Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association (SAPAA)

2025 (Rolling 3-Year) Site Inspection Results

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Executive Summary

This report, prepared by the Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association (SAPAA), provides a cumulative analysis of site inspections conducted between 2023 and 2025. It focuses on the condition of Alberta's WAERNAHR (Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas, and Heritage Rangelands Act) sites, continuing the stewardship legacy despite the 2019 suspension of the formal provincial program.

Key Findings & Site Conditions

Overall Health: Approximately 80-85% of inspected sites maintained a "Good" or better naturalness score, indicating they remain largely undisturbed.

Degraded Sites: Roughly 15–20% of the sites showed significant disturbance. The Redwater River Natural Area is the most degraded, plagued by illegal shooting ranges, bush parties, and severe Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) damage.

Primary Pressures: The most frequent human-caused disturbances include:

- **OHV Misuse**: The leading cause of soil erosion, vegetation loss, and trail braiding.
- **Infrastructure**: Legacy pipelines, roads, and wells facilitate unauthorized access.
- **Human Activity**: Garbage dumping, vandalism, and bush parties.
- **Biological Threats**: Invasive plants and animals.

Methodology & Citizen Science

SAPAA utilizes a Site Inspection Report (SIR) form containing 36 questions to collect consistent data. A critical evolution in 2025 was the integration of iNaturalist.ca which has contributed over 28,000 observations from 2,000 observers, providing species-level evidence to support general site assessments. Most inspections are conducted by volunteers during personal travel, underscoring the importance of aligning stewardship with volunteer interests.

Conclusion

While many of Alberta's protected areas retain high ecological value, they face localized but severe abuse from irresponsible recreation and dumping. SAPAA calls for renewed government investment and active monitoring to protect these legacy resources for future generations.

Who is SAPAA and What is WAERNAHR?

This is the third annual Site Inspection Report (SIR) summary provided to the responsible Minister(s); they are the 2023 Plus 2024 First Quarter Site Inspection Results and the 2024 (Rolling 3-Year) Site Inspection Results.

This and the previous reports are prepared by the Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association (SAPAA). SAPAA was formed in 2000 as a non-profit initiative, with the aim of supporting government stewardship.

How SAPAA Got Here

Changes in occupational health and safety regulations, as well as insurance issues, regrettably caused the government to pause the program around 2019. Even prior to this, the province stopped recruiting new stewards and did not replace those who retired. Some site maintenance and site response has been continued at the request of stewards, but regular communications and conferences ceased. In 2023, the Alberta Government decommissioned its online site inspection reporting form.

SAPAA has since continued as a non-profit and maintained its membership. It strives to work with GoA officials to coordinate activities and ensure that results are useful and relevant. This report is an example of this: interested SAPAA members visit sites, on their ***own time and at their own expense***, and report on the state of Alberta's natural areas.

Who Is WAERNAHR

Although SAPAA members are passionate about all environmental systems in Alberta, our particular interest is in those covered by the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands (WAERNAHR) Act. While all of Alberta's Crown land is important, WAERNAHR is the traditional purview of SAPAA. Although the Crown no longer includes sites with administrative protection under this umbrella (e.g. those having protective or consultative notations, PNT and CNT), SAPAA continues to include these areas.

WAERNAHR Has a History

SAPAA thanks the Alberta Government for sharing forty years of site inspection data. While private information was redacted (e.g. steward name, phone numbers, emails, etc.), the remaining data is intact. This longitudinal data provides invaluable comparative information.

What is iNaturalist

iNaturalist.ca is the Canadian portal of the global iNaturalist platform—a bilingual (English/French) community-science hub where people record, identify, and share observations of wild plants, animals, and fungi.

Anyone with an iNaturalist.ca account can upload photos and records of plants, animals, fungi, and other organisms they encounter during visits. These observations create a more detailed ecological record than could be captured through the SIR form alone.

The system is part of a national partnership and it feeds directly into biodiversity research and conservation decision-making. Whether the Canadian version or not, iNaturalist is an example of using technology to support citizen science.

