

HIKING TRAILS OF JASPER : free for all

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For decades the hiking trails near Jasper townsite have attracted national and international visitors. The broad Athabasca Valley with its forests, lakes, wetlands and grasslands provides a wonderfully varied trail system from gentle short strolls to more strenuous day hikes. Four mountain ranges provide a spectacular backdrop and two major park rivers - the Maligne and the Miette tumble out here to join the Athabasca giving the area its name of Three Valley Confluence.

Over the years trails were informally developed by local Jasper residents to favourite viewpoints and scenic destinations. Many of them were within walking distance of the town centre. In the 1980s Parks Canada recognized 195 kms of these valley trails as 'official' and they were extensively signed so that visitors could enjoy them without getting lost. Once out of earshot of the transportation corridor it was, quite simply, idyllic. This superb trail system has contributed significantly to Jasper's importance as a tourism destination.

Wildlife

However, the valley is also critical wildlife habitat and east-west movement corridor for both prey and their predators. Unfortunately the town – together with the highway, railway, outlying commercial accommodations, campgrounds and other developments – partially blocks much of this corridor.

In the early 1990s mountain bikes began to appear in the park. Covering significant distances in a single outing bikers considered the hiking trail system inadequate for their needs. They – as well as some hikers, horse riders and cross-country skiers – began clearing unofficial trails until another 133 kms of these 'rogue' trails had been expanded into important wildlife habitat and movement routes. Studies showed that species such as grizzlies, wolves and cougars were being pushed further up the slopes on either side of the valley and away from their prey.

User Conflict

With this new sport of mountain biking came user conflict. A Parks Canada document in 2000 stated: 'Tension has always existed among members of different user groups; historically among hikers and horses and more recently mountain bikers with other users' and the Jasper National Park website conceded that 'conflicts between users have become much more pronounced'.

Searching for solutions

In 2000 Parks Canada, realizing it had a problem, stated in the Jasper National Park Management Plan that 'Mountain bike use will only be permitted on designated trails'. It then attempted to designate these trails through a Jasper Trail Stewards 'stakeholder' committee. Local mountain bikers turned out in force and refused to give up any of 'the

trails we love' in spite of presentations by specialists indicating that they were adversely affecting wildlife movement and security habitat.

After five years of fruitless arguments Parks Canada tried another tack: with a \$1.7 million grant from a Government of Canada fund 'to support ecological goals in Canada's national parks' it hired a project manager to head a Jasper Trails Project Committee. Like the Trail Stewards this one was also made up of local stakeholders with a preponderance of mountain bikers.

Now, three years later and probably encouraged by a collaborative agreement between Parks Canada and the International Mountain Biking Association, the Trails Project Committee has released its Concept Plan. Some glaringly inappropriate trails through wildlife corridors will be removed but to make up for losing these 'rogue' trails that were illegally cut in the first place bikers will be compensated by being allowed to use other unofficial trails – many of them through black bear habitat and wolf corridors.

A new trail with two loops is being proposed through critical bighorn sheep habitat above Highway 16 and another one through a wilderness area above Cabin Lake parallel to an already established trail. Yet another is presently under construction from the Moberly Bridge through to Lake Annette on the east side of the Athabasca. All of these trails will further fragment wildlife habitat.

There has been no attempt to resolve user conflict. A 2003 Simon Fraser University graduate study indicated that between 50% and 70% of visitors were either 'in favour or very much in favour' of separating some activities; that was six years ago before mountain bikes had proliferated to the extent that they have today. Instead of designating some trails to bikers as proposed in the Management Plan the Committee recommended: 'to maintain the multi-use character of the trail network. In other words, mountain biking will be designated to the entire network (with a few exceptions)'. The 'entire network' covers 280.7 kilometers.

Parks Canada has approved this plan – probably relieved after nine years and possibly more than \$2 million to finally see the end of it. But the plan is in stark contrast to the other Canadian Rocky Mountain National Parks where mountain bikes are only allowed on designated trails and hikers have a good choice of trails to get away from them. In the US parks bikes are confined to paved roads or fire roads and many parks forbid their use altogether. The prospect of being allowed virtual free run of the magnificent Athabasca Valley trail system in one of Canada's premiere national parks is already starting to attract groups of more than 20 bikers.

The JEA – with members who are mountain bikers – is not against their use on the wider and more suitable trails but to allow them on steep, narrow ones like the very popular Five Lakes hiking trail is asking for trouble. There should be a substantial number and choice of trails solely for hikers where visitors and residents can once again enjoy a quiet wilderness experience without the constant concern of what might be approaching from behind and the danger of being hit by an out-of-control biker. If not, Jasper National Park

could lose its reputation as a major hiking tourism destination. It may also be in danger of lawsuits from injured hikers.

Priority for rehabilitation

Nine years after the start of this frustrating exercise Parks Canada must finally close and rehabilitate the unofficial trails that are adversely affecting the wildlife corridors. All the money spent so far has gone to create new trails or upgrade old ones for multi-use. As long as the rogue trails remain open bikers, hikers and horse-riders will continue to use them and the wary carnivores that are being forced from their habitat and travel corridors will be no better off.

Comment

One of the dangers of trying to solve national park management issues by asking for the views of local stakeholders is that there is an obvious conflict of interest either from economic or recreational points of view. Input from local residents would only be acceptable if management were to set out the terms of reference beforehand reflecting Parks Canada's legislated mandate to give first priority to the protection of nature. In other words state what should not be on the negotiating table for discussion.

Right now stakeholder committee members are faced with a blank page. Everything is open for discussion and in a small community like Jasper it becomes either very divisive or intimidates members to side with an aggressive majority. Parks Canada must get back to managing these national treasures for *all* Canadians.