

Manitoba's Wildlife Management Areas -Towards a Vision



The Souris River enters the Assiniboine in the Assiniboine Corridor Wildlife Management Area

A few years back I sent the following letter to the Minister of Sustainable Development and to the Wildlife Branch:

We are disturbed by the use (and abuse) of the Assiniboine Corridor WMA - at Souris Mouth by inconsiderate gun enthusiasts for target practice and general mayhem.

This historically important and beautiful site is being trashed. The attached photos show destruction of signage and litter ... hundreds of shell casings - beer cans and cigarette packages.

The vandalism sends a clear message as to what these people think about the "ecologically significant" area.

That is only half the picture. Imagine how disconcerting it is to have one's Sunday afternoon walk marred by gunfire. What does that have to do with the concept of Wildlife Management?

The target practice area they have set up along the trail send a clear message to the rest of us...they own this spot.

Are guns allowed in this space (it wasn't hunting season - they are just playing).?



Signs placed by the Historic Resources Branch tell us that we are entering an Ecologically Significant Area. The signs are full of bullet holes.

I got a reply from the director of the Wildlife Branch telling me that:

“the use of firearms is not restricted provided that they are used in a safe manner. Unfortunately, some people do abuse the privilege and leave behind litter. The litter associated with target shooting is unlawful and can be dealt with by our enforcement officers. Should you observe this activity in future, I would encourage you to report it immediately through the T.I.P. Line by calling 1-800-782-0076.”

Essentially the response I got was that they just didn't have the resources to police the areas. When I asked what gun use (other than during hunting seasons) and vehicle use had to do with wildlife management, I got no reply.

Now, I know that WMA's have very little money allotted to enforcement or enhancement. So I wasn't surprised by their reluctance to promise any action. But it seemed to me that allowing firearms in an area without any provision for enforcement seemed to be asking for trouble.

The other troubling thing about this response was the use of the "bad apple excuse". It's not guns that are the problem; it's the minority of people who use them inappropriately. The same excuse comes up whenever on questions the damage done by ATV's, snowmobiles, jet skis, and oversized pickup trucks.

What governments seem to ignore is that certain activities (usually not earth friendly ones) are bound to attract bad apples. All activities are not created equal in terms of damage to the earth and to people.

We spend billions on highways, millions on full-service campgrounds, millions on Wellness Centres, swimming pools, ice rinks, paved walk and bike paths, spray parks, etc. while spending very little (and it would take very little) to make the best use of our natural areas.

I replied, thanking him for his response and adding:

For the record...

I have to say that target shooting is a totally inappropriate use of Wildlife Management Areas. (I can see that hunting is appropriate in some.)

I also see no reason to allow motor vehicles of any kind.

I'm pretty sure neither guns nor motor vehicles enhance the life of any wildlife remaining in the WMA's. They surely don't enhance the experience of those of us who would like to enjoy the use of these areas in a responsible (and sustainable) way.

Essentially, those of us who actually care about the outdoors, about nature, about the planet, have to give way to those who so obviously don't.

I am not sure how the current policies have anything to do with Wildlife Management or Sustainable Development.

I got no reply to that.



The damage and litter are occurring all along the north side of the river, a place easily accessed by vehicles.

Which brings us to today...

Of course, the damage and litter in the Souris Mouth WMA continues.



The area overlooking one of the most historically significant places in Southwestern Manitoba is littered with shotgun shells.



The target shooters have taken over a large area and trashed it. This has been going on for years.



Truck and ATV tracks criss cross the whole area. They have made the area their playground. The damage gets worse every year.



The most extensive area being trashed is visible on Google Earth.

The idea that “enforcement officers” would have any chance of catching litterers and vandals in the act is preposterous, given the low level of priority placed on the WMA’s.



What a nice way to spoil a beautiful and significant location. Allowing access to

vehicles make this sort of vandalism possible, perhaps inevitable.

What is needed is a comprehensive review of the purpose, use, and ultimate value of WMA's.

