



**OUTDOOR RECREATION  
COALITION OF ALBERTA**

**Outdoor Recreation Forum**

**October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Mount Royal University**

**Summary Report**



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## About the Outdoor Recreation Coalition of Alberta (ORCA)

The Outdoor Recreation Coalition of Alberta (ORCA) is a growing coalition of individuals and organizations who represent the public interest in the development of a high-quality and inclusive non-motorized outdoor recreation sector.

ORCA's Mission: 'To advance the public interest regarding outdoor recreation by coordinating and amplifying the voices of the outdoor recreation community.'

We intend to advance our mission by:

- Building community among outdoor recreation individuals and organizations across Alberta
- Working together to bring a consensus voice from the outdoor recreation community to government planning initiatives and decision-makers
- Fostering a deeper understanding of issues and helping to resolve conflicts between disparate sectors of the outdoor recreation community
- Centralizing access to resources related to outdoor recreation information and safety.

## Background – Where We Are

Outdoor recreationalists are very aware that Alberta's outdoor recreation physical infrastructure is often inadequate to address the growing numbers and types of recreation users and is often in poor repair.

Deficient infrastructure results in lower participation rates and drives recreationalists to use non-sanctioned trails which increase environmental damage and decrease safety. Additionally, crowding increases the potential for inter-user conflict, particularly between incompatible recreation activities.

Equally deficient are the multi-faceted aspects of social infrastructure that are essential in building a first-class outdoor recreation sector in Alberta. Inadequate social infrastructure refers to:

- Most Albertans have no connection to an outdoor recreation organization, therefore:
  - are poorly supported in being socially and environmentally responsible in the backcountry
  - many do not have the knowledge and experience to ensure their backcountry adventures are both personally rewarding and safe. This is particularly true for new entrants to outdoor activity.
- Many outdoor recreation organizations struggle to build active engagement with the broader community they serve, partly because they have minimal access to the required human and financial resources. This is particularly true for hiking, Alberta's #1 outdoor activity.
- There is an enormous pool of local and activity specific knowledge within the outdoor recreation community that lacks an efficient way of communicating that expertise to others. This impedes development of multiple aspects of the outdoor recreation sector, including:
  - ability to be knowledgeable about personal/group social and environmental responsibilities
  - safety for themselves and others.

- There has been a strong tendency for organizations and discipline-specific sub-sectors with outdoor recreation to stay within their silos. Much of the sector's advocacy is spent on areas of conflict between the sub-sectors rather than advancing an agenda that would benefit the sector and the public interest.
- The lack of a unified and coherent voice for the greater non-motorized outdoor recreation community in Alberta has been missing in important government planning and recreation management initiatives. Without this voice, the outdoor recreation community has not/will not have the influence it needs to be heard by decision-makers.

## ORCA Forum Purpose

The Outdoor Recreation Coalition of Alberta (ORCA) is focused on building organizational capacity to encourage cohesion and a unified public voice for the non-motorized outdoor recreation community. There is a need for a deeper understanding of the 'map' of outdoor recreation across Alberta - to build on strengths and to identify priority issues. The main goals of the Forum were:

- 1) To build community and improve understanding between individuals and organizations representing diverse activity sectors.
- 2) To broaden and deepen ORCA's and the participants' understanding of the issues, challenges and opportunities facing the sector.
- 3) To advance priorities 2 and 3 of the ORCA 2023-25 strategic plan which are to 'Create a larger and more engaged membership' and 'Take a leadership role in advancing the public interest regarding outdoor recreation at the Governmental level'. The Forum data was intended to both inform how ORCA should advance those strategic priorities over the life of the plan.

## About of the Forum

Following the completion of the 2023-25 Strategic Plan, ORCA decided to approach Mount Royal University's Ecotourism and Outdoor Leadership (ETOL) program to jointly hold a Forum in Fall 2023. The ETOL program agreed to provide the venue and student volunteers and ORCA would be responsible for designing the program, recruiting participants, and covering the event costs.

