

Bow River Recreational Access

Ghost Dam to Bearspaw Reservoirs.

Introduction

Outdoor recreational pursuits have increased in popularity in recent years with access to suitable venues close to the urban populations being one of the most important needs. Calgary and surrounding communities have access to a wide variety of outdoor pursuits with the Bow River and its tributaries offering a venue for paddle sports such as canoeing and kayak as well as fishing. But river recreational access is not without restraints. Access to public waterways is often across privately owned land or under restricted access agreements within city and provincial property.

In 2016 the City of Calgary addressed their concerns with the development of the Calgary River Access Strategy (RAS) ⁽¹⁾ whereby a total of 12 designated river access sites were considered for improvements or new river access developments. To date two major projects have been completed, an upgrade to West Baker Park in the northwest quadrant of Calgary and a new boat ramp at Ogden Bridge. The Government of Alberta followed suit with the Bow River Access Plan (BRAP) ⁽²⁾ that addressed river access improvements between Fish Creek Provincial Park in Calgary and Johnson Island Provincial Park property at Carseland. Within the scope of the BRAP major improvements have been made to Policeman's Flats in 2018 and a new road to McKinnon Flats in 2020. Also, the Harvie Passage Whitewater Park was developed in Calgary and other river recreational facilities are planned.

Upstream of Calgary, the 50 Km reach of the Bow River between Ghost Reservoir and Bearspaw Reservoir has the potential to alleviate the ever-increasing river recreational use on the lower Bow River. Cochrane has become the focal point for future river recreational use with the proposed River Wave Park ⁽³⁾. But to optimize outdoor activities access to the river upstream and downstream of Cochrane is needed. Until the fall of 2020 casual walk-in river access was available below the Ghost Reservoir Dam. Unfortunately, TransAlta closed the site to the public citing liability and property maintenance issues. Downstream of Cochrane, the new City of Calgary Haskayne Legacy Park may offer the best solution for a take-out point for river use.

The Calgary River Users Alliance (CRUA) has played an important stakeholder role in the development of the Calgary River Access Strategy and the Government of Alberta - Bow River Access Plan. Together with our membership of diverse river recreational user groups, we believe it is possible to develop a comprehensive strategy to enhance river access needs between Ghost Reservoir and Bearspaw Reservoir. This document discusses our objectives as a recreational river user group and what could be done with the cooperation of all stakeholders to meet the community needs expanded outdoor pursuits while protecting landowner and environmental concerns.

Objectives

The **Calgary Rivers Users Alliance (CRUA)** was formed in 2016 to improve recreational, non-motorized boating access to the Bow and Elbow Rivers in Calgary with the following objectives:

- To represent the interests of all boaters using the rivers of Calgary, including anglers and paddlers.
- To improve non-motorized recreational boating access to the rivers of Calgary.
- To improve working relations with City of Calgary departments, specifically Fire, Police, and Parks Departments.
- To educate City Councillors and City Departments about the importance of river recreation in Calgary and its value to the local economy.
- To work towards an overall Bow River Recreational Management Plan.

More recently CRUA expanded its scope of engagement to include the entire Bow River Basin. We are now better positioned to engage with government agencies on water and river recreational management policy. CRUA membership is diverse and included the following organizations:

Alberta Whitewater Association	Alberta Slalom Canoe Kayak
Calgary Kayak Club	Rocky Mountain Paddling Centre
Alberta River Surfing Association	Bow Waters Canoe Club
Paddle Alberta	Angling Outfitter & Guide Association of Alberta
Harvie Passage Alliance	RiverWatch
Bow River Trout Foundation	University of Calgary Outdoor Centre

CRUA objectives fall in line with both the City of Calgary River Access Strategy (CRAS)⁽¹⁾ and The Government of Alberta Bow River Access Plan (BRAP)⁽²⁾:

The CRAS Objectives: The River Access Strategy (CRAS) was developed with the aim to:

- Provide increased user access to the Bow and Elbow rivers, so that Calgarians can enjoy a healthy and active lifestyle.
- Promote appropriate access points to access recreation opportunities on the river, while also protecting the riparian environment.
- Provide better information around bylaws, safety, river conditions and more.
- Create more economic opportunities for various businesses who provide services to help users access the river.

BRAP Outcomes and Objectives: The GOA has identified eight desired outcomes for the BRAP:

1. Develop a sustainable river access plan for anglers and other recreational users (i.e., canoeists, kayakers, etc.) as well as those seeking nature experiences along the Bow River.
2. Ensure the health and sustainability of the fishery, riparian areas, and aquatic ecosystems.
3. To focus on improving the existing facilities at the Bow River access sites within the planning area. A priority is identifying an alternative location to Policeman's Flats.
4. Reduce site impacts (i.e., site erosion, inappropriate user behavior, human waste, etc.).

