

Make Bighorn a wildland park

After months of public consultations, the Alberta government has approved the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan, a blueprint for land-use management for the South Saskatchewan River drainage. This is an important step in the identification and protection of a wide variety of southern Alberta landscapes — the eastern slopes, the grasslands and the badlands.

We at the Alberta Hiking Association (AHA) applaud the four new and expanded conservation areas that include a new provincial park, the 54,588-hectare Castle Wildland. We hope the transfer of these public lands to Tourism, Parks and Recreation will see a balanced approach to trail usage and management.

Next up is the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan,

now in its public consultation phase.

As hikers, we are interested in the protection and management of trails and hiking opportunities in the North Saskatchewan's eastern slopes in general. The AHA is particularly concerned about the Public Land Use Zones of the Bighorn Backcountry, a 500,000-hectare area east of Banff and Jasper National Parks. This wonderful area represents the closest mountain and foothill hiking available to Edmontonians and those living in the Red Deer area, and we believe north and central Albertans should have the same hiking opportunities as Kananaskis Country provides for Calgarians.

For some time, the Bighorn Backcountry has been a de facto park where literally thousands of Albertans go to

enjoy the outdoors. Unfortunately, it suffers a low profile and lack of investments in recreation by government because of the current designation as a Public Land Use Zone. Anyone who has witnessed the crowded parking at the staging areas and the number of vehicles parked along the highway right-of-way can attest to the area's hiking opportunities and popularity. There is, though, a general lack of signage, out-houses, garbage disposal and trail maintenance.

Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation's most recent full telephone survey on priorities for parks found that 73 per cent of randomly surveyed Albertans believed that increasing the area of Alberta under parks designation is a top priority. Given the growth in Alberta's population and

the pressures that are being brought to bear on this area as a result, the AHA urges the government to provide the resources for the proper management of this area by designating the Bighorn Backcountry as a wildland park. We support the existing designation of motorized and non-motorized trails under the Bighorn Backcountry, as well as ongoing hunting, trapping and commercial uses, and believe that Parks management will result in more coherent management and a better recreational experience for all users. The North Saskatchewan Regional Plan gives Albertans the opportunity to see the establishment of a Bighorn Wildland Park.

David Wasserman and Jane Ross, co-chairs of the Alberta Hiking Association