One of the features of iNaturalists is the ability to filter observations according to multiple criteria such as a geographic location. This is done by loading into iNaturalist GIS-polygons defining a particular area. Some polygons are large (for example, Canada is one such delineation) while others can be a few metres square. If not already existing, SAPAA has loaded all WAERNAHR sites into iNaturalist including PNT and CNTs. These individual polygons are then grouped into an umbrella SAPAA project.

By integrating iNaturalist information into a report, SAPAA can better document biodiversity and invasive species, and provides evidence that can be reviewed over time. A Site Inspection Report pairs general site condition reporting with specific species data via iNaturalist.

Who Visits These Sites?

Most site inspections have been relatively short, typically lasting only a few hours to a half day and with two multi-day visits. Given that the median size of SAPAA sites is under 300 acres,, this short time on the ground is still considered sufficient to provide a valid assessment of overall site condition.

Some individuals include site inspections as part of their holiday and travel plans. Most individuals submitting a report visit a site due to other interests such as birding, botany, etc. This highlights an important lesson for stewardship programming: volunteer contributions are often supported by personal interests that align with site visits. Recognizing and supporting these overlapping interests is a critical feature for a volunteer stewardship model.

Which Sites Were Visited?

Because current SAPAA members live in and around Edmonton and Red Deer, this is where most of the site inspections are clustered.

First Ascents, Problem Children, and Favourite Destinations

As of writing, nearly 90 sites have no recorded visits. Given the moniker, ‘first ascents’, these sites may be remote, hard to reach, or simply overlooked.

A few sites are emerging as needing consistent revisits. The poster child for this is Redwater River. The subject of a CBC news story in early 2025, Redwater hosts an illegal shooting range, bush parties, and extensive ATV damage. A neighbour lamented the challenges and the indifference shown by both the local police and the government of Alberta.

Calculating Three Years of Data

SAPAA provides cumulative results over the past three years. This report includes all observation reports submitted to SAPAA by December 31, 2025. 2023 was a partial year and its site inspections were rolled into the 2024 collection. As a result, 2024 site inspections will be included in the 2026 report, but not in 2027; accordingly, 2025 site inspections will be used in the 2026 and 2027 reports, but not in 2028. 135 Site Inspection Reports were submitted between June 2023 and January 2026, covering 83 distinct protected areas.

Caveats, Cautions, and Limitations

The findings in this report should be interpreted with appropriate caution. Inspection coverage varies by year, site, and contributor, and differences in visit timing, duration, and reporting effort can influence what is recorded.

For example, year-over-year changes do not necessarily indicate that a disturbance or species was absent in a given year, but may instead reflect variation in inspection effort. The results should therefore be understood as a practical and conservative baseline based on observed and reported conditions, rather than a complete inventory of all site features, disturbances, or species present.

