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Executive Directors Message

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Endangered Grasslands Need Better Management of ATVs

From a conservation and resource management perspective, ATVs, ORVs, Dirt bikes, or dune buggies, are all designed to travel “off-road” and consequently are all referred to as All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs). Although snowmobiles are an off-road vehicle, a process is currently underway to develop new legislation and regulations for snowmobiles, and therefore they are not directly addressed in this issue of *BC Grasslands*.

The inappropriate use of ATVs and the mismanagement of ATV use around the province, both on private and crown land, is a very serious threat to grasslands and other associated ecosystems, such as wetlands and riparian areas. The GCC has heard a clear message from government, resource managers, the Federation of BC Naturalists, Union of BC Municipalities, the Outdoor Recreational Council, BC Cattlemen’s Association, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, and the Federation of BC Woodlot Associations (only to name a few), that British Columbia needs some form of registration and licensing system, as well as improved management of ATV use.

Needless destruction of habitat by ATVs is not a new problem. Although ATV groups are making progress in organizing and educating ATV users, there are many dirt bikers and quad users that are not part of any association. And there lies the problem. Younger generations are being fed powerful TV images: “You have the ability and the freedom to travel where no other vehicles have gone before... through streams, over open grasslands, over rocky outcrops, up steep hill sides and through alpine meadows.” It is an appealing image. In the mean time, degradation of one of BC’s most endangered landscape, our grasslands, continues unabated, leading to erosion, the spread of invasive weeds and the loss of wildlife habitat.

The fundamental problem is that resource managers, the ranching industry, conservationists, ATV groups and the concerned public have no effective means to address inappropriate use of ATVs on crown or private grasslands. ATVs do not require registration or a licence for operation. Because of this, land and resource managers and conservationists have limited success in stopping reckless use of off-road vehicles.

Lets face it, without organization, a solid collaborative plan and a means for registration of vehicles, how can we begin to talk about management, education, self policing and partnerships? For over 25 years various groups have discussed this issue and lobbied government, but the problem remains.

In 2001, the GCC collaborated with various government and non-government organizations to produce an ATV Background document: *The Need for a Provincial Licensing System and improved management of ATV use*. The purpose of this backgrounder is to inform government and other interest groups about the All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) problem and the urgent need to put in place a system of licensing ATVs, particularly motorbikes and quads, so people can be held accountable when they use their vehicles in closed areas or in a manner damaging to the environment. The need for improved planning and management of ATV use and the need for an effective educational process are stressed as means to achieve environmentally responsible use of these off-road vehicles.

It was agreed that a system of annual licensing that requires the prominent display of a visible license plate on all ATVs provides a solution to a number of issues. Licensing will:

- Provide enforcement officers, ATV associations and other organizations the means to identify vehicles and take action
- Ensure that responsible riders are not targeted for the infractions of those who wilfully ignore regulations
- Provide an opportunity, at the time of licensing, to educate all users about the need to ride responsibly and to protect the environment
- Provide the financial resources for the planning and effective management of ATV use, construction and maintenance of trails, restoration of degraded sites and education of ATV users
- Assist in the recovery of lost or stolen ATVs

In addition, it was agreed upon that government, non-government organizations and dealers need to collaborate to distribute information and educational material at the time when ATVs are sold and licensed. This will inform users of the responsibilities that go along with ownership and use. An effective communication and education process will assist to inform ATV users of their responsibilities when they use their vehicles off-road; educate ATV users about the ecological value of the areas they use and their obligation to stay on designated trails and "play areas;" and promote stewardship, conservation and cooperation.

As a result of this process, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, in partnership with West Coast Environmental Law, commissioned an inter-jurisdictional analysis and developed *Alternatives for Regulation of All-Terrain Vehicles in BC* (Susan Rutherford, July 2001). The outcome of this paper is presented in this issue.

There is tremendous support provincially to resolve this issue. Potential solutions have been explored and there is a willingness from government, industry and non-government organizations to establish partnerships. It is imperative that we establish a proactive and collaborative process between stakeholders and government to develop a system for registration and licensing and develop a plan to improve the management of ATV use in BC. We need collaboration. We need innovative solutions. And we need to act NOW.

The Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia (GCC) is a strategic alliance of organizations and individuals dedicated to the conservation and stewardship of BC's grasslands. The GCC strives for innovative, pro-active solutions based on partnerships and collaboration between all interest groups on complex issues, such as: ATV licensing and registration, invasive weeds and the need for a Provincial Weed Management Strategy, urbanization of our grasslands, species at risk, and the urgency of preserving working ranches in British Columbia. Learn more about the GCC by visiting its website (www.bcgrasslands.org) or contacting the GCC by phone at (250) 374-5787.