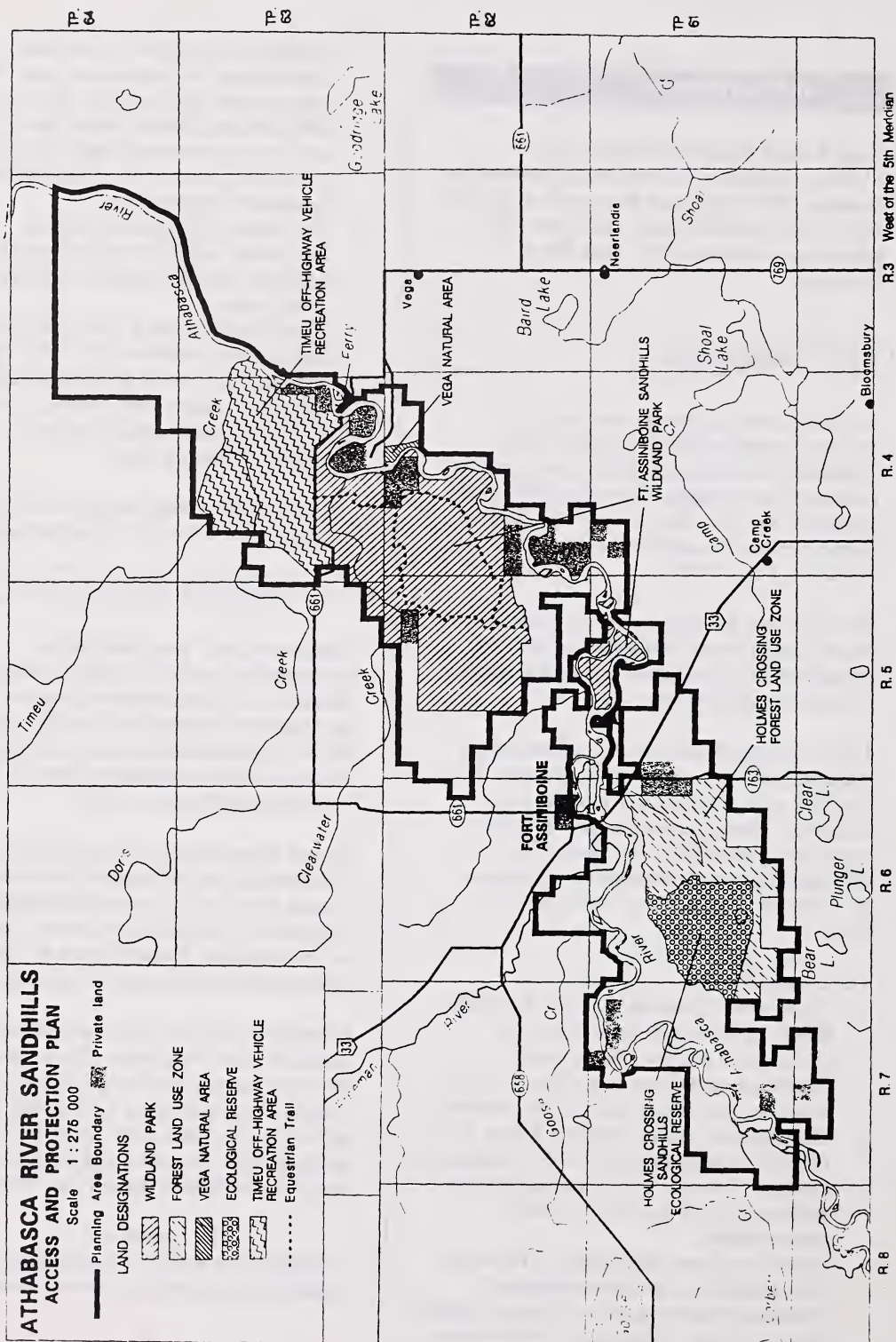
To protect provincially, regionally and locally significant representative, special, sensitive or

Scale 1 : 275 000

Planning Area Boundary Private land

LAND DESIGNATIONS

-  WILDLAND PARK
 FOREST LAND USE ZONE
 VEGA NATURAL AREA
 ECOLOGICAL RESERVE
 TIME OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE RECREATION AREA
 Equestrian Trail



scenic natural landscapes and associated flora and fauna.

Heritage Appreciation

To provide opportunities for unstructured exploration, enjoyment, understanding and appreciation of Alberta's natural heritage.