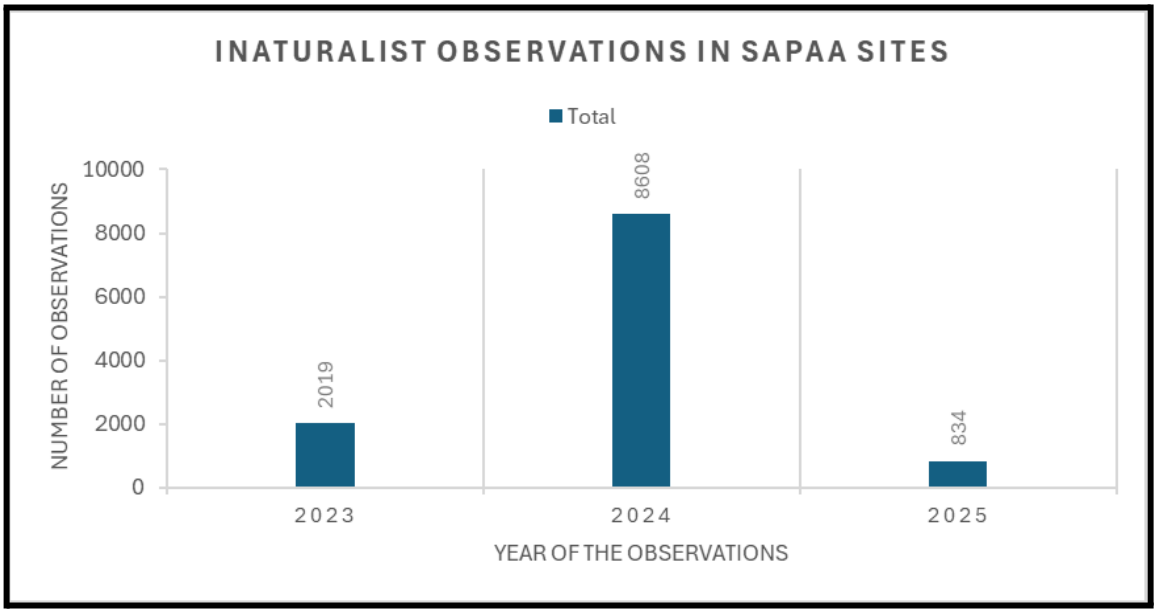
In addition, iNaturalist observations confirm presence rather than abundance, and some measures, including Naturalness Ratings, remain subjective on purpose. Finally, the data collected reflect SAPAA's best effort limited by available Time, Talent, and Treasure (money).

Overall, How is WAERNAHR Doing?

Most protected areas are in relatively good condition. More than 75–80% of Site Inspection Reports gave the sites a naturalness score of Good. This means they were seen as largely undisturbed, often despite facing natural and/or man-made pressures.

20–25% of the sites scored below this level, showing signs of disturbance, with Redwater River standing out as the most degraded site recently inspected and receiving a score of 0 by one inspector. The most common sources of damage were Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) use, dumping, firearms activity, and tree cutting.

28,000 iNaturalist observations have been made by 2,000 observers since the application's inception. Many of the WAERNAHR sites have no observations while others have hundreds or more. For the rolling 3-year time period, iNaturalist documentation peaked in 2024 but reduced in 2025. This is a data collection anomaly rather than being indicative of broader ecological shifts.



Common and Specific WAERNAHR Issues

A Site Inspection Report collects data on what should be in an area and what should not be. Some of the latter include infrastructure from agriculture or industrial development (e.g. a pipeline, road, or abandoned well). Other 'should not be there' observations are noted as a result of irresponsible recreation.

Talking About The OHV in the Room (or Natural Area)

Off-highway vehicle (OHV) use remains the most common human disturbance affecting Natural Areas. While OHVs can provide legitimate and sustainable access to some sites with benefits to other visitors, their misuse or overuse quickly degradates a site. Irresponsible operation can damage sensitive landscapes through soil disturbance, trail braiding, vegetation loss, invasive species introduction, and increased fire risk.

This pattern is reflected in the inspection data, where motorized disturbance was the most frequently recorded disturbance category overall. In 2025, OHV-related impacts were noted in 23 inspections, making it the most observed pressure that year.

At the same time, recent inspections indicate that conditions are not uniform across all sites. Some locations showed evidence of improvement. At Dussault Lake, earlier ATV rutting appeared to be healing, while Halfmoon Lake showed no recent ATV tracks during the 2025 visit.

Infrastructure, Resource Pressures, and Site Access

Infrastructure encroachment was recorded in 20 inspections in 2025, while resource extraction or related use was recorded in 16 inspections. Reported features included roads, cut lines, pipelines, power lines, buildings, and oil and gas wells.

In many cases, these appear to be legacy or pre-existing disturbances rather than evidence of new active damage. However, they remain significant because they can increase access into protected areas and contribute indirectly to other pressures, including invasive species spread and recreational misuse. Their presence did not always correspond with lower Naturalness Ratings, as several sites were still assessed a Naturalness score of Good to Great.

Dumping, Gathering Activity, and Other Human Disturbances

Gathering, dumping, and vandalism-related impacts were recorded in 14 inspections in 2025. These included garbage dumping, bush party sites, informal camping-related impacts, and vandalism.

