Alberta Conservation Association
2008/09 Project Summary Report

Project name: *Upper North Saskatchewan Fire and Wildlife Interpretive Trail*

Project leaders: Shevenell Webb

Primary ACA staff on this project: Robert Anderson and Shevenell Webb

Partnerships:

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
TD Friends of the Environment Foundation (Red Deer Chapter)
Mountain Equipment Co-op
Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation

Key findings

- We selected the existing Landslide Lake trail, 170 km west of Rocky Mountain House, as an ideal location for a fire and wildlife interpretive trail because it overlaps the Upper North Saskatchewan Prescribed Burn and is accessable to Highway 11.
- We measured vehicle and trail use on the Landslide trail and recorded 627 vehicles and 369 trail hits from June – August 2008.
- We concluded that many people are indifferent about the benefits of fire based on the results of an informal Forest Fire Survey to document people's experience, attitudes, and knowledge about fire.

Abstract

Prescribed burn programs in the east slopes of Alberta have presented an excellent opportunity to engage the public about the important role that fires play in maintaining and enhancing the forested ecosystem. This past year, the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) began a new initiative to determine the feasibility of developing an outreach program about fire and wildlife ecology. Our preliminary goals for the program are to develop an interpretive trail in a recent prescribed burn that would give visitor's an up-close glimpse of the forest after fire and improve people's understanding about natural disturbance history. An interpretive trail of this nature would be a unique and timely endeavour in Alberta. Support for this fire education and outreach initiative is growing from a diversity of partners and stakeholder groups. We report on our background research findings, progress, and future plans to implement the fire and wildlife interpretive trail.

Introduction

Fire prevention campaigns over the past 100 years have dramatically altered forest communities, wildlife habitat, and the public's attitudes about fire. However, prescribed burns are being planned by the Alberta Conservation Association and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (ASRD) to improve wildlife habitat and forest health conditions and minimize the risk of catastrophic wildfires and insect infestations. Although managers have identified the important role of fire in ecosystem function, the public has little opportunities to explore the many benefits of fire, which may hamper political support for such activities. Therefore, it is important to engage the general public on the value of prescribed fires, particularly in wilderness areas where fire suppression has caused few natural breaks to occur on the landscape.

The ACA implements an ongoing Ungulate Winter Range Restoration program that relies on partnerships and planning with ASRD for prescribed burning to reach desired ecological, social, and economic objectives. In addition, ACA has worked in collaboration with ASRD and public groups in planning the R11 (Bighorn Backcountry) Forest Management Plan. Developing a communication strategy that emphasizes the rationale and benefits of prescribed burning has been identified as a key objective of the R11 plan. An outreach program, such as an interpretive trail, that compliments the habitat restoration program and R11 plan would teach people about natural disturbance ecology while also creating additional recreational opportunities for our member groups and the general public.

In general, the first year of this project was to determine the feasibility and support for a fire outreach and education project. The primary objectives were to: 1) Determine a location for an interpretive trail, 2) Conduct background research on natural disturbance history, people's attitudes about fire, and interpretive trail programs, and 3) Develop a proposal and submit funding applications.

Methods

We met with ASRD staff to plan a location that would be ideal for an interpretive trail and to get informal support for initial ideas. We wanted to pick a location that overlapped a recent prescribed burn, was accessible, and had an existing trail network in place. After selecting a trail, we used a road and trail counter to measure visitor use to the area.

For background research, we met with Parks Canada staff to gain insight on successful public outreach programs and visited interpretive trails in Alberta and British Columbia to document trail designs (e.g., trail length, signage, parking, other facilities, etc.). We also familiarized ourselves with the literature about the history of forest fire management, fire ecology, people's attitudes towards fire, and conservation education techniques. In addition, we conducted an informal Forest Fire Survey to determine knowledge about the general public's experience and attitudes about forest fires. We distributed surveys to Goldeye Centre and Shunda Hostel in Nordegg. We selected these 2 facilities because of the concentration of people and close

proximity to potential interpretive fire trail. Youth ages 10-20 years old from Alberta and British Columbia attend a leadership camp at Goldeye and were asked to fill out fire surveys as part of their evaluation package. Meanwhile, fire surveys were left at the Shunda Hostel registration desk for visitors to fill out upon arrival or departure.

We incorporated the background information and worked on a project budget, proposal, and an interpretive plan. We also submitted funding applications and elicited informal support from other project partners.

Results

The existing Landslide Lake trail (Fig 1) has been identified as an ideal area for the establishment of the fire and wildlife interpretive trail because it overlaps the proposed Upper North Saskatchewan Unit 1 Prescribed Burn, has a well established trail, and has a large gravel parking lot that is easily accessible from Highway 11. The Landslide Lake trail is characterized as a steep, 7.5 km hike through montane, subalpine, and alpine eco-regions that ends at a popular backcountry fishing destination or hikers can continue to the Cline River. We are planning the interpretive stations in the montane area with gentler slopes to accommodate diverse age groups and physical capabilities. We will create loops off of the main trail to make short and long walks feasible. Currently the trail is used by day hikers, backpackers, and fishermen. In addition, this area is also important to First Nations as evidenced by on-site sweat lodges and other ceremonial structures. Approximately 627 vehicles used the parking lot and 369 hits were registered on the trail counters from June 21 – August 21, 2008.