Outdoor Recreation

To provide a land base for low intensity, day use, nature oriented outdoor recreation in which facilities are kept to a minimum.

Tourism

To provide a land base for a variety of ecotourism activities.

1.3 Purpose of Vega Natural Area

The Vega Natural Area is designated by policy as a conservation natural area.

The management intent of the site is:

- To maintain the natural diversity, ecological processes, native species and habitats in a portion of the Athabasca River valley; and
- To permit foot access to the natural area for a range of recreational activities compatible with the primary intent of protection.

1.4 Purpose of Management Plan

This management plan directs the protection and use of Vega Natural Area for up to ten years from the date of its approval. It describes the area and provides objectives and management guidelines for its protection and use.

Since Vega is a conservation natural area, the focus will be protection of the natural resources. Visitor management will emphasize providing information and education to users to prevent damage to the natural resources.

1.5 Public Involvement Process

In May 1997, an implementation committee met to discuss a process for the development of management plans for the designated areas identified in the Access and Protection Plan. This committee was composed of stakeholders who had been involved throughout the planning process for the Athabasca Sandhills area. The committee decided to hold a series of meetings, open to the public, to discuss management strategies for each of the areas. A public meeting to discuss the management of Vega Natural Area was held in Fort Assiniboine on August 27, 1997. All the public meetings were completed by the end of August 1997.

Subsequently, a draft management plan for Vega Natural Area was prepared by Natural Resources Service and sent to those who attended the public meeting and to the members of the implementation committee for review.

An open house was held on April 30, 1998 to give the general public an opportunity to review and comment on the plan.

When the public reviews were completed and comments from the public addressed, the plan was sent for approval to the Department of Environmental Protection.

2.0 Overview

2.1 Location/Access

Vega Natural Area is located at the east end of the Athabasca River Sandhills area. It encompasses a section of the valley on the east shore of the Athabasca River, about six kilometers southwest of the Vega ferry.

It is accessed by Secondary Road #769 north of Barrhead for 29 kilometers, west on Secondary Road #661 for about 8.5 kilometers, and then south for about 2 kilometers to a parking area.

This last road forms the east boundary of the natural area.

2.2 Biophysical Resources

Vega Natural Area is within the Central Mixedwood Subregion of the Boreal Forest Natural Region. In this subregion, aspen is generally the dominant forest cover with white spruce and balsam fir occurring in mixedwood stands. Stands of balsam poplar frequently occur with aspen on moister sites. Wildlife is diverse, particularly in mixedwoods and shrublands associated with wetlands.

The dominant feature in Vega Natural Area is the Athabasca River valley. Terraces in the valley are covered by stands of mature balsam poplar. Second growth aspen with scattered stands of jack pine cover the sandy uplands.

The Athabasca River forms the western boundary of the natural area. Here the river is gently meandering around numerous islands. North of Vega Ferry the valley deepens and the river widens.

Wildlife such as bear, moose, deer and wolves use the river valley as a travel corridor. Bald eagles are frequently seen.

3.0 Objectives and Management Guidelines

The following objectives and guidelines provide management direction for the protection and use of Vega Natural Area. The guidelines are developed using an ecosystem-based management approach, an approach that tries to look after the land in a responsible way that sustains its ecosystems.

3.1 Protection

Objectives

- To prevent degradation of the natural area

- To allow natural processes to continue without interference, except for wildfires, and forest insects and diseases

Discussion

In general, the policy is to let “nature take its course” in a Natural Area. Interference with natural processes will be kept to a minimum, with exceptions. For instance, due to the small size of the natural area and the impact fire would have on the surrounding lands, forest fires will be suppressed.

Vega Natural Area has had some disturbance in the past. Sand has been removed from at least two areas, and the sandpits have not been reclaimed. There has been some seismic activity in the northeast corner. The steep banks have been used for dumping garbage, but work crews have removed most of the debris since the site was designated.

Management Guidelines

Wildfires will be suppressed in the natural area. The site is not within Land and Forest Service protection area, so fire suppression is the responsibility of the County of Barrhead. Fire detection will be from the Vega Lookout.