Although less common than OHV-related impacts, these disturbances remain relevant because they contribute to cumulative site degradation and are often associated with easy site access.

Invasive Species and Biological Concerns

Invasive and feral species can devastate or at least degrade an ecosystem as well as cause losses to agriculture. Reports frequently noted their presence. iNaturalist provides an additional line of evidence by supporting species-level observations within SAPAA protected areas.

SAPAA expanded its data collection focus to include collecting information on invasive plant or animal species in a natural area. This is done through a comment field in addition to iNaturalist for species confirmation. Observation examples included Canada thistle or creeping thistle, wild caraway, clovers, field scabious, dandelions, and whitebark pine blister rust. Notable site examples included Riverlot 56, where invasive thistle and field scabious were identified as significant concerns, as well as Upper Mann Lake, Buck Lake Creek, Dussault Lake, and Pine Lake.

The SIR and iNaturalist results suggest that invasive plants remain a persistent pressure across a subset of protected areas.

Overall Pattern

Overall, the 2023–2025 findings suggest that Alberta's protected natural areas are generally retaining their ecological value, but that repeated local pressures continue to affect site condition in predictable ways. OHV use remains the most common disturbance, while invasive species, access facilitated by existing infrastructure, and localized dumping continue to create additional management challenges. Because these pressures are concentrated rather than universal, future efforts may be most effective when directed toward repeat-problem sites, improved monitoring, and practical stewardship or enforcement responses where needed.

How Do We Know This About WAERNAHR?

SAPAA collects information about the WAERNAHR sites by physically visiting these locations. Each individual brings their own experiences and interests to a visit. Most of the individuals visiting these areas are SAPAA members in addition to unsolicited reports from members of the public. SAPAA knows about the visit because it has received a Site Inspection Report. A report collects consistent layperson information on site condition, visitor observations, and stewardship needs across protected areas.

The questions are reviewed annually by SAPAA and ministry officials. A copy of the current questions is available: 2026-SIR-Questions. In 2025, SAPAA expanded the data collected to include biophysical observations via iNaturalist.ca.

The inspection form has 36 questions. SAPAA continues to refine the questions while sharing results with the Government of Alberta and other legitimate research or stewardship groups.

Inspecting Effort in 2026 and Beyond

In 2025, SAPAA shared with Ministry officials a detailed strategic and operational plan. In summary, this plan recommended that SAPAA's efforts should continue to build on practical activities given the lack of support from the provincial government.

In the near term, this means continuing to strengthen inspection systems, reporting processes, and stewardship partnerships rather than attempting to establish a fully scaled SAPAA-led volunteer program before the required capacity is in place. This approach reflects both the progress achieved to date and the practical limits currently posed by available time, expertise, and financial resources.

Safety is Beyond SAPAA's Reach

The legacy government Stewardship program was placed on hiatus ostensibly due to the challenges of running a safety program with direct-to-Crown volunteers. In 2025, SAPAA developed and finalized an operational and safety program for future volunteer use. While that program was not launched, its development provided critical information about the costs and challenges of running such a program.

Depending on the number of volunteers, the cost to run an Occupational, Health, and Safety compliant program is no less than $25,000 per year for the bare bones option and more than $75,000 for a full complement of volunteers. This assessment was done through a Grant MacEwan University Student Project in the summer of 2025.

$25,000 was to field a minimum of three volunteers and also include the fixed costs needed to safely field a larger complement. $75,000 was based on fielding a larger complement of 15 individuals. In both cases, an honorarium would be paid to defray travel and incidental costs to the volunteer. Technology would eliminate much of the manual processes around managing reports submitted. Other costs include training and potentially contracting out some of the functions to offset a lack of volunteers.

It Takes a Village to Inspect a Site

Because of the costs to develop a cadre of volunteers, SAPAA will broaden inspection coverage by working more closely with peer organizations, interested individuals, and existing stewardship networks. In practical terms, this means encouraging external groups to incorporate protected area visits into their own activities and field programs. Targeted outreach, and the continued development of a stewardship Community of Practice, may all help support this approach.

