

Recreational Planning in the East Kootenays of B.C., Canada

- Balance is Everything -

Darcy Monchak, Resource Planner, Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management Golden, B.C, Canada

Overview

The East Kootenay area of B.C. is experiencing steady growth in public and commercial, motorized and non-motorized, recreational activities. Visitors from around the world are mixing with local residents in the backcountry of one of the most spectacular areas on the planet. There are opportunities to manage this growth so that it best maintains a diversified, quality recreational experience, a viable economic, social and environmental future, and so that the growing number of user conflicts are minimized.

The vast majority of land in B.C. and the Kootenays is crown land owned collectively by its people. As such, responsibility for management of this land ultimately rests with its government. In conjunction with the extensive road access infrastructure which evolved through natural resource development (forestry, mining and construction of inter-provincial energy and transportation corridors), the opportunity to access relatively all areas of Crown land in pursuit of recreational activities has increased dramatically over the last two decades. This increased, often unplanned recreational access to crown land has resulted in numerous social and economic benefits to the public and commercial recreational operators. It has also resulted in some negative impacts to the quality of various commercial and public recreational experiences and to environmental issues.

Commercial recreation is recognized as an important economic resource for the Province and local area. The sector is currently growing, and commercial operators are concerned that unplanned backcountry recreation can result in conflicts between recreationalists that will affect their ability to provide a quality experience to clients. This conflict can occur between commercial operators or between the public and commercial operators, and be related to use levels or between non-compatible activities.

The public's use of its crown land base is also increasing. Conflicts between public users often relate to motorized versus non-motorized use. More recently, there is concern by some of the recreational public, that the opportunity to access Crown land is becoming affected by commercial ventures.

Strategic access planning in the east Kootenays has occurred for decades, but only recently has government in conjunction with a broad spectrum of public and commercial stakeholders attempted to resolve existing and pending recreational issues together over such vast areas. The Golden Backcountry Recreation Access Plan (GBRAP), initiated in 1999, and the Cranbrook Recreational Access Strategy (RMS), initiated in 2003, are examples of such planning which establish recreational patterns of use and opportunities throughout thousands of square kilometres.

These are volunteer-driven community consensus-based initiatives. They consider public recreational and access requirements, the need to promote and provide certainty for tourism, and the need to conserve important wildlife habitat for the future. By indicating zones where certain recreational activities can occur, the plans provide a measure of certainty for both tourism development (businesses that rely on commercial recreation directly or indirectly), public recreation, and biodiversity / wilderness values. The plans address recreational use only, as other planning processes deal with forestry and mining issues.

GBRAP as a Specific Example

The Golden area has a high level of outdoor-related commercial and public recreational use, with the potential to have planned growth in recreational activities contribute substantially to the local and Provincial economy and public recreational experiences. These activities currently occur across the full spectrum of terrestrial and aquatic settings, and range from remote backcountry to highway oriented recreational experience activities. Recreational activities include hiking, mountaineering, river rafting, fishing, hunting, camping, boating, skiing, snowmobiling, kayaking, mountain biking and wildlife viewing. This diversity of recreational opportunity is currently sustained because of the variety of developed and undeveloped areas within the area.

The level of tenured and non-tenured commercial recreational activities and the level of public recreational use of the land base have notably increased over the last two decades, and are still increasing yearly. Traditionally, guided hunting predominated, however, heli-skiing, heli-hiking, river rafting, downhill skiing and scenic viewing are now the dominant businesses in the commercial recreation sector. Establishment of the all-season Kicking Horse Mountain Resort is proving to be a catalyst for the establishment of other commercial recreational activities, as well as being a reason for increased non-resident public recreational use of the land base. There has recently been an increase in the level of applications for commercially tenured recreation. This involves proponents who have historically engaged in these activities (such as helihiking and snowmobile tours), to proponents who are seeking approval for new activities such as lodge-based hiking and cat-skiing. Besides this increase in tenured activities, perhaps of even greater contribution to the local economy is the spin-off from non-resident recreationalists who are being drawn to the area. Non-resident snowmobiling is of particular importance.