The success of the Forum relied on the engagement of a broad spectrum of non-motorized recreation groups and individuals who were interested in participating and learning more about key issues and concerns facing outdoor recreation in Alberta. Participants included members of organizations such as the Alberta Hiking Association, Alberta Equestrian Federation, Bragg Creek Trails, Paddle Alberta, Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, Climbers Access Society of Alberta, Alberta Outfitters Association, Great Divide Trail Association as well as outdoor recreation businesses such as Hela Adventures (Nordegg) and Uplift Adventures (Crowsnest Pass). Several outdoor recreationists also joined the Forum in person and online and were able to fully participate remotely.

To encourage participation, the Forum was structured to address four key areas of concern within the outdoor recreation community that ORCA had heard about from many different user groups and individuals. These topics included:

- Land Use and Recreation Management in Alberta
- Conflict management and the way forward together
- Inclusion – Outdoor Recreation for All
- The Question of Recreation Fees

To address these concerns, subject matter experts from the outdoor recreation community and the Government of Alberta were invited to participate in speaker panels to provide context and an overview of the complexities and needs around each area of concern. Panel presentations were followed by small group breakout sessions. Each session ended with a plenary session to share perspectives, expertise, and potential solutions. All sessions were recorded, and extensive notes taken during small group discussion to ensure that all voices and perspectives were taken into account.

To facilitate the sessions and provide objective summary recommendations to ORCA, a consultant with *Highwatermark Solutions* was engaged during the Forum planning, implementation and reporting phases.



## Forum Results – What we Heard.

### Session 1: Land Use and Recreation Management

The pressures on the Alberta landscape have dramatically increased over the last decades. Notably, pressure from multiple-use of landscapes has seriously eroded the quality of the environment, which in turn reduces the quality of outdoor recreation experience.

ORCA is mindful that outdoor recreation of all forms also impacts the environment. However, preserving and enhancing the environment is essential for creating a first-class outdoor recreation sector. It is understood that recreationalists have a vital interest in identifying and pursuing the strategies that promote improved management of both ecological and social values of public lands.

In Alberta, public policy has not kept pace with the increasing pressure on the landscape, although there are indications that the government has a growing interest in improving its planning and regulatory processes. Conflict is the inevitable result of poor planning in an environment of rapidly increasing demands from commercial and non-commercial interests.

Engaging in land-use planning and understanding the regulatory framework by both ORCA and its coalition partners is essential to provide government direction to achieve greatly improved outcomes for healthy public lands and outdoor recreation needs.

#### Framing questions for small group discussion:

1. Where should our priorities be for land use management?
2. Is there a place for everything on the landscape? At what scale do we make these decisions?
3. What are opportunities and constraints with a multi-use landscape?

### Forum Agenda

#### Session 1

**Land-use and recreation management planning in Alberta.** This is bedrock for what will or will not become possible. Lessons from the past - looking to the future.

#### Panel:

- Chad Willms – Director – Land and Environmental Planning (South), Environment and Protected Areas, Government of Alberta
- Connie Simmons – Alberta Hiking Association
- Katie Morrison – Executive Director, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Southern Alberta.



## Land Use and Recreation Management – Panel and Discussion Group Highlights and Outputs

- Multi-stakeholder recreation advisory groups have been highly contentious processes.
- Polarization is happening around recreation use (where, extent and type).
- Indigenous communities are being pushed out of traditional activities.
- Land-use planning is a way to help manage overlapping and competing activities.
- Land-use planning on a project-by-project basis doesn't work anymore - there is a need to address cumulative effects on all public lands.
- We're always taking something away from someone, rather than looking at the landscape as something we need to share.
- The Castle Parks process – first-time recognition that not everyone could get what they want.
- Trails Act – recognition that recreation is a land-use that needs to be managed.
- The public is starting to understand that they need to be involved in land-use discussions before things go wrong.
- 76% of the public favours setting land aside for conservation and recreation.
- Many topics, including motorized vs. non-motorized recreation end up being highly partisan in nature.



## The Forum Agenda

### Session 2

**Conflict management and the way forward together** – Could better collaboration around points of friction help us find unity on common interests?

