



Changing Use Patterns at Starr Creek Cabin

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1) History

The current Starr Creek Cabin was built in 1991 under the leadership of Win Hobson of Telkwa, using his own money and a volunteer contingent of cross-country skiers. It was built to replace an old mining cabin that Jerry Mencl of Telkwa had found at the headwaters of Starr Creek. After using the old mining cabin for three years they built the new cabin at Starr Creek to replace it. The cabin sits at an elevation of 1305 m/ 4600 feet at approximately UTM 594942 6036606 09U. The relevant map sheet is 93 L/5 Burnie Lake.

Prior to that, in the 1980s, Win and other local backcountry skiers had renovated and used a cabin at Winfield Creek in the Microwave Range as their prime backcountry ski destination. Soon afterwards the Winfield Creek Cabin was discovered by snowmobilers and due to their persistent use of the area, skiers abandoned the area and the cabin in favour of the Starr Creek location.

Initially the rental fees for the cabin went to pay down the debt owed to Win, but by the early 90s he was still about \$7,500 out of pocket. To pay off this debt about 20 local skiers each paid Win \$250 shares on the basis that they would have "life memberships" in the ski cabin (i.e. use of the cabin without having to pay the applicable fee). The final \$2,500 debt was acquired by the Bulkley Valley Cross Country Ski Club (BVCCSC) who now administer and maintain the cabin. Unfortunately, since the club's focus is the Nordic facility at Pine Creek, the cabin receives little attention and exists only because of the efforts of some dedicated volunteers.

For its first fifteen years, the Starr Creek Cabin was a popular destination for non-motorized users. Each winter there were at least two week-long trips by parties of local and visiting skiers, plus many shorter trips. In addition several parties of hikers used the cabin each summer. In the winter of 2006/07, however, no skiers visited the cabin, except for one party on a traverse. Summer 2006 saw just one hiking group.

In contrast, during the summer of 2006, there were at least 30 visits by motorized users, despite the non-motorized status of the area. This is according to cabin logbook entries. It is likely that there were actually many more motorized visitors who declined to make an entry in the log book. By the winter of 2006/2007, the entire Starr Creek area was covered with snowmobile tracks and there were numerous entries from snowmobilers in the cabin's log book.

2) Caribou

In 1965 a viable herd of 271 woodland caribou roamed the Telkwa Mountains. In the late 60s and early 70s, with increased public access due to mining activity and hunting, the herd numbers crashed. Following the ban on caribou hunting in 1973 and the collapse of the mining interests which reduced the number of people accessing the area, the herd appeared to be making a slow recovery.

To assist this recovery, in 1981, recreation access restrictions were proposed which were approved by the Deputy Minister of Parks and reached Order in Council stage. Unfortunately, due to strong lobbying, local MLA and Forest Minister Jack Kempf vetoed the proposal. The inevitable happened. By 1993 the herd was down to 11 animals and by 1997 just 6 caribou (no calves) were left. Extinction threatened the Telkwa Caribou Herd. This second collapse can be partially attributed to range abandonment by the caribou due to human-caused disturbances, particularly by off-highway vehicles (OHV) and snowmobiles.

After the Ministry of Environment (MOE) put considerable resources into restocking the herd, which included the expenditure of more than a half million dollars in taxpayer's money (\$235,000 from the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund and \$310,000 from Forest Renewal BC) it again tried to control access to the area. Resistance by users was again well organized and persistent. The user groups were able to sway wildlife officials into accepting a voluntary recreational access management plan rather than legislation.

In the ten years since, it has become clear that this approach has utterly failed. Motorized use has increased dramatically to the point where caribou habitat is again being impacted and, in the case of Starr Creek basin, there is a drastic reduction of non-motorized use by skiers and hikers. The caribou are now exposed to more disturbance from motorized use that can eventually restrict the herd's expansion in numbers into suitable habitat, e.g. north of Starr Creek.

At its September 2006 meeting, the Voluntary Recreational Access Management Group (VRAMG), a group consisting of snowmobile club reps, trappers, back country horsemen, prospectors, hunters, skiers, hikers and naturalists etc. which oversees the implementation of the access management plan for the Telkwa Caribou Herd Recovery Plan, unanimously asked MOE to investigate legislative options to protect the herd as it was clear to them that voluntary compliance was not working. No progress has been made to date.