The Case for the Enhancement of Wildlife Management Areas

A healthy community will have places where you can go for a peaceful walk, in a natural setting. In Manitoba we are not short of space. Only a portion of our territory is suitable for agriculture or resource extraction. We have endless stretches of forest and prairie that are basically surplus to our economic needs. We have lots of wilderness, much of it close by.

We could make better use of it.

Some decades back our Provincial government did a very good thing.

Across the province there were expanses of what, from an agricultural standpoint, was surplus land. Rocky, dry, hilly, or marshy – it just didn't pay to farm it. It had little value in our economic scheme. But it often had other value.

The sand hills near Lauder weren't much use to a farmer, but they were a great place to take a walk, to experience a unique landscape, to view a particularly distinct section of the Souris River Valley. Likewise with the sandy dry terrain overlooking where the Souris River empties into the Assiniboine.



Souris Mouth is a rare location. A pleasant walk takes you to a magnificent view of the intersection of the two major rivers. Why is the spot not protected?

The rocky, steep valley of the Souris in the Souris Bend, upstream from that point, offers the most dramatic river valley views to be found in Manitoba, but farmers long ago found it too steep and rocky for the plow.

Steep cliffs overlook the river bends and quick drops in elevation produce rapids at regular intervals. There are places here that defy the stereotype of the "prairie landscape".



The Souris Bend Wildlife Management Area. A rare and extensive tract of unspoiled wilderness. Do we have the will to keep it that way?

The very attributes that make this a special place for the wilderness enthusiast, the wildlife enthusiast, the hiker and paddler, make it unsuitable for cultivation - and that is a happy circumstance. There are no homes, no roads, no hydro lines, and no cultivated fields. It is possible to walk (or canoe) for miles without encountering any of the usual noisy, smelly, intrusive ways in which we humans mark our territories. Or it was once possible and it could be possible again.

Miles of rough trails take you across the prairie grassland, along the ridge of the escarpment with its panoramic views of the river valley, down the valley walls, and along the river itself.



Upstream from historic Lang's Crossing. The Souris Bend has a vast series of equestrian / hiking trails and countless places to view the Souris River Valley.

These and other spots were purchased at what one can only assume was a pretty reasonable cost, and designated as Wildlife Management Areas. Yes, they had hunting in mind, but hunting seasons are short – we have plenty of nature to go around.

And, yes, we already have a network of Provincial Parks. But they are manicured and managed. They have serviced campgrounds and designated trails. They cost us quite a bit of money to operate.

The WMA's are a more natural place to visit.

The Manitoba Government Website makes the purpose clear:

Wildlife Management Areas exist for the benefit of wildlife and for the enjoyment of people. They play an important role in biodiversity conservation and provide for a variety of wildlife-related forms of recreation, including birding and wildlife watching. Hunting and trapping are generally permitted in WMAs, but these activities may be prohibited or restricted in a few areas. The use of vehicles, off-road vehicles, watercraft, power boats, or airboats, may be restricted in some areas. WMAs are open year round and have no entrance fees.

With just a little bit of investment, and a bit of promotion, they could be a much bigger part of a healthy community agenda. With a little supervision, regulation and enforcement they could become a low-cost / high value place to experience the natural world.

How Should WMA's be Used?

An important first step would be to restrict the use of both guns and motor vehicles, except under carefully considered conditions.

It may be that hunting is appropriate in most WMA's. There is a case to make that some of the locations, such as the Brandon Hills WMA, which is close to a city and used in all seasons, is inappropriate for any use of firearms.

In areas where hunting is allowed, hunters will insist that they need access by motor vehicles and that may be appropriate.

But with the exception of specific hunting seasons, there is no reason to allow either guns or motor vehicles in any WMA. The use of both, contradicts the very purpose, the very name, "Wildlife Management Area".

A government publication entitled "**Manitoba's Protected Areas Initiative**" helpfully informs us that"

"the Use of Wildlife Lands Regulation prohibits "activities that significantly and adversely affect habitat in the areas specified."

It seems pretty clear to me that neither motor vehicles nor gunfire is **"for the benefit of wildlife"** and that both would indeed, **"significantly and adversely affect habitat in the areas specified."**

Should there be exceptions? Certainly.