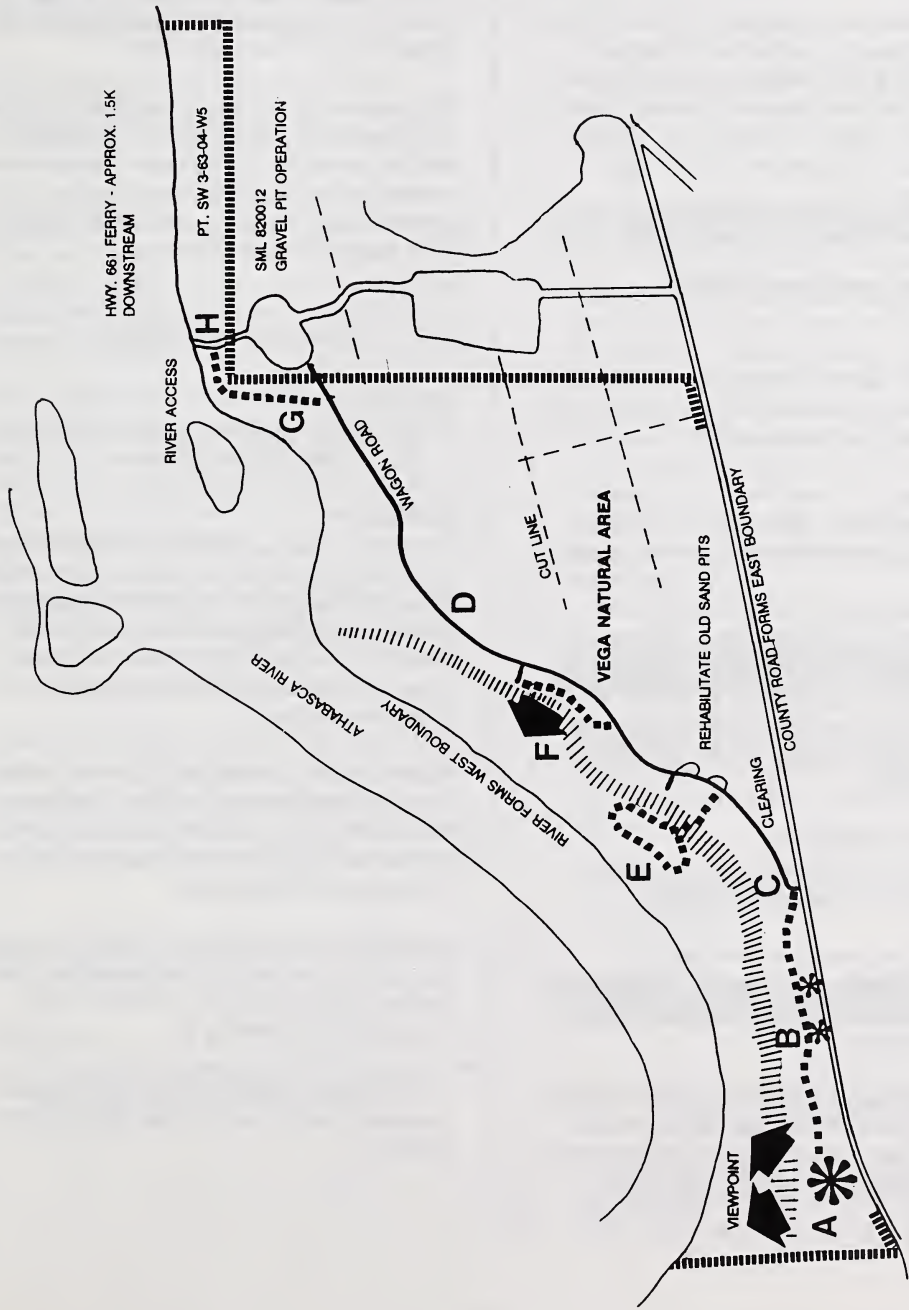
The banks and terraces of the Athabasca River are subject to slumping and natural erosion. This is a natural process and will not be interfered with.

The area will be monitored for further illegal garbage dumping, which if found will be reported to the County of Barrhead Bylaw Enforcement Officer.

Environmental Protection staff will enforce applicable legislation, for instance public lands legislation that prohibits tree cutting, littering and soil extraction.

At this point non-native vegetation has not been located in the natural area, but if found it will be removed.