3) Morice Land and Resource Management Plan (MLRMP)

The Starr Creek cabin is located at the edge of the MLRMP map area but is often accessed from the Bulkley Land and Resource Management Plan (BVL RMP) area. At the beginning of the Morice LRMP in 2002, the Protected Areas Strategy showed the Telkwa Mountains in which Starr Creek is located as a candidate for protection as a Class A Provincial Park. The rationale was to ensure the survival of the Telkwa caribou herd as well as some mid-and low elevation forests that are vital for caribou winter range. Throughout the planning table's deliberations, that area was referred to as non-motorized. The table assumed that environmental concerns would be covered by the Telkwa Caribou Recovery Strategy and did not discuss further protection. The MLRMP mandates the establishment of a Use Plan to reduce user conflicts.

Houston snowmobilers are the most frequent users of the Starr Creek cabin. So far, the Houston Snowmobile Club has declined to engage in the Use Plan process because the MLRMP has not been enacted by the provincial cabinet.

4) *Displacement of non-motorized use*

Throughout North America, the pattern of recreation user conflict is well documented and common. Where motorized and non-motorized users compete for the same resource, non-motorized users usually are displaced. They have no certainty that they will find the resource as they need it. Since they have to invest far more time and effort to reach a destination, they react by abandoning the area. They try to move to other areas where the process is repeated. Non-motorized users are more susceptible to goal interference from motorized users than vice versa. As a result, the area available to non-motorized users that is reliably free from motorized interference has shrunk dramatically and is continuing to shrink.

This pattern is well known to recreationists in this region. The Winfield Creek cabin and the Harold Price shelter are prime examples of the displacement of skiers by snowmobilers. It took a violent incident at a commercial mountain lodge in 2005 to spur government agencies, which had until then had been reluctant to address the issue, to start taking the interest of the vast majority of recreationists that do not use off-highway vehicles.

Lack of action by government agencies at times favours motorized interests and jeopardizes non-motorized and broad community interests. In 2001, persons unknown erected an illegal snowmobile cabin in the Sinclair Creek drainage west of Smithers. Local Forest District staff disregarded numerous letters protesting the cabin and chose to do nothing about the illegal occupation of the cabin by local snowmobilers for years. As a result of an investigation by the Forest Practices Board in 2005, the cabin was posted, closed and eventually tenured.

In the Babine Mountains Provincial Park, the stated intent of the park Master Plan and the non-motorized designation of Cronin and Four Lakes has been eroded by BC Parks' practice of making snowmobiling permits available. In addition there are numerous trips by snowmobilers into Silverking basin, a non-motorized area within the park, without any consequences.

In the case of the Starr Creek cabin, it is clear that a facility built by, paid for and intended for the use of non-motorized recreationists is being alienated by increasing motorized use, even though motorized user groups have committed to reducing their presence. It is obvious that a different approach is now needed.

5) *Recommendations*

To prevent further loss of areas and facilities available to non-motorized users in the Starr Creek area, we recommend that the Starr Creek area be declared legally non-motorized until a Use Plan that protects the Telkwa caribou herd and satisfies the interests of all user groups is established. Maintaining the status quo removes any incentive for motorized users to negotiate since they now have a free hand.

In the Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area, replace voluntary motorized access restrictions with legislation, as recommended by the VRAMG at its September 2006 meeting. This would allow enforcement of the summer motorized closure. There has been a dramatic

increase in the number of ATVs and trail motorcycles in the Howson Road to Starr Creek corridor. During one weekend in the summer of 2006, eight ATV drivers and two trail motorcyclists were documented riding in the area. Most professed to be familiar with the closure, but chose to disregard it. Many more motorized users made entries in the cabin's log book throughout the summer.

To provide a meaningful base for negotiations, all alpine areas in the region need to be mapped and documented according to: ecological sensitivity, availability to either user group in terms of distance from town and from trailheads, desirability and suitability, and legal status. In the absence of this information, rational and meaningful debate is difficult.

In Smithers and Telkwa, the communities that produced the first LRMP in British Columbia, there should be no hesitation to enter into a dialogue on recreational zoning and complete the RAMP. There are economic as well as social and environmental arguments in favour of resolving local conflict. The RAMP process must be open, accountable, and based on the premise that government will impose zoning if no consensus is reached.

Tenure for the Starr Creek Cabin should be transferred from the Bulkley Valley Cross Country Ski Club (BVCCSC) to the Smithers chapter of the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC). At present, the cabin is looked after by one or two BVCCSC club members without much support from the club whose interests are primarily Nordic and track skiing. The ACC, on the other hand, is directly engaged in mountain activities and is prepared to look after the facility.

The BV Outdoor Recreation Society of Smithers, BC is a citizen's group of both motorized and non-motorized users with the following purposes:

- Conserve mountain and forest habitat
- Conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat
- Promote responsible use of off-road motorized vehicles
- Maintain and enhance a balance of recreation opportunities

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