



# Crown land critical to Albertans

by Gilbert Bouchard

People in Alberta, like the rest of the western world, are obsessed with recreation. Most Albertan citizens have quite a bit of spare time and have a sizable amount of monies to spend on recreational activities. 450 million dollars a year are spent on hunting alone, including ammunition, guiding services, equipment, and the tourism revenue that hunting brings into the province, (which includes food stuff, accommodation, fuel, etc...).

But where do people go for these activities? National Parks? Provincial Parks? Crown lands? Well, all these are correct, but with the growing Albertan population putting pressure on our parks, the overflow should logically spill onto the province's crown lands. Not only do our Crown lands offer a needed outlet for potentially dangerous pent-up energies, they also act as an economic buffer, allowing opportunity for the citizens of the province to return to the land to hunt, to fish or to harvest wood, in tough economic times.

Only 10 percent of our province is critical to the survival of wild hoofed animals and water fowl. Most of that 10 percent is Crown land.

What is boils down to is that the proper management of Crown lands is extremely vital. Vital to every single Albertan citizen. All of us 'own' this wilderness heritage, and should have some say in its upkeep and management, heaven knows we get stuck for the bill. Crown land management may not seem too important now, but a few years down the line when recreational land is in real demand and your favorite picnic spot is 200 miles away and has been converted into a cow pasture you might think differently.

The province divides itself into three zones. The first zone is the white zone: the south eastern corner of the province; privately owned, mainly agriculture. The second zone is the green zone: Crown land; forestry and recreation. The third zone is the yellow zone: most of the Peace River block; sales and settlement, unless better utilized for habitat or recreation. The Peace River block does have some Crown land, land that is fairly easy to get to, unlike most of the green zone which has absolutely no roads.

The government develops Crownland under a multiple use philosophy, in other words, representative development for forestry, agriculture, recreation, and any other interest groups. How well is this multiple use philosophy working? Not very well, in fact it is under fire from a growing number of conservationists, who accuse the government of clearing excessive amounts of land and bending to vested interests, namely agricultural interest. One such conservationist is Eugene Plihal, a recreationalist on the Crown Grazing land Regional Advisory Committee for the Peace River block (the committee is responsible for crown land clearing with in the Peace River Block, some 100,000 plus acres of crown land). Plihal has no faith whatsoever in the multiple use myth.

Plihal states that "recreational land is being swallowed up for grazing. Land is being cleared around lakes, causing erosion, washing fertilizers in the waters,

causing algae buildup and killing the fish and other higher life forms."

Other examples of Crown land misuse include 50 feet wide trails torn through forests and near river banks to "allow cattle to get around"

Present land development laws (for crown lands) are tied to agricultural interests. The original land development laws were intended to benefit both agriculture and wildlife. The Grazing Land Advisory Committee is a prime example of pandering to agricultural interests, 50 per cent of the committee is ranchers, yet only 5 per cent of the province is agriculture related, the other 95 per cent of us are not consulted proportionally about the use of publicly owned Crown land.

Other multiple use practices, such as 100 yard wide strips of forest between fields, smack of conservationist tokenism, and could be detrimental to the animal populations of the north. Due to the decline of forest land several species could already be on the brink of extinction.

Plihal continued to point out other weaknesses in governmental policy, such as only two wildlife officers (and two biologists) patrol over 5000 square miles of wilderness in the Peace area. It's tragic, really tragic." How can the government claim to uphold existing wildlife laws while being so hideously understated.

Again government views wilderness lands as lost income, but other sources disagree. Writer and conservationist Elmer Kerr states that the per dollar value of wild game exceeds the value of domesticated animals (three times more wild meat to be exact).

Wild meat is superior to domesticated meat in other areas: less fat, superior protein content, people with cholesterol problems could eat wild meat, it has more calcium, more vitamin A, thiamine, riboflavin, niacinamine, iron and phosphorous.

With the overall superior quality of wild meat, why is marginal crown land being cleared, thus displacing hundreds of wild animals, to raise domestic species? Pound for pound Crown land could produce more wild meat if left wooded than if cleared and grazed for domestic purposes.

Some sources babble about climax forests, forests too old to support wild life, saying they should be cleared to raise cattle and which, in turn, would naturally recycle the forests. Nice try, but this is a myth. What about the millions of acres burned in forest fires every year? Don't they recycle forest lands? What about the forestry industry, don't they go about chopping trees down? Of course only about 3000 acres a year are being cleared in the Peace River area for agricultural purposes, but if one adds up the lands cleared for forestry, oil wells, and oil exploration, roads, mining, etc., and add this year's total to future years, a crisis will develop within the next decade.

Plus, once crown land is leased to the individual farmer he can do whatever he wants to do with it "except dump nuclear waste on it". One example close to my heart is one of my uncles, who for the last dozen years has been leasing Crown land. He has overgrazed some of his land to the texture of a billiard table, killed trees and plant life up to the shores of the little

Smokey River by neglect. Now he's putting in a request to bulldoze 600 acres of Crown land, right up to the banks of the river.

One government official stated that a "grazing lease has never been revoked". People do whatever they want, milking their leases dry.

One important point that must be mentioned is that all this land being cleared is marginal land, land that is not always economical to clear without government subsidy. Land that I've already mentioned would be wiser and economically smarter to be kept wilderness.

The fact is that there is no longer any unused land in Alberta, little used land, seldom used land, but no unused land. The

age of the frontier is over, Alberta is fast approaching the age of saturation. No longer can we treat our wilderness land with neglect, it is a quickly vanishing resource.

And we, even as university students have an important role to play. After all, in ten years or so this land will be our recreational land, and if you don't want to discover your favorite 4 x 4ing field, or favorite fishing hole surrounded by barbed wire and littered by cow patties then speak up now. Let's pressure the government to change multiple abuse back to multiple use. After all it's our land too!!



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