Better Information Processes and Systems

To help community organizations and existing interested individuals, a priority for 2026 is better information systems that support inspections. This includes refining web-based reporting tools, strengthening data management practices, improving hosting and administrative reliability, enhancing the presentation and visualization of results, and further integrating the SAPAA website, inspection database, and iNaturalist observations.

Better use of recently collected and historical inspection information will support more consistent reporting and allow future field efforts to be directed more strategically.

Beyond Google Forms

For the 2026 field season, SAPAA has launched a web-based online reporting tool that will supplement its legacy Google Form technology. One of the benefits of this tool is for the user to be able to review past site inspection reports as well as upload images. A phone-based version is in development.

A key priority for 2026 and beyond is the continued improvement of the information systems that support inspections. This includes refining web-based reporting tools, strengthening data management practices, improving hosting and administrative reliability, enhancing the presentation and visualization of results, and further integrating the SAPAA website, inspection database, and iNaturalist observations. Better use of historical inspection information will also help identify sites that have not yet been visited, or that may now be due for renewed inspection. Together, these improvements will support more consistent reporting and allow future field efforts to be directed more strategically.

A second priority is to broaden inspection coverage by working more closely with peer organizations, interested individuals, and existing stewardship networks. In practical terms, this means encouraging external groups to incorporate protected area visits into their own activities and field programs. Honorariums, targeted outreach, and the continued development of a stewardship Community of Practice may all help support this approach. In the near term, SAPAA may achieve the greatest impact not by independently building a large volunteer cadre, but by enabling a wider range of Albertans and partner organizations to contribute useful site observations.

A third priority is to continue refining SAPAA's operational and safety framework. A formal volunteer model remains a longer-term objective, current efforts are more appropriately focused on improving safety guidance, training materials, visit procedures, and inspection standards. This will help ensure that contributions from the public and from partner organizations are gathered in a manner that is both practical and increasingly consistent.

Conclusions and Thank You

Overall, 2025 was a year of practical consolidation. SAPAA improved how it gathers, stores, analyzes, and reports information, while also laying the groundwork for future growth through better systems, clearer processes, and stronger integration of iNaturalist and historical inspection records.

Alberta's Protected Areas, together with the Volunteer Steward Program that supported them, represent a distinctive approach to conservation stewardship. A jurisdictional scan across Canada, the United States, and other comparable jurisdictions did not identify a direct equivalent to this model, underscoring its significance as part of Alberta's stewardship legacy.

Unfortunately, the continued misuse of many Natural Areas is not a point of pride. While the protected areas are intended to be lands able to promote sustainable biodiversity and responsible recreation in tandem, some sites have instead become near-exclusive playgrounds for owners of OHVs or convenient garbage dumps.

This should be of major concern for the people of Alberta and its government. These areas are legacy resources set aside for current and future generations, and are not built for abuse. Improved monitoring and stewardship, and the active investment of government, will help to allay these concerns.

Annexes and Further Reading

Document Information

Title	Details
Document Title	SAPAA - 2025 (Rolling 3-Year) Site Inspection Results
Principal Author	Frank Potter, President SAPAA *SAPAA wishes to thank the following Grant MacEwan University students who researched and compiled the first draft of this report: Aditi Gujar and Nolan Gray*
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Links and Definitions

The following links have been shared with Ministry officials. Nevertheless, a timely reminder and update can be helpful:

- SAPAA Website: SAPAA; List of Protected Areas.
- Definition of Protected areas and interactive map: Protected Areas | SAPAA.
- Current Questions, Rationale and Data Gathering.
- The 2023 Plus 2024 First Quarter Site Inspection Results
- The 2024 (Rolling 3-Year) Site Inspection Results
- Site Inspection Form: Site Inspection Form | SAPAA
- Guns, CBC, and Natural Areas – 2024-11-15 | YEG Ville

Annex 2: List of Inspections

Ministry officials have access to the 'SIR-SAPAA' online system which contains all current and historical site inspections: Site Inspections.