

Bow River Access – A Vision for the Future

Overview:

Calgary River Users Alliance (CRUA) was formed in 2016 to advocate for improvements to Calgary's Bow and Elbow River recreational river access sites. The [Calgary River Access Strategy](#) (CRAS) was approved by City Council in February 2017 that has seen new and improved designated river access across the city. The GoA followed with the [Bow River Access Plan](#) (BRAP) in 2019 which addressed designated river access between Calgary and Carseland. New road access to McKinnon Flats was completed by Alberta Environment and Protected Areas (AEP) in 2020, and a Stewardship-Partnership agreement between AEP and Calgary Fish and Game Association (CFGAs) saw a designated river access site and an expanded parking lot completed in 2022. Although Policeman's Flats was referenced for remediation within the BRAP, it was the Bow River Trout Foundation (BRTF) that developed a maintenance agreement with the owner of the private property to enhance river access. This has been an ongoing BRTF project where improvements to the site have been made each year.

CRUA has been working on a [Bow River Basin Recreation Management Plan](#) (BRBRMP) for some time and had discussions with AEP to include the scope of our proposals in the revisions to the South Saskatchewan Region Plan scheduled for 2024. A part of the CRUA proposal is to expand the scope of designated Bow River access sites upstream of Calgary to the Ghost Reservoir, and downstream of the Carseland Weir. Improvements to the Kananaskis River water recreation access site were also included in the BRBRMP.

It is important to recognize that CRUA is an advocate for Bow River recreation activities, and our member organizations are the principal stewards and partners in site development. CRUA has acted as the umbrella organization in many of the successful projects that follow:

- Alberta Whitewater Association (and affiliates) Kananaskis River Whitewater Park. Ongoing
- Bow River Trout Foundation - Policeman's Flats Revitalization Project. 2017-2022.
- Calgary Fish & Game Association - McKinnon Flats Stewardship-Partnership Project. 2021.
- Alberta Whitewater Association– Harvie Passage Task Force. 2022
- Alberta Whitewater Association– River Access Ghost to Bearspaw Reservoirs. 2022

Since its inception, CRUA has also been a principal advocate for improvements to the Bow River water management policies. Discussion with government agencies and Transalta, the manager of the Bow River Basin hydroelectric dam system, continue to sustain a viable recreational fishery in, and downstream of Calgary.

A Vision for the Lower Bow River

Although CRUA has seen considerable success in the scope of our advocacy work in recent years, there is now a need to collectively focus on much-needed recreational resources in the Bow River downstream of Calgary similar to what is currently being achieved upstream of Calgary. It is hoped that the various agencies that own, and or maintain the river access sites in this reach of the river can come together to develop a single vision for future developments and infrastructure enhancements in support of CRUA's Bow River Basin Recreation Management Plan (BRBRMP).

We propose to form a working group for the Lower Bow River from all user groups, with the principal objectives:

- To increase public and government awareness of the importance of the Lower Bow River to the economy of the region.
- To gain active support and direct participation in new and enhanced river access initiatives.
- To solicit joint funding for river access site enhancements and maintenance.
- To establish a uniform code of practice for the operation, maintenance, and safe use of river access sites.
- To advocate for the inclusion of the BRBRMP, encompassing all river recreational activities, in the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan.

The Lower Bow River Designated River Access Sites

Each of the river access sites on the lower Bow River (Figure 1) is operated under separate management objectives. Considering the economic importance of river recreation activities to the Alberta economy there is justification for all public land river access sites to be owned by the GoA and where appropriate develop a stewardship-partnership agreement with site owners and local users to enhance and possibly maintain site infrastructure.



Figure 1: Lower Bow River Designated Access Sites

Fish Creek Provincial Park:

Positioned on the southern perimeter of Calgary, Fish Creek Park offers the fishing community the most convenient boat ramp access to the Lower Bow River trout fishery. It is also an important take-out point for Calgary fishing floats and the recreational paddling community.

The park has been operated under the Alberta Environment & Parks – Kananaskis Region administration. Recent changes in the provincial ministerial alignment put Fish Creek Park under the new Forestry, Parks & Tourism Department. This puts all Bow River access points under a single provincial administration that could simplify the funding model for capital improvements.

Policeman's Flats:

The property is owned by Sherbrook Investments with a site improvement and maintenance agreement with Alberta Environment & Protected Areas (AEP) to develop a public access boat ramp and parking lot in 2005. The 2013 flood destroyed the parking lot and boat ramp. It became evident that AEP was not prepared to make a significant investment in the remediation of the site, at which time the Bow River Trout Foundation stepped in with an agreement with the property owner in to re-establish the parking lot and river access sites in 2017 and upgraded the causeway across the adjacent wetlands to the parking lot in 2022.



The uncertainty of public access to the river's edge across private property would suggest that the GoA should buy the river access property to assure long-term river access at this site.

Ricardo Ranch:

The City of Calgary's [Ricardo Ranch Area Structure Plan](#) located across and downstream of Policeman's Flats has a river access site development proposal. The timeline for the boat ramp is unknown. Once complete it will offer an important addition to the network of Bow River access sites.