Further removal of sand will not be allowed in the natural area. Natural Resources Service will reclaim the sandpits when resources are



- LEGEND**
- BOUNDARY
 - EXISTING WAGON ROAD
 - NEW TRAIL (CLEARED ONLY)
 - EXISTING CUT LINE
 - ESCARPMENT
 - VIEW
 - WET AREA ON TRAIL

- A** VIEWPOINT OF ATHABASCA VALLEY. PROVIDE TURN AROUND/PARKING FOR 3 VEHICLES, GRAVEL TRAIL TO VIEWPOINT, BENCH, DECKING AND INFORMATION. SIGNAGE, INCLUDING AT ESCARPMENT.
- B** CONSTRUCT 2.5M WIDE, CLEARED ONLY TRAIL. CONSTRUCT 2.5M WIDE, CLEARED ONLY TRAIL. BLOCK ACCESS TO EXISTING TRAIL WITH BOLLARDS OR WOOD BOLLARDS. PROVIDE GATE FOR MAINTENANCE VEHICLE ENTRY.
- C** EXISTING OLD ROAD. MAINTAIN IN CLEARED CONDITION. POTENTIAL 2.5M CLEARED ONLY TRAIL TO LOWER TERRACE.
- D** POTENTIAL TOP OF ESCARPMENT TRAIL. GOOD VIEWS.
- E** DELINEATE TRAIL TO BYPASS GRAVEL OPERATION.
- F** ACCESS TO RIVER ON EXISTING ROAD FROM GRAVEL PIT.
- G**
- H**

Overall Concept

1. Minimal development with emphasis on viewpoint. Provide vehicle control for existing wagon road and clearing.
2. All other development - low priority.



**VEGA NATURAL AREA
TRAILS MASTER PLAN**



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December 1998

available. Funding assistance for this reclamation project may be sought from other sources.

If wildlife become a problem to users of the area, Natural Resources Service should be notified.

The viewpoint overlooking the Athabasca River is a unique feature, as there are few such viewpoints with public access. Across the river one can see private agricultural land and the Fort Assiniboine Sandhills Wildland Park. Every effort will be made to protect the aesthetics of this viewpoint.

3.2 Heritage Appreciation

Objectives

- To allow the opportunity for unstructured exploration, understanding and appreciation of the Athabasca River valley

Discussion

Heritage appreciation includes interpretation, environmental education and public information.

Generally there are no formal interpretation services in a Natural Area. Use of the area for environmental education is generally encouraged as long as impact is minimal. Public information signs and brochures that describe the area and tell visitors about its intended use are appropriate.

Management Guidelines

No formal or informal interpretative services will be offered in Vega Natural Area.

Groups are welcome to use the area for environmental education purposes. Please notify Natural Resources Service if a large group is planning to use it.

Signs that include a map and description of the Athabasca Sandhills area and a description of the Vega Natural Area have been prepared and will be installed at the parking area at the viewpoint.

Boundary signs will be maintained at strategic points around the perimeter of the natural area.

“Foot Access Only” signs will be posted at access points to the natural area.

The Vega Ferry is a logical point to offer information about the natural area. A sign locating the viewpoint and describing the view of the valley will be located there.

No research is presently occurring in the natural area, but research is welcomed that would further knowledge of biophysical resources and management of protected areas. Anyone interested must apply for appropriate approvals from Natural Resources Service.

3.3 Outdoor Recreation

Objectives

- To provide opportunity for non-motorized day use recreation activities

Discussion

Presently a small parking area at the south end of the natural area allows room for two vehicles to park off the road. A barrier has been placed between the parking lot and the edge of the riverbank. Directly below the parking area is a steep escarpment, and the river cannot be accessed from here.

The viewpoint from the parking area provides one of the best panoramas of the Athabasca River in the region. Directly across the river is private land, which is surrounded by Fort Assiniboine Wildland Park.

An old trail angling northwest follows the top of the bank and eventually joins an existing trail leading down to the river. This trail is not connected to the parking lot.

A Trail map has been prepared that describes proposed improvements to the site (see map on page 5).

Management Guidelines

Activities requiring foot access only will be allowed in the Vega Natural Area. These activities include hiking, cross-country skiing, bird watching, photography and other low impact activities that can be done on foot.

Hunting is allowed in the natural area. Provincial hunting regulations apply.

The natural area will have only minimal facilities for parking and hiking. No other facilities will be developed in the natural area.

The parking area at the viewpoint will be enlarged to provide turnaround access for 2 to 3 vehicles. The short trail to the viewpoint will be graveled, and a bench for sitting installed. The barrier at the edge of the escarpment will be improved to increase visitor safety.