5. Facilitate commercial recreation and tourism opportunities within and adjacent to the Bow River.
6. Develop partnerships with anglers, guides, and tourism operators to enhance the management and stewardship of Bow River access sites.
7. Identify strategies for educating Albertans about the sites, what can be anticipated at each site, and expected behaviors on and off the river.
8. Continue to explore opportunities for expanding the Bow River access network beyond the sites identified in this Plan.

The principal objective of the BRAP was to improve existing facilities within the scope of the planning area from the Fish Creek Provincial Park to Johnson's Island - Wyndham Carsland Provincial Park Weir (Figure 1). This has been accomplished with improvements to infrastructure at Policeman's Flats and a new road access and proposed river access improvements at McKinnon Flats. Upgrades and new boat ramps in the City of Calgary have also complemented an integrated river access further upstream to the Bearspaw Dam.



Figure 1: BRAP Scope of Development

The angling pressure has continued to increase across the designated scope of the entire Bow River Basin in recent years and sports fish populations have declined over the same period. Also, recreational boat use across the lower Bow River Basin has increased. Access to the Bow River upstream of Calgary from Ghost Dam to Bearspaw Reservoir is limited but has the potential for expansion to allow for an additional 50 Km of river recreational activities.

Bow River Access Ghost Dam to Bearspaw Reservoir

River access across this reach of the Bow River has been possible below the outflow of the Ghost Reservoir Dam, close to the Wildcat Gas Plant 6 Km downstream of the Ghost Reservoir, at Cochrane, and several casual access sites in the upper portion of Bearspaw Reservoir. Unfortunately, except for Cochrane, all these river access points cross private land and have been closed to public use in recent years. Liability, garbage containment, and site maintenance have been the major concerns for the property owners. A total of four sites do have the potential for development into designated river access (Figure 2).

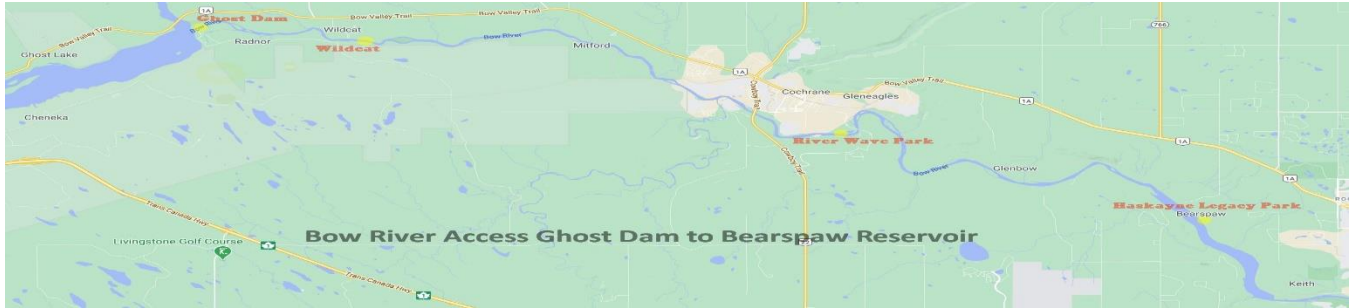


Figure 2: Bow River Access Ghost Dam to Bearspaw Reservoir

Ghost Dam River Access:

The Ghost Dam and adjacent property are owned by TransAlta. A service road from the county road south of the Ghost Lake Cottage Club development to the river was available to the public until the 2013 flood when the vehicle access to the roadway was restricted. Foot traffic to the river edge was possible until the fall of 2020 when all public access was prohibited Figure 3)

It is CRUA's understanding that regulated access to the river edge is possible once liability and site maintenance issues are addressed. To secure vehicle access the service road would need to be upgraded and possible further restrictions for access put in place. The first step would appear to focus on foot access to the site. A stewardship-partnership agreement should be considered. CRUA and/or one of our member organizations will take the initiative to advance discussions with TransAlta.



Figure 3 River Access below Ghost Dam.

Wildcat River Access:

Access to the Bow River is by use of the service road to the Wildcat Hill Gas Extraction Plant. In recent years, the road was closed to the public most likely due to liability and site maintenance issues. The provincial Wildcat Island Natural Area (Figure 4) is 1 Km further downstream of the historical service road access. The island is a common stopping-off site for the paddle community. Overnight camping and picnics are common at the property. The development of a public river access site at Wildcats should also be considered.