**Panel:**

- Jason Edworthy – President, Alberta Equestrian Federation
- Alexandra Miller-Tait – Director of Recreation, Ecosystem and Land Management, Forestry and Parks, Government of Alberta.
- Monica Tice – Moose Mountain Bike Trail Society



### Session 2: Conflict Management

While there will always be competition between various interest groups for access to Alberta's renewable and non-renewable resources, the public interest is best served through effective planning and management strategies that prevent competition from devolving into conflict.

The largest sources of conflict for the outdoor recreation sector are between recreation and commercial exploitation of our natural heritage, and between recreational activities that require different types of physical infrastructure and/or to some degree negatively impact the experience of others when practiced in the same space.

The competition between recreation and commercial interests is inherently political in nature. Affective representation of the recreation interest has largely been absent for two reasons:

1. Unlike commercial interests, the sector lacks the financial resources to make its case. The non-motorized recreation sector contributes \$10 billion and at least 20,000 full-time-equivalent (FTE) jobs to Alberta's economy, but these impressive contributions do not channel significant financial resources toward advocating for the recreation interest, and few amongst the 20,000 FTE workers would identify as owing their living to outdoor recreation.
2. The outdoor recreation sector has no natural organizing principle that would foster the development of a lobby to represent its interest. This deficiency contrasts with other cultural sectors like the sports or entertainment sectors. For both these influential sectors, the practice of the activity is typically severely constrained, if not impossible, without forming delivery organizations which naturally creates the social infrastructure needed to effectively represent their sector interest at the political level.

Reducing conflict between recreation disciplines is, in part, the result of poor planning and inadequate physical and social infrastructure. A great deal of conflict is the result of misunderstandings about the interests of others. Reducing inter-user conflict is a shared responsibility between government and the outdoor recreation community.



### Framing questions for small group discussion

1. What are the overarching objectives that different recreation disciplines share?
2. Given that the needs and wishes of different outdoor recreation user groups can often conflict, how can we manage this and ensure that our needs in general are met?
3. What is the best method to share/communicate trail etiquette to all user groups?

### Conflict Management – Panel and Discussion Group Highlights and Outputs

- Conflict is rare, but can ruin your day, and on occasion cause injury or even death.
- Conflict can start at the trailhead (i.e.: limited equestrian parking taken by others).
- Surprise encounters on trails create conflict, in particular on up/down sections.
- Solutions: separate trail usage where possible; better communications; signage; and knowledge of how to manage encounters is needed.
- Downhill mountain bike community is not typically open to criticism.
- Separate trails – what are we getting out of that place? (user priority for different trails?)
- Hikers and rider’s have conflicts on trails.
- Downhill bikers can’t stop safely when going downhill. No easy answer to this issue.
- Partnerships are key in implementing programs that help reduce conflict.
- Recreation vs. non-recreation is another level of conflict.
- Important to have user groups come together (ORCA!)
- Alberta Off-Highway Vehicle Association is organized. They have one leadership role that represents all of the individual users. Easier to manage from a Gov’t of Alberta perspective.
- Fairness – responsibility to each other as a shared value.
- Good experiences require us to find common values.

### Session 3: Building an Inclusive Outdoor Recreation Sector

Non-motorized outdoor recreation has traditionally been the dominated by Canadians of European heritage. Typically, the attitudes and skills required to participate fully have either been passed down from family and friends or learned by those fortunate enough to attend schools with an outdoor education program.

Many Albertans report significant barriers to meaningful access to outdoor recreation, of which the absence of the introductory experiences noted above are only one. They include financial constraints; not feeling culturally comfortable in the outdoor space; and not knowing how to get started.

Children and youth who have meaningful access to outdoor recreation activities enjoy superior physical, social and psychological health leading to improved quality of life. Outdoor active adults enjoy similar benefits and are likely to be more productive, require fewer health care resources and live independently for longer. ORCA believes inclusive access to be a social justice issue of greater importance than is generally realized.

