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Copy: WALKING THE LAND/Ghost wilderness
access issues

My accent throws most people, they assume I'm straight European, although occasionally New Zealand or South Africa are suggested as alternatives. I was, in fact, born in Toronto, hopped around this country until ten years of age and then my father worked for an engineering company supporting NATO enterprises in France and Germany.

When I re-rooted back in '99, I began to learn the layout of hiking the mountains and the high wild places in particular, courtesy of a Calgary company the Fit Frogs (Motto: "We keep you hopping so you don't croak.") run by Lori Beattie – a resolute lady of horrific fitness often referred by media connections as the Queen-of-the-Inner-city-hike. She is: she absolutely knows every staircase in Cowtown and every hill and park besides. At weekends we'd car pool and leg it to Kananaskis Country, know where to park legally at trailheads, hike all day with people who knew the terrain and first aid besides, and depending on the terrain gradient, even manage to gasp about what wilderness connections did for the soul.

When I came to do my own equestrian guidebook research, I remembered Lori's lessons and added a few million questions of my own, and then put the package together, concentrating largely on what is known as 'designated' trails. In K-Country these have trailhead parking, and pretty much at every critical junction is a green coloured map on a stout post, with a little dot indicating where you are. Even better, as you enter K-Country are information kiosks, stocked with the wonderful easy-to-interpret Gem-Trek maps, countless very readable guide and reference or historical books and, yep, the odd occasional cuddly toys of bears and wolves. Even better is the priceless resource of the Friends of Kananaskis staff, who will pull out maps, describe suitable trails, tell you of wildlife activity and anything else besides.

For modern day society, who wants an outdoor experience but a warm bed by nightfall, the gift and foresight of Peter Lougheed's Kananaskis Country for this generation and seven hence, to use the old environmental creed, is immeasurable.

The Ghost, where I spent three days last week, is very different and has a magic of infinite space, wild horses, the eagle migration highway and until a few years back, the biggest mountain sheep horns known in North American hunting records. The area lies NW of Cochrane, beginning roughly 23 kilometres up the Forestry Trunk Road. For many years known for raves and out-of-control

parties, and OHV and ATV traffic (off-highway-vehicles and ATV quads or motorcross bikes - those numbers that come back after weekends heavily mud plastered that you'll see at gas stations re-fuelling), few hikers or equestrian users recently have cared to venture into this unique wilderness area.

In 2005 Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) took a gamble and set up an independent committee of what's recognized as 'stakeholders', inviting in representatives of hunters, climbers, hikers, outfitters, grazing lease holders, ATV and OHV users, and a few more besides....a large and apparently unwieldy and what had the potential to be an antagonistic assortment of those with opposing interests or connections up there in the Ghost, and asked them to set up a ground-breaking access management plan and to establish themselves as a reputable advisory committee. This, after moving all motorized transport out of particularly sensitive eastern slopes watershed areas around the privately owned TransAlta access road, the South Ghost, and apart from one access road to what is known as Junction 39 up in the North Ghost, right up to the totally motorized free area, the Ghost River Wilderness Area.

The machinations of what the committee's achieving are, sadly, largely a mystery to the general public; the website is a sod to locate and still not updated since 2006. Which is a shame because SRD's Roger Meyer and Darryl Johnson have put in extraordinary hours and resolute enthusiasm to keep the trail initiatives moving along. Committee members really do have to commit here, a full-on day per month and a stack of research and networking time besides. Just recently American consultant and former Forestry Service official Steve Ulas came north of the border, for an outstanding three-day seminar on trail sustainability responsibilities. He worked along premises of definitive starting points, staging areas, preferred loops and to undertake trail construction that will be long-term sustainable and well marked.

Bob Bolton, committee Vice-Chair, reckons on over 50 man hours alone on the North Ghost discussions, where climbers want to extend motorized access for another 7 km past Junction 39, towards what are world-class climbing and ice-climbing areas. The Climbers Access Society of Alberta (CASA) have put together a substantial environmental impact study; to allow fish (alleged by one source to be up to 50-70 cm in size) to continue access to spawning grounds, hard crossings are proposed - a sort of submerged bridge that allows the river to pass through unhindered while keeping vehicles from disturbing riverbed bottom silt and stones (for an excellent website and info click onto CASA's at <http://climberaccess.ab.ca>) . The idea sounds great in theory but I rode that stretch last week, and the horses were up to knees and bellies on those crossings, with the current at a ferocious full chat and fast flowing. If you go back earlier on that trail, to where the TransAlta drops down to the Ghost River, the river bed there too constantly changes with flooding and run-off....that day alone we saw three different original road site crossings, all washed out; one 4x4 truck driver decided to leave his vehicle on the bank and hike in from there, while two others chose two random different crossing areas.

An ATV quad trail from identifying numbers 7 to 9 to 81 that we rode has one original trail on the left-hand side so deeply etched that a separate trail to the right has been started; it too is now getting deep and a third abraded trail is beginning – these are all on old cut lines or lumber trails from many years ago, with hideously deep muskeg often alongside, so the idea of re-routing to more sustainable higher locations is indeed a good one.

Also, along the TransAlta itself it's mandatory to have a licensed highway vehicle (ie, with an Alberta license plate and accompanying insurance) – NO quads, no OHVs in other words. The two photographs snapped of a very illegal hillside vehicle and the terrain below it, the soil eroding badly and drifting away in the wind gusts, really demonstrate to me at least how ecologically fragile these areas are. The Lesueur Creek side trail we rode on a gloriously fine day had obvious motor-cross vehicle treads . SRD and the GSMG are working on some really fabulous ideas, but where's the money for manpower to police and ticket offenders?

The Ghost for me always works its magic. Throw in a few trail markers for hikers and equestrian users – from listening to their conversations recently, which after all is about 80% of a conversation! – would undoubtedly entice more users. Not thousands, just a handful, and when these high wild places capture your heart, then you too become a steward of the land. With continued vision, the Ghost is Albertans' next Kananaskis, wilder and perhaps even more unique.

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