

More on Crown Land Use Access

As of late, there has been much discussion and at times debate over the potential loss of access to crown land by the ordinary citizen of Ontario. The issue is acutely obvious in the northeastern region of Ontario, which includes the Manitouwadge area. Up until recently, the average crown land user: hunter, fisherman, berry picker, canoeist, etc. has not really given too much thought to what potentially exists in the future in terms of the accessibility to and the recreational use of our great outdoors.

Let me make it perfectly clear at the outset that I do not wish to levy unduly harsh criticism of the tourist outfitter who is working very hard to make a success of his/her operation. These people obviously have much at stake. Moreover, I do not wish to utter any condemnation of our local MNR or our local LCC (local citizen's committee). They are all dedicated, hardworking people who sometimes face the brunt of the frustration and anger of the outdoor enthusiast who feels that his/her freedoms are being dramatically curtailed by an unsympathetic system.

Economics and politics are in the forefront of the media today. By extension, the crown land use issue is a direct result of these two factors. For some years, Northern Ontario has seen much economic turmoil on many fronts. As such, governments get inundated with pleas and at times demands for help. Whenever opportunities of a politically expedient nature present themselves to remedy economic problems, governments naturally tend to jump on the bandwagon and do the so-called "right thing".

I will go out on a limb and suggest that the Ontario Government through its Ministry of Natural Resources has done just that with its CLUAH project (Crown Land Use Atlas Harmonization). CLUAH has been in the development stage for years and as such is fast approaching its final phase before implementation. In effect, CLUAH, the Ministry's poster child is the vehicle to turn large tracts of land in Northern Ontario into a model for tourist development. As you probably already know, many of our lakes are basically inaccessible to the average citizen by virtue of all the signage we see in place at access points. This has been done at the behest of a small, yet powerful group of tourist outfitters.

It can be argued that the public has had input to decisions made by the MNR regarding crown land use. Public meetings were held in Manitouwadge, Hornepayne, White River, Dubreuilville and Wawa regarding CLUAH. However, such meetings are often poorly attended because of indifference on the part of the public or the overwhelming nature of the material presented in a constricted time frame. Further, LCC's (local citizen's committees) are in place to give input. The problem with the structural format seems to be that LCC's are often weighted heavily in favour of special interest groups and very lightly in the direction of public representation. As such, the public is not truly being represented. There is an apparent lack of transparency evident.

To emphasize the seriousness of our regional situation, I would like to use a few quotes from OFAH's (Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters) report card on crown land access and recreation for Northern Ontario. I will endeavour to not use these quotations out of context.

OFAH states, “ The Wawa District continues to be unnecessarily restrictive. There are serious local access concerns...”
OFAH gave this district an F (failing grade) on land access for local users. Further, OFAH gave the MNR an overall D, citing, “

The serious issue of closing public motorized access to forest access roads built with public money is major, the lack of consideration for local recreational users and lack of organized Recreational Management Planning in the north are the largest contributing factors to this poor grade. MNR continues to use perceived liability issues as excuses to close public access roads. The Wawa, North Bay and Sudbury districts are uncooperative with regard to land use planning. Tourism interests are often not in ‘balance’ with local users...”

The intention of this letter is not to attack any individual(s) but rather to highlight the potentially negative position that we in Manitouwadge might find ourselves in. Manitouwadge is another northern community in a transitional phase. A very short time ago, the local economic plan was to sell Manitouwadge as a retirement haven for those wishing to escape the urban crush. To that end, the logo “ Play in the Extreme “ was developed. Well..., in reality how attractive could that possibly be with a potential for more crown land access denial situations looming?

In closing, I'd like to leave you with the words to a song performed by Five Man Electrical Band, in 1970. It somehow seems fitting...

Sign, Sign everywhere a sign
Blocking out the scenery breaking my mind
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign

Herb Mayr
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