A location such as Souris Mouth, historically significant and dramatically beautiful, requires a fair walk. Perhaps to make the site available for people who aren't up to the hike we could allow vehicles along a well-defined trail and a designated parking spot.



The trail to Souris Mouth

When deciding the nature of restrictions we need to consider the size, location,

historical and ecological significance, as well as the natural features of each WMA location.



The area is rich in history. It deserves better care. The first Land Titles Office (1880) in the Westman was there. The First HBC Trading Post (1793) was nearby. Millford, the first village in south of the Assiniboine River in Westman, the childhood home of Nellie McClung, was just to the south. In here memoir, “Clearing in the West”, she vividly recalls crossing the Assiniboine near Souris Mouth as they approached her new home. The Criddle/ Vane Provincial Heritage Park is just to the north.

When setting both restrictions and goals for individual WMA’s, we need to encourage partnerships with local organizations. The Brandon WMA is favoured by Cross-Country Skiers and Hikers. The Souris Bend WMA has benefitted by the involvement of Equestrians. The rules need to reflect partnerships with user groups.

Taking a Closer Look at “Appropriate Activities” and Broader Issues.

The concept of “appropriate activities” was recently brought to light in an interesting fashion.

The equestrian group that has created, maintained and enhanced trails in the Souris Bend WMA, was informed that ATVs would be allowed improved access to some portions of the WMA. It appears that an ATV Association lobbied the provincial government for a change to a long-standing policy. The equestrians certainly hadn't been consulted. The media was alerted and ran the story, while the Friends of Souris Bend Facebook Group sponsored a petition and letter writing campaign to get the government to reconsider. The petition was very well supported and within days the government reported to all that there would be no improved access for ATV's .

On the surface, it would appear that this was good news story, but this little episode is part of a much larger issue, and I am very afraid that the Earth, and those of us that care about its health, are losing that battle.

A subset of the battle to save the planet is the divide between those of us who prefer earth-friendly recreational activities and those who choose activities that harm the earth and, in the process, often harm and annoy any nearby humans and wildlife.

The battle between ATV owners and hikers, for instance, is not as simple as two groups vying for their right to enjoy their pastimes. Having government treat it that way, which they are doing, deflects our attention from the deeper issues. It's not just that I object to having my peaceful, quiet, hike interrupted by the noise, stink, and danger of a passing ATV. It's that the environmental, health, and safety impacts of our respective lifestyle choices are in no way comparable. And that matters. It matters deeply when it comes to public policy.

Who could not agree that governments today should come out strongly in support of earth-friendly options in all aspects of life?

By, in effect, ignoring the environmental side of an issue, governments can sidestep it and pretend that it is just a battle between two competing interests.

My letter to the local MLA and two other cabinet ministers went like this:

My family and I have been hiking and paddling in the Souris Bend Wildlife Management Area for decades, and we strongly object to allowing the use of motorized vehicles of any type in that beautiful and unique area.

Those of us who choose to enjoy nature in a peaceful, non-intrusive way are finding it increasingly difficult to find places to escape from the noise and pollution of modern-day life.

At a time when the earth is on the verge of a climate catastrophe our governments should be doing everything possible to encourage earth friendly activities. ATV's, in particular, are incompatible with hiking and equestrian

activities, and it was the equestrian group that did the work in developing and maintaining the trails through this amazing landscape

The response from the Minister in charge read:

The Province of Manitoba recognizes that multiple user groups have interest in this area. We also recognize the ecological importance of the area, and will continue to consider impacts to wildlife and habitat as we move forward.

Historic vehicle access along existing Designated Vehicle Trails and use of equestrian trails by non-vehicle users is being considered, including where these trail networks currently overlap. We are reviewing the Designated Vehicle Trail and equestrian trail system to ensure the safety of all users, while at the same time taking steps to limit off-trail activity. No decisions have been made regarding the trail network, and no regulatory changes have been made to the Designated Vehicle Trail system. There is no intent to expand or promote the recreational use of ATVs in the Souris River Bend WMA.