Encouragingly, there has been a big increase in participation in outdoor recreation amongst traditionally excluded demographics over the last decade. Of concern, however, some new entrants are less likely to demonstrate the ability to care for themselves in the backcountry and to understand environmental and social responsibilities in this context. Developing these attributes is thought to be essential for full participation and high-quality outdoor recreation experiences for all.

Collectively, these observations illuminate the intersectionality of the topics discussed in the Forum and suggest that 'building a robust outdoor sector' and 'inclusivity of access' are inseparably connected.

## Forum Agenda

### Session 3

**Inclusion – Outdoor Recreation for all.**  
How do we achieve this?

**Panel:**

- Bethlehem Abraham – University of Alberta PhD Candidate
- Albi Sole – ORCA



### Framing questions for small group discussion

1. Building a welcoming culture in the backcountry - how do we create and manage this? What should this look like?
2. How do we reach out and help those not in an organization to be included in Alberta's outdoor recreation opportunities?

### Building an Inclusion Outdoor Recreation Sector – Panel and Discussion Group Highlights and Outputs

- The inclusion of new Canadians is becoming a larger component of recreation management.
- There is a need to create a safe space for new recreation users so they can learn and enjoy safely.
- There is a need to expand outdoor education programs in schools and classrooms.
- We all need to welcome all cultures in both the front and the backcountry.
- We can find models for programs to help, like those offered by the Outdoor Council of Canada, Spirit North, Paddle Alberta, Bow Water (actively went to Syrian refugees and invited them to participate).
- Identity of Canadians is linked to wilderness and wide open spaces – how do we include and invite new arrivals to embrace this part of Canadian identity and shape it themselves?
- Ask questions, don't make assumptions, or dictate.
- Where are people starting? We need to have a better understanding of this point.
- Different ethnicities tend to use parks differently – we need understand and work with this.
- There is a need to reach out and support through mentorship.



## Forum Agenda

### Session 4

#### The question of Recreation Fees.

The pros and cons of recreation fees. How do we envision their future role, if any?

#### Panel:

- Alf Skrastins – Bragg Creek Trails
- Janine Giles – Alberta Hiking Association
- Albi Sole – ORCA

### Session 4: Access Fees

The implementation of the Kananaskis Conservation fee was extremely controversial with most recreationalists appearing to be opposed, or at least seeking greater accountability from Government as to how the revenue is spent. Issues raised included: 'this is another barrier to access'; 'this is an access fee, not a conservation fee'; 'Why does the fee not apply to random camping and motorized recreation which are much more invasive?'; 'why did the first big grant go to the Canmore Nordic Centre's sport trails rather than back-country recreation trails which are a higher priority for those paying the fee?'

However, it is clear that government could, or would, never be able to meet the full demand for recreation infrastructure and that a more fulsome public/government commitment is required. This reality shifts the debate from 'should recreationalists contribute to recreation infrastructure construction and upkeep' to 'what should that partnership look like?'

#### Framing questions for small group discussion.

1. Are fees for outdoor recreation a good thing? Yes, or no? If yes, how should they be extended past Kananaskis Country?
2. What sort of contract should the province make in return for imposing the fee? I.e.: What do they promise in exchange for the fees charged?

## Access Fees – Panel and Discussion Group Highlights and Output

- Money from the Heritage Trust Fund was invested to create Kananaskis Country, and not much has been invested since.
- Within government, there has been no incentive to build trails. Without funding infrastructure has not kept up with user levels.
- Kananaskis Environmental Pass changed things - users became customers and so demanded better services, and Parks increased incentives and funding to improve infrastructure.
- There are too many people in the backcountry for the level of service.
- Legacy question: Heritage Trust fund provided first investment, should it provide again?
- If funds are in short supply, would it be better to have a sales tax instead of a user fee?
- Should we consider punitive fines to fund restoration and access?
- If it were made a publicly supported priority, the Gov't of Alberta would fund recreation.
- The implementation of the Kananaskis Pass has resulted in new infrastructure.
- To get money for outdoor recreation - access fees are needed, or we will lose recreation service.
- At the conclusion of this discussion, a vote indicated that most support access fees, with the remainder on the fence.