The GBRAP is the result of a thorough process of negotiations among stakeholders, where trade-offs were made between different recreational interests. It was known by all stakeholders that without a plan, conflicts in the backcountry would increase between recreational users. Further, they knew that a high level of consensus was required in order to have a plan that could be implemented. These stakeholders came to consensus on approximately 90 percent of the 1 million hectare plan area, and those consensus recommendations have been wholly incorporated into the plan direction. This high level of consensus was made possible by enabling stakeholders to take time to understand each others issues, and develop a willingness to respect those other issues. This level of consensus was also enabled by government ensuring that stakeholders will be able to periodically review plan content when new information becomes available.

There will continue to be a growing advocacy of the local residents for maintenance of their opportunities for non-commercial recreation. There is recognition that in some areas these opportunities must be balanced with commercial recreational opportunities. For example, there have been issues in winter where the tracks left behind by public snowmobilers have impacted the safety and quality of experiences for the clients of commercial heliskiing operators. The plan deals with some of these issues by placing key heliski runs in non-motorized areas, while at the same time ensuring that areas important for snowmobiling are designated as motorized. Although the GBRAP zonations are partially based upon historic and current use patterns, it also looks ahead to deal with the expected increase in use levels, and they are often based upon attainment of an overall balance (social or otherwise) of opportunities, experiences and conditions. As a result, there are areas in the plan that are zoned to allow for specific uses even though such uses are not currently occurring, and there are areas that are zoned to prohibit specific uses even though there is no pressure for such uses at present. By looking ahead in this manner, the plan provides for appropriate uses in appropriate areas and discourages uses that are incompatible with each other or with natural features. For example, there are a few plan areas that have been designated as non-motorized for recreation - with only minimal infrastructure development allowed - in order to accommodate the interests of that group of

commercial and public users. Such large non-motorized “wilderness” zones are in drainages that are isolated, where use levels are currently low and where there are high biodiversity values that are already being managed for through industrial forestry practices. Just as the GBRAP is working to keep key motorized areas open to all users, it is working to maintain the qualities of those isolated areas.

At the core of the plan are detailed maps covering the entire 1 million hectares of the plan area. The maps show areas that the plan has zoned as motorized or non-motorized for ground-based winter and summer activities, and for helicopter and other aerial landings use. In addition, the maps show the type of infrastructure development that can occur for each drainage area (for example, whether a backcountry mountain lodge can be built in an area, or whether the area should be managed to promote more public and/or commercial wilderness values).

Plan implementation is happening on two fronts: The first mode of implementation is occurring within government, as agencies responsible for resource tenuring are working with their clients to manage plan values. For instance, the government agency responsible for tenuring commercial recreation has been effectively ensuring that commercial operators are only tenured for activities that comply with the plan.

The second mode of implementation relates to public non-commercial use, which is being implemented through voluntary means, with partnerships, acceptance within the community, and continued co-ordination by government necessary for success. Due to the involvement of key recreational users in plan formulation and the high level of consensus achieved, many of the plan decisions will likely be implementable and stay in effect for some time. Despite this, there are many areas/issues that were not discussed thoroughly, where the general public has yet to become involved, where better information is required, or where new recreational issues will need to be resolved - making it necessary to ensure that the plan is a living document that is revised regularly. For example, further refinement of recreational use carrying capacity levels and reconciling both public and commercial sector use patterns in some areas remain as outstanding issues for future resolution. To assist in such plan revision issues, a Backcountry Recreation Advisory Committee has been established, consisting of many of the stakeholder groups that have been involved since the inception of the GBRAP process.

Although the plan has been in effect for some time, it is only recently that signage indicating the motorized/non-motorized status of some roads has been put in place. Public comment and involvement is expected to increase as a result of this signage, as recreationalists become aware of the plan for the first time.

Key to the continuation of the plan is the ability to make revisions when new information (including public comment) becomes available. In order to maintain the balance of motorized and non-motorized opportunities, and the balance of developed and non-developed areas, plan direction will have to be amended in the decades to come.