Figure 4 Wildcat Island Natural Area

Haskayne Legacy Park:

The Calgary River Access Strategy ⁽¹⁾ included Haskayne Legacy Park as a possible future river access site on the north-west perimeter of the city. It is understood that a new designated river access at the edge of the Bearspaw Reservoir will be included in the plan. The preferred location will be at the north-west corner of the park where it borders with Glenbow Ranch Provincial Park (Figure 5). It will be important for the City of Calgary to give due consideration to water protection goals around the Bearspaw Reservoir. Recreational use of Bearspaw Reservoir should align with that of the Glenmore Reservoir, as per Glenmore Park Bylaw #9018, which prohibits swimming or human contact, motorized boats, and winter on-ice access.

Boat access to the shore of Haskayne Legacy Park will not only allow for recreational outdoor pursuits on the reservoir but also offer a take-out point for floating the 25 Km reach of the Bow River between Cochrane and Calgary. This is one of the most beautiful stretches of the river to float within a reasonable distance of Calgary. Therefore, a new trailered boat access should be considered in the park development.



Figure 5 Haskayne Legacy Park

Cochrane River Wave Park:

The proposed River Wave Park development ⁽³⁾ will have surfing waves and an urban beach at River Avenue Bridge. This combination of recreational waves and the accessible beach will result in substantial cultural, economic, and environmental benefits that will last generations. The waves and urban beaches are expected to generate \$2 to \$6 million per year in new economic activity from wave users alone. Improved recreational access to the river will contribute considerably more the local community.



The development of the River Wave Park will add to river access sites in Cochrane. For the casual floater, a put-in at the Riverfront Park below Highway 22 and a take-out at the new River Wave Park is 2.4 Km. The length of the float can be extended to 3.4 Km by a take-out at the Family Sports Centre. Anyone of the Cochrane river access sites offers the opportunity to have a longer float of XXX KM from Ghost Dam of 25 Km downstream to Haskayne Legacy Park.

The Economic Importance of Recreational River Use

In 2016, the CRUA prepared a report ⁽⁴⁾ in support of the economic contribution of river sports to the City of Calgary River Access Strategy. The direct economic contribution of the Bow River fishing community to City of Calgary businesses was more than \$24.5 million and by regional fishing related activities a total of \$114 million annually. Combined with paddle sports, the total contribution that all river users was estimated at \$50 million annually. An update of the data in 2019 ⁽⁵⁾ showed that the estimated economic contribution to the City of Calgary had increased to \$56 million annually.

The CRUA 2019 update went on to say that *“An in-depth economic assessment of the Bow River Basin recreation needs and the contribution to the local economy is paramount to achieving much needed financial resources to enhance infrastructure and develop strategies to protect a very valuable recreational resource and economic driver to the local business community”*. Certainly, with the expansion of river recreation venues on the reach of the Bow River between the Ghost Dam and Bearspaw Reservoir it is reasonable to suggest that river recreation spots and related activities would contribute more than \$100 million annually to the local economy.

The Next Step

1. Develop an agreement with TransAlta to reopen the Ghost Dam River Access Site to recreational river use. Liability and site maintenance concerns will need to be addressed. Controlled foot access would appear to be possible, but a more open public vehicle access agreement will be a challenge.
2. Engage with the City of Calgary to assure that trailered boat river access to Haskayne Legacy Park is included in the development plan.
3. Engage with the Government of Alberta to assess the feasibility of a new public access site with a boat at or close to the Wildcat Hills Gas Plant.
4. Engage with the City of Cochrane to assure that the River Wave Parks meets all river recreational needs.

Reference:

1. Calgary River Access Strategy – Presented to Community & Protective Services Committee Meeting – 01 February 2017. <https://www.calgaryriverusers.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CPS2017-0103-CRAS-Att-1-Final.pdf>
2. Bow River Access Plan, Alberta Environment & Parks. 2019. <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/2d84767c-b4d6-4cf9-91e8-a0d3d66361b0/resource/cb11d013-e247-4c22-9ee3-dedb1251e48a/download/bow-river-access-plan.pdf>
3. Cochrane River Wave Park. <https://cochraneriverwavepark.com/>
4. The Economic Importance of Recreational River Use to the City of Calgary. 2016. <https://www.calgaryriverusers.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/crua-economic-position-statement-to-city-of-calgary-revise-19-may-2016-1.pdf>
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