## Summary of the ORCA Forum

### Key Themes Emerging from the Forum

1. There is a growing recognition of limitations on recreational trails, facilities, and activities. Not everyone can get what they want.
2. The need for public engagement in recreation activities is growing, and an understanding that it needs to occur earlier in the planning process is gaining traction.
3. A collaborative effort from the non-motorized recreation community is what is needed to have all recreation voices heard.
4. Inclusion of all demographics in planning and recreation activities is essential.
5. User fees appear to be a beneficial, perhaps essential, way of gaining investment in recreational facilities, despite many dissenting voices.
6. User fees in Kananaskis Country have resulted in more active government management.

### TOPLINE: What the Forum Data Tells us

1. There is a strong interest in exploring solutions to complex recreation management challenges.
2. Easy answers are no longer possible where resource development, recreation management and cultural/Indigenous interests overlap.
3. The earlier in the planning process non-motorized recreation groups come together to create a united voice and approach, the higher the likelihood is of achieving positive outcomes.
4. The Government of Alberta has been and continues to be encouraging a united approach to non-motorized outdoor recreation sector's engagement and input to land-use and outdoor recreation management.

### Informing the ORCA Strategic Plan

The ORCA strategic plan identifies three priorities: 'Solidify organizational governance and operations'; 'Create a larger and more engaged membership'; and 'Take a leadership role in advancing the public interest regarding outdoor recreation at the Governmental level'. In general, the output from the Forum is supportive of these priorities. The ends desired by both ORCA and the community, as reflected by the Forum output, are ambitious and will be challenging to achieve.

The objective now will be to adopt the tasks and strategies that enable ORCA to advance the strategic plan while meeting the specific deliverables the community has identified. Those deliverables include:

1. There is a strong interest among recreation community representatives to work collaboratively to ensure their voices are heard during future recreation management planning initiatives.
2. Continuing to build a cross-sectoral community is important for future collaborations.
3. Inclusion of diverse voices is inseparable from over-all success.

4. The timing of future land use and recreation planning initiatives by government is uncertain, but ORCA has a role to play in making sure when they do happen, the organization and coalition members will be ready to effectively and fairly represent the non-motorized recreation sector.

A common theme animates deliverables 1-3 in that each relies on ORCA's ability to engage individuals and organizations in communication exercises that create a welcoming space where participants feel heard and are able to hear others. The communication tools used will include building personal relationships through direct engagement and to the recreating public through social media.

Deliverable 4 will build on 1-3 but will involve developing significant expertise in understanding all landscape values (ecological, cultural, social and economic) of the planning area, the nuts and bolts of government processes, and fairly addressing non-motorized recreation interests.

### **Operational Considerations**

The deliverables cannot possibly be achieved with volunteer effort alone. ORCA now needs to extend organizational capacity and effectiveness. This requires financial support to fund:

1. A Coordinator to lead community engagement.
2. A communications expert to build digital and other communication tools.
3. A planner/negotiator to develop and lead ORCA's input into future land-use and recreation management planning processes.

In order to stay on task, the ORCA board in collaboration with the coalition members will require to develop a 'Terms of Reference' for an ORCA-led recreational planning team. These terms will need to:

1. Honour the mission and values of ORCA.
2. Develop and lead to a framework for decision-making on policy issues based on input from all coalition members.
3. Develop an open and agreed-upon strategy for dispute resolution.
4. Set guidelines to prevent mission creep.

### **A Thank-you Wrap!**

ORCA wishes to thank all panel presenters who volunteered to give up their time and expertise for this worthwhile event. Laying out the context of each key topic is a foundation for important conversations and this was done with passion, knowledge and invaluable experience.

We also thank all participants, in person and online, who gave their time, serious consideration and input to the Forum discussions. Your input has been invaluable for ORCA to move forward with greater assurance of what the non-motorized outdoor recreation community needs and expects.

Finally, a very special thanks to the Mount Royal University and the Ecotourism and Outdoor Leadership Program for providing the venue and supporting the ORCA Forum 2023.

ORCA wishes to thank the following for supporting the ORCA Forum 2023!