The old trail will be maintained as a walking trail. The two access points to this trail, one at the gravel road on the east boundary of the natural area, and the other at the existing trail outside the north boundary, will be blocked off to discourage vehicle use.

A trail to connect the viewpoint to the old trail will be constructed when funding permits. The trail will roughly parallel the public road, and may require a couple of bridges.

The existing cutlines in the northern part of the natural area could be tied in to the existing trail along the riverbank. This would provide a more extensive walking trail system through the river valley, and could be considered if use warranted it.

3.4 Tourism

Objective

- To provide opportunities for tourists to view the Athabasca River valley from the viewpoint

Discussion

Tourism is not a primary objective of this natural area. However, the site offers an excellent view of the Athabasca River valley. This could be a feature of interest to tourists, since there are few views of the river valley accessible by vehicle in the Athabasca River Sandhills area.

Management Guidelines

A sign will be posted at the Vega Ferry locating the viewpoint and describing the view of the valley.

4.0 Dispositions

The only disposition in the natural area is for trapping, and this will continue. It is a Registered Fur Management Area. There is no oil and gas activity in the natural area.

Reclamation of the pre-existing sandpits will be undertaken. There were no formally registered dispositions for these sandpits, and no attempt will be made to claim for reclamation. Funding assistance will be sought to help with the reclamation.

5.0 Surrounding Land Use

A gravel pit adjacent to the north boundary of the natural area is leased to three parties - the County of Barrhead #11, and two private leasees.

Private land is on the east and south boundaries of the natural area.

6.0 Administration

6.1 Role of Volunteer Steward

A successful volunteer steward program for natural areas has been in operation for several years. This program encourages individuals or

groups to help with on-site management of natural areas.

Steward responsibilities include assisting departmental staff in monitoring and reporting on the conditions of the Natural Area. They could also conduct mutually agreed upon inventory or research activities, and provide input into the management planning process.

The steward works with department staff by:

- visiting the site at least twice a year;
- observing and reporting to departmental staff any destruction or alteration of the site through inappropriate activities; and
- completing and submitting an annual Natural Areas inspection form to the department.

Other public volunteers will be encouraged to participate in the management of this site. Those interested could contact the Conservation Officer at Natural Resources Service, Barrhead.

6.2 Role of Natural Resources Service

The natural area is the administrative responsibility of Natural Resources Service. Day-to-day management of the site is the responsibility of the Conservation Officer, Natural Resources Service, Barrhead.

Natural Resources Service will work closely with the volunteer steward of the natural area to manage and maintain the site.

6.3 Plan Review

This management plan will be reviewed not later than ten years from its date of approval. However, a review may be conducted sooner if issues/concerns warrant it. The public will be asked to participate in the plan review.

Bibliography

Alberta Environmental Protection July 17, 1995 *Special Places: A Spectrum of Categories Intent and Management*. Draft prepared for discussion of the Special Places Coordinating Committee. Edmonton: Alberta Environmental Protection, Recreation and Protected Areas Division.

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Appendix C

Permitted Activities in Athabasca Sandhills Protected Areas

	Holmes Crossing Ecological Reserve	Holmes Crossing Forest Land Use Zone	Fort Assiniboine Wildland Park	Vega Natural Area	Timeu Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area
Hunting	Not permitted	Permitted	Permitted	Permitted	Permitted
Trapping	Not permitted	Permitted	Permitted	Permitted	Permitted
Snowmobiling	Not permitted	Permitted on designated trails	Permitted on designated trail only	Not permitted	Permitted
ATV Use	Not permitted	Not permitted	Not permitted	Not permitted	Permitted
Hiking	Permitted	Permitted	Permitted	Permitted	Permitted
Equestrian Use	Not permitted	Permitted	Permitted	Not permitted	Permitted
Camping	Not permitted	Permitted in staging area/campgrounds only	Random camping* permitted. Car camping not permitted in staging area	Not permitted	Staging area camping and random camping permitted.
Geophysical Exploration	Not permitted	Permitted	Allowed only for existing commitments	Not permitted	Permitted
Oil/Gas Development	Not permitted	Permitted	Allowed only on leases that pre-exist park establishment	Not permitted	Permitted
Logging	Not permitted	Permitted	Not permitted	Not permitted	Permitted

*Random Camping - an undesignated area used for camping other than the staging area. In the wildland park random camping must be at least one kilometer from the staging area. The intent is to disperse the impacts of camping, and to provide the opportunity for primitive camping experiences.