Oxbow:

The Walton Development of [Foothills Oxbow](#) on the south side of the Bow River, downstream of the Cottonwoods Golf Course includes a boat ramp proposal that will offer improved access to river recreational use, and offset pressure on the current designated river access sites of Policeman's Flats and McKinnon Flats. The timeline for the boat ramp is unknown.



FIGURE 9. RIVERFRONT PARK CONCEPT PLAN

McKinnon Flats:

The property was purchased from the McKinnon Family in 1982 with a commitment by the GoA to maintain public access to the river's edge and protect the ecology of the property. As part of the BRAP, a further commitment was made by the GoA to upgrade the road access to the river. This was completed in 2020. McKinnon Flats has increased in popularity as a river access site for the float fishing community as well as an outdoor recreation destination venue for regional residents. And the property was once considered a candidate for a provincial park. But it became evident that increased parking and a designated river access site were needed to accommodate the increased use of the property.

A Stewardship – Partnership Agreement between Calgary Fish & Game Association (CFGa) and the GoA was put in place to expand the river edge parking lot and a designated river access site. Vehicle restrictions were also placed on the property to better protect the riparian areas adjacent to the river.

The project was completed in 2022. The high river flows of 2022 damaged the river access site to such a degree that the emergency access gate to the downstream gravel bar was opened to the public for the remainder of the summer and fall to allow for truck-boat-trailer access to the river. Site remediation was undertaken in November 2022 to restore the river access site to its original configuration.



The [McKinnon Flats Stewardship Partnership](#) (MFSP) offered CFGA a unique opportunity to establish itself as a leader in recreational property management in the Bow River Basin. It would expand the influence of CFGA outside of recreational activities to more of a community support initiative to protect and enhance sustainable recreational use while protecting the environment. Unfortunately, the agreement appears to have collapsed once the parking lot and river access site were completed.

CRUA believes the MFSP is a potential blueprint for future river frontage recreational management initiatives in the future. The limitations for stewardship partnerships will depend on the willingness of AEP and stakeholders to participate in a broader scope of site developments to enhance not only recreation but a multi-use initiative to include the historical importance and ecology of the property.

Legacy Island:

Legacy Island, formally known as Jensen's Boat Launch, was developed into a public river access mid-point between McKinnon Flats and Carseland -Johnson Island in 2002 with a lease agreement between the GoA and Trout Unlimited Canada – Bow River Chapter (TUC-BRC). The project was financially supported by public donations, local government, and adjacent property owners. A boat ramp and the parking lot were established on the main stem of the Bow River, while access to the island was by way of a ford across the back channel from the county road. A condition of the lease agreement is to assure public access to the property and maintenance of the road, parking lot, and riverboat ramp while protecting the island environment as best as possible.

The damage from the 2005 flood was mitigated by the GoA, and the damage from the 2013 flood was so severe that a redevelopment of the property's access to the parking lot and river needed immediate attention and was paid for by TUC-BRC. The road access to the property has deteriorated over the years, but unfortunately, TUC-BRC has been unable to recognize the importance of the Legacy Island River Access site to recreational river users and has resisted many offers of support for remediation efforts.



CRUA initiated discussions within TUC and the Bow River Chapter in May 2021 to define the scope of development needed to not only improve the road access to Legacy Island but also protect the ecology

of the property for future generations. Project management and funds will be needed to support projects to meet the obligation of the lease agreement and improve access to this important Bow River access site. The proposal included installing culverts in the backchannel and to reestablish its flow which would create new fish spawning habitat. Progress with this initiative has been slow and at the same time, access to the property has deteriorated further.

Carseland-Johnson Island:

Johnson Island is a part of the **Wyndham-Carseland Provincial Park**. The park has been historically operated under the Alberta Parks – Southern Region administration out of Lethbridge. Recent changes in the provincial ministerial alignment put this park under the new Forestry, Parks & Tourism Department. It serves as a day-use area and the final Bow River access site above the Carseland Weir.

The boat ramp has been built on a peninsula that overlooks the weir. Unfortunately, the boat ramp has sustained considerable damage under high river flows. The end of the concrete ramp has been washed away in recent years making it very difficult for boat use.



CRUA opened up the discussion with Alberta Parks in 2021-22 with a [proposal](#) for an upgrade to the Johnson Island boat ramp and a new public river access site below the Carseland Weir at the Wyndham-Carseland Provincial Park campsite. A river access upgrade is needed to stabilize the boat ramp or construct a new boat ramp slightly upstream where an eddy now exists.

What Next

As has been mentioned in the opening statement of this document CRUA has seen considerable success in the scope of our advocacy work in recent years, but there is now an urgent need to collectively focus on much-needed recreational resources in the Bow River downstream of Calgary. It is hoped that by reaching out to the river user community we can come together to develop a single vision for future developments and infrastructure enhancements in support of CRUA's Bow River Basin Recreation Management Plan (BRBRMP).

