



# Koocanusa Area Situational Analysis and Recommendations for Crown Land Recreation

## Summary Report

The Koocanusa area is a regionally important tourism and recreation asset, attracting outdoor enthusiasts for activities such as fishing, hunting, camping, boating, wildlife viewing and off-road vehicle use. It is also an area of traditional use for First Nations and falls within the territory of the Ktunaxa Nation. In recent years, increased tourism and recreation have led to negative impacts on Crown land resources in the area including degradation of sensitive grasslands and wildlife habitat, excessive litter and garbage in the backcountry and public health and safety concerns. In 2014, MLA Bill Bennett and Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations Steve Thomson initiated the Koocanusa Recreation Steering Committee (KRSC) to help address these issues. The KRSC, consisting of representatives from the B.C. Government, Ktunaxa National Council, Tobacco Plains Indian Band, Regional District of East Kootenay and Columbia Basin Trust, commissioned a report to help identify Crown Land recreational issues in the Koocanusa area and recommend actions to reduce the most significant impacts.

An in-depth consultation process was undertaken in the summer of 2014 to help identify these Crown Land recreational issues and potential solutions in the Koocanusa area. The consultation process included extensive engagement with First Nations, government, residents and property owners, visitors to the area, local businesses, and non-governmental and community organizations, seeking input on the issues, impacts and management approaches to address Crown land recreation issues in the area. Consultation was supplemented by a review of existing research and planning activities in the area, including the Cranbrook West Recreation Management Strategy and the Lake Koocanusa Official Community Plan, and approaches and tools utilized in other jurisdictions experiencing similar issues.

A Situational Analysis was completed which identifies the scope of recreation issues affecting Crown land, the current management situation related to each issue, and the gaps and challenges of current management. The Situational Analysis was supported with digital maps to spatially depict the recreation issues and management situation. The vast majority of the recreational issues stem from the fact that access to the Crown land in the region is relatively easy and there are few access controls in place. Based on the background research and consultation process, the following issues associated with Crown Land recreation in the Koocanusa area were identified as being the most significant:

- **Damage to sensitive ecosystems and grasslands**, including important grasslands for cattle and ungulate grazing;
- **Disturbance to wildlife and wildlife habitat**, including winter range for a variety of ungulates, and species that are endangered or threatened in BC, such as the American Badger and Lewis's Woodpecker;
- **Effects on practicing Aboriginal rights and traditional activities** related to environmental damage and impacts to archaeological sites and cultural resources;

- **Recreational boating** issues on Lake Koochanusa including noise, crowds, sewage dumping and unsafe boating practices;
- **Crown land camping and illegal occupancy (squatting)** which is leading to localized impacts in high-use areas, notably litter and garbage, aesthetic impacts from overuse, noise disturbances and illegal cutting of trees and shrubs;
- **Unauthorized large events and gatherings** on Crown land including rave parties and bush parties, resulting in increased garbage and human waste, noise disturbances, and public safety issues;
- **Increased wildfire risks** related to easy and uncontrolled access and illegal campfires, and potential evacuation difficulties due to the large number and unknown location of recreation users in the area;
- **Negative impacts on grazing tenure and lease holders** as a result of damage to grazing lands from off-road vehicles (ORVs) and campers, livestock escape due to cattle gates and fences being left open or damaged, and users leaving garbage on the land;
- **An increase in the spread of terrestrial and aquatic invasive species;** and
- **Public health and safety concerns** associated with the unsafe operation of motorized vehicles, illegal use of firearms, and an increase in belligerent behavior, property damage, trespassing and vandalism.

Many of these recreational issues are occurring in the same place at the same time, and when coupled with existing authorized and tenured activities are leading to unknown cumulative effects on Crown land resources.

Twenty three recommendations were provided to the KRSC based on the background research, stakeholder engagement process, and review of how other jurisdictions manage similar issues. The recommendations contain priority actions to be implemented before the 2015 summer recreation season. This includes effectively communicating information to Crown land recreation users, including a Code of Conduct, clarification of areas where recreation is encouraged and discouraged (based on existing policy), and information on publicly available recreation facilities. It was recommended that this information be disseminated to recreational users through development of a Crown land recreation brochure, a website for the Koochanusa area, and signage at popular recreation areas. It was also recommended that additional support be provided to Natural Resource Officers to help educate recreational users regarding appropriate Crown land behaviour and land stewardship. Other priorities for the 2015 season were identified as exploring partnerships with existing recreational groups in the region to support land stewardship, and enhancing waste management facilities.

Prior to the 2016 summer recreation season, a key recommendation was that the KRSC develop a Crown land recreation management framework for the Koochanusa area that clearly identifies where specific recreational activities are permitted and prohibited on Crown lands. The management framework may include areas where Crown land camping and ORV use are not permitted, and also areas that should be set aside for intensive and managed ORV use. Other actions recommended for the 2016 recreation season include reducing the spread of invasive species through development of a monitoring and management plan and a public education and stewardship campaign.

The full report - Koochanusa Area Situational Analysis and Recommendations for Crown Land Recreation - is available at [www.koocanusarecreation.ca](http://www.koocanusarecreation.ca)