We appreciate your views on the issue. Manitoba is in the early stages of public consultation and will continue to work with various user groups and adjacent landowners to develop a reasonable solution.

The opening sentence referring to “multiple user groups” sets the parameters for the discussion. Recognizing the “ecological importance” is a nod to the fact that the environment exists, and can henceforth be ignored. Instead “the safety of all users” is a consideration.

The province’s written statement provided to the Brandon Sun, notes that:

“At this time the province is working with stakeholders and trail users but no final decisions on trail allocations have been made.”

We’re all just “stakeholders” – we all have rights.

So a “sport” that pollutes the environment, kills a few people per year, disrupts wildlife, endangers hikers and equestrians, and is unhealthy for the both the user and anyone they encounter, is on some sort of level playing field with a sport such as hiking which, in terms of environmental impact and the health of both user and observer, does the opposite.



Trails used by hikers leave a minimal footprint.

This is the story of governments that consistently encourage, and even subsidize, behaviors that are starkly at odds with any pretense of taking action on climate change and health.

When I sent my concerns to government, I included the Minister of Conservation.

Her team sent me a prompt reply, explaining that, “ **this matter falls under Honourable Blaine Pedersen, Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development, I have taken the liberty of forwarding your email for their review.**”

The reply speaks volumes about why we continue to avoid dealing with the impending climate disaster.

I replied to this message by suggesting that:

“In fact, the issue of the appropriate use of Wildlife Management Areas is, almost by definition, about the natural world, and thus the Minister of Conservation and Climate should be at the table when decisions are made.

In fact, it should be the job of the Minister of Conservation and Climate to advise all branches of government as to the sustainability of all policies. The reason we are facing an environmental catastrophe is in large part because individual government departments see it as someone else's problem.

If there are people in government who see no problem with encouraging people to use gasoline-powered toys, to the detriment of people who make more earth-friendly recreational choices, then that helps to explain the continuing, accelerating, degradation of the natural world that is happening right before our eyes.

If the Minister of Conservation and Climate won't be a voice on behalf of the earth, what is the purpose of the department?"

So far...no response.

What Should Government Do?

Politicians like to say that their duty is to enact the will of the people. They will also admit that the role of government is also to protect the rights of the powerless and minorities. Progressive governments around the world are beginning to acknowledge that they have a duty to protect the earth.

Therefore, if it appears that the will of the people is to infringe upon the rights of the powerless or to damage the earth, some action might be required.

So?

Although I prefer to enjoy natural places on foot, and would find donning a helmet and riding on an ATV as simply spoiling a perfectly beautiful day, that's just my opinion. ATV enthusiasts have every right to pursue their perfectly legal hobby, but there is no place for them in ecologically sensitive locations. Our governments have a duty to at least not go on pretending that our choices relating to the earth, to health and safety, and to the well-being of our neighbours, are somehow value neutral or with out far-reaching consequences. Now is the time for our governments to place a little more emphasis on providing safe, accessible places for earth-friendly activities.

Governments should also more clearly message the truth about climate change and the hundreds of daily decisions we all make that make a difference. They need to begin clearly encouraging earth friendly (human friendly) choices. They have to do more than suggest, they have to deploy clearly obvious carrots and sticks. They haven't begun to do this.

The first step is admitting you have a problem.

In Summary

We urgently need our government to review the use and abuse of WMA's.

WMA's are a good place to start putting the environment first, and to start promoting healthy recreational alternatives.

We need to stop encouraging recreational activities that have negative effects on the environment and human health, and stop penalizing those who prefer more healthy sustainable activities.

The further degradation of sites that are ecologically and historically significant can be virtually eliminated by a few simple steps. Restrict the use of both motor vehicles and guns, and enforce the rules. Does anyone really think that the litter, vandalism and habitat damage we see is caused by hikers? Bluntly put, people with guns and people with vehicles are causing the problem. Period. No one is saying that all gun owners and people who use vehicles are to blame, but allowing the **activities**, except under carefully considered conditions, is contrary to the stated purpose of the WMA's.

Will we do this or will we continue to allow the people who abuse these sites to dictate government policy?

Ken Storie