We conducted a Forest Fire Survey from July 1 to August 28, 2008. The average age was between 10- 20 years old and 67% of respondents were female. In general, people were indifferent about fire. The majority of people had seen a fire on television (99%), but fewer people had seen a forest fire in person (33%). Only one-third of the people agreed that forest fires are a natural process that should occur on the landscape, while half of the people knew what a prescribed burn was and 62% agreed that fires can help some trees reproduce. However, 33% thought that fires resulted in high wildlife mortality and 58% agreed that the television and newspaper were credible sources about the environment. Wildlife mortality (0.33) was the most frequently ranked important risk of forest fire, whereas, ugly landscape (0.53) was the least important ranked risk. In general, people were unsure about the benefits of forest fires. Creation of a diverse and healthy forest was the most frequently ranked benefit (0.31). Conversely, reduced risk of wildfire (0.27) and improved wildlife habitat (0.27) were the least frequently ranked benefits.

We submitted funding applications to a variety of partners and received financial support from those organizations acknowledged above.

Conclusion

We are gaining momentum and support for this project from a diverse suite of partners. We are working closely with ASRD to deliver this valuable education and outreach project and look forward to increasing our partnerships, particularly with schools. We have planned to implement the interpretive trail over the next two years but are dependent on adequate weather conditions for the Upper North Saskatchewan Prescribed Burn to occur; currently, the prescribed burn is scheduled for spring 2009. In FY 2009/10, we will focus on creating a project website, developing, ordering, and installing signage, making trail improvements, and installing other trail facilities.

Communications

- Fire and Wildlife brochure completed in April 2008 and handed out to the public by the ASRD Fire Information Officer.
- Preliminary project ideas were presented to and approved by the Alberta Conservation Association Wildlife Team in September 2008.
- Project plans were presented to and approved by the Bighorn Backcountry Steering Committee in October 2008.
- A project presentation was delivered to the Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee in March 2009.

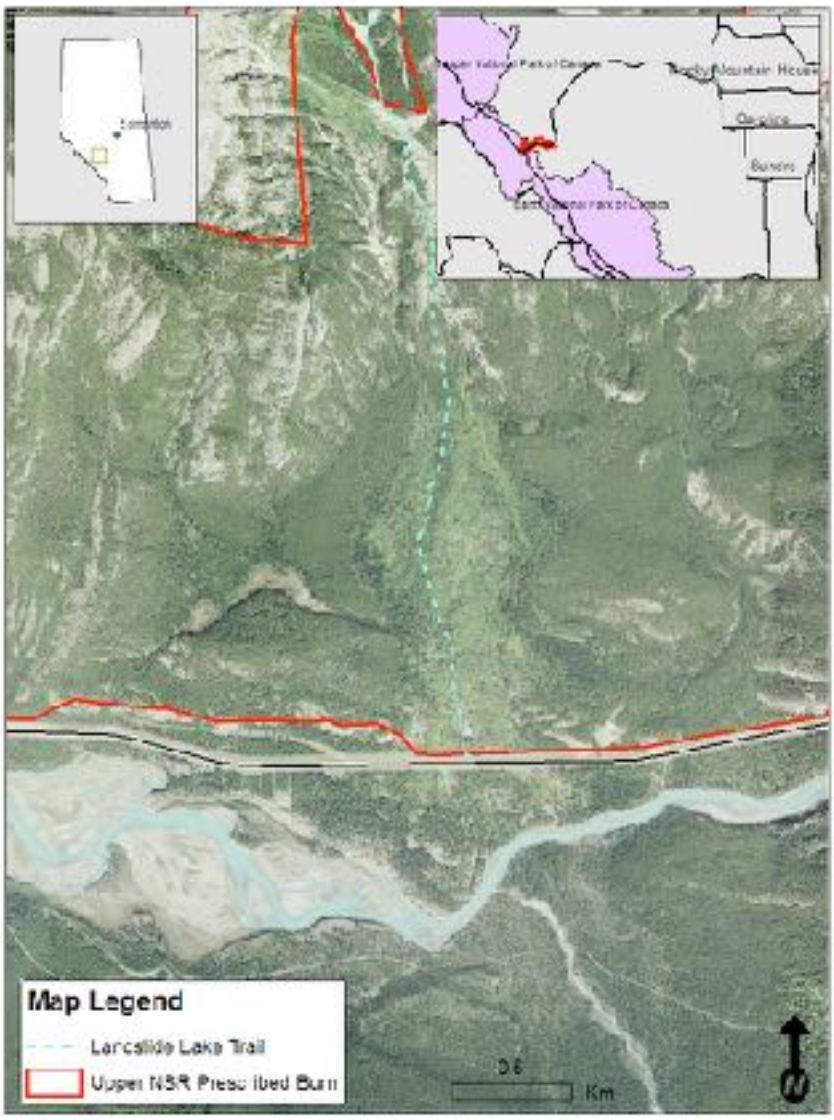

Figure 1. Location of the interpretive trail, approximately 170 km west of Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. This area is scheduled to be burned in spring 2009.

Looking South on the Montane portion of the proposed interpretive trail, as viewed from the ridge on Landslide Lake trail in July 2008. (Photo: S. Webb, ACA)

A family enjoys a backpack trip on the Landslide Lake trail in July. (Photo: S. Webb, ACA)

In spring, a day hiker overlooks the Landslide Lake trail from above. (Photo: S. Webb, ACA)