

# 2017 St. Williams Conservation Reserve Survey

## BACKGROUND

In 2017, an online survey was conducted to gain a snapshot of recreational use in the St. Williams Conservation Reserve (SWCR or, “the CR”) and to gauge recreational users’ perceptions of the current trail system.

The online survey was widely promoted to recreational users and to others affected by recreational activities. Local recreational user groups were encouraged to get their members to complete the survey. Landowners near the conservation reserve also received information about the survey. Other tools used to promote the survey included posters placed at trail heads and parking areas, a news release to the local print media, and information posted on the SWCR website and Facebook account.

The response to the survey exceeded expectations with 620 respondents, including 528 people who answered all 15 questions. Further evidence of the high degree of interest was the fact that 117 people provided additional comments.

### Key findings from the survey included:

- The level of interest in recreational opportunities at SWCR is very high overall.
- The response from motorized users was particularly strong.
- The SWCR is used regularly by many and diverse recreational users.
- Most respondents rated their overall experience of the CR as Great or Good.
- As expected most respondents supported recreation in the SWCR but there were considerable differences in how the various recreational activities were perceived.
  - There was almost universal support for passive recreational activities such as walking and nature appreciation.
  - There was some opposition to other authorized uses, particularly to motorized users (ATV and dirt bike riding were combined in this question) and hunting.
- The survey provides some insight into how the various users groups perceive other user groups that has implications for shared user trails.
- Although the target audience for the survey was recreational users, a surprisingly large number of respondents indicated that the Natural Heritage values of the CR was their primary or secondary interest.
- Most respondents were aware that the SWCR has rare and sensitive habitats that support many species at risk.

Additional details of the survey results are summarized in the following text and charts.

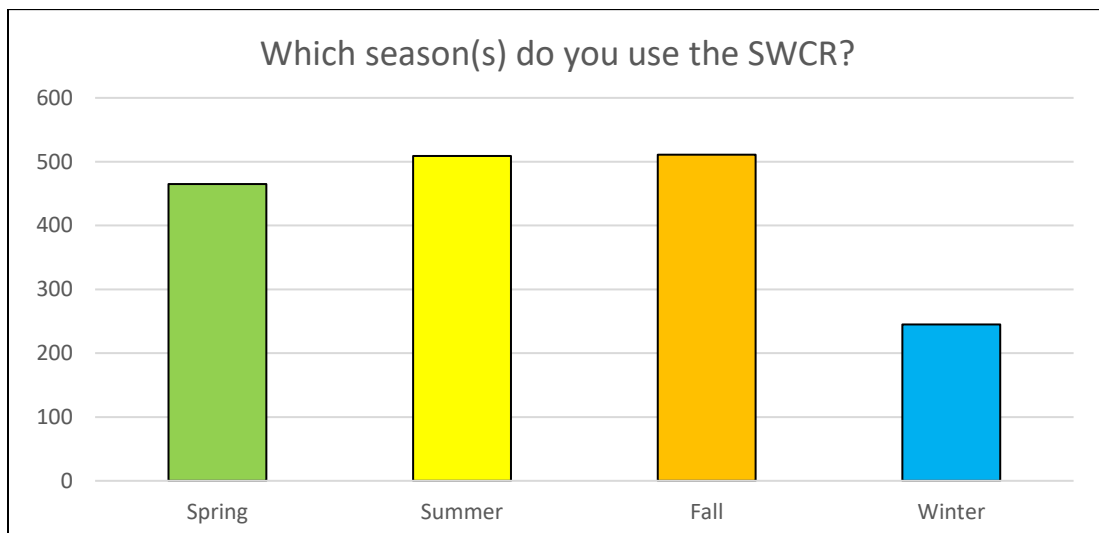
## RESULTS

### Who completed the survey?

- Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials were all well represented in the responses, with few responses from people under 23 or over 71.
- Three-quarters of the respondents lived within a one-hour drive of the CR
- Many respondents indicated they belong to one of the recreational user organizations that had been targeted during the survey distribution, especially the active use recreational organizations (ATV, trail bike, equestrian and mountain bike clubs).

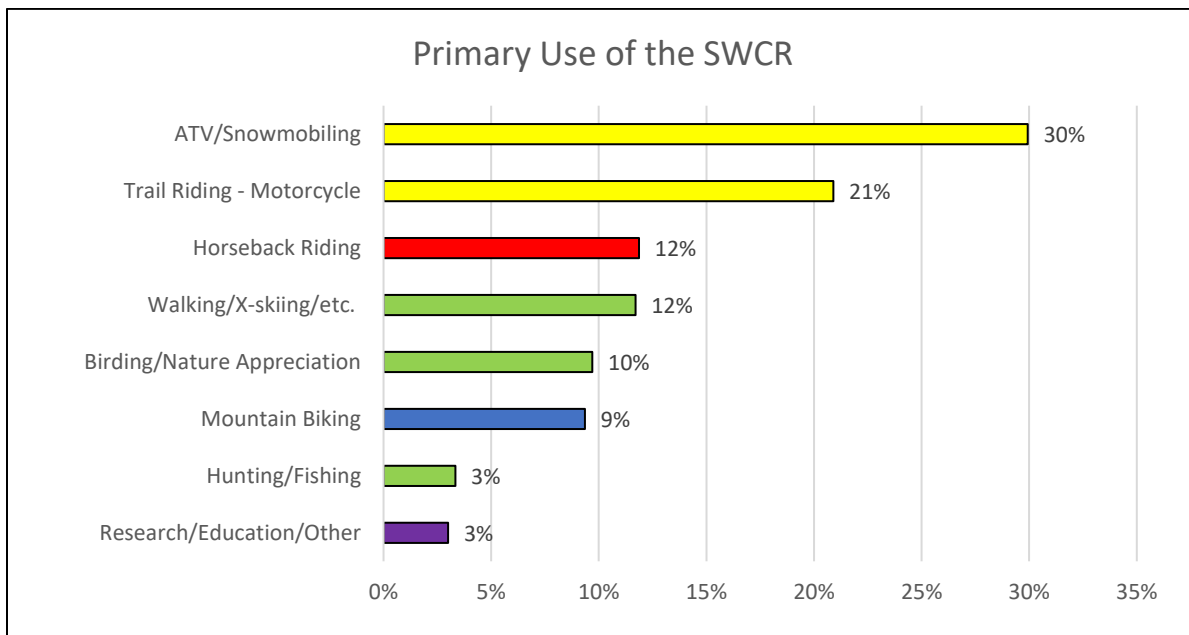
### When and how often do they use the CR?

- Most respondents visit the CR in the spring, summer and fall seasons but many (40%) also indicated they use the CR in the winter.
- Most respondents (40%) indicated they visit the CR about once a month, but many (29%) are infrequent users (fewer than 7 visits per year), some (20%) are regular users (about weekly), and 8% almost never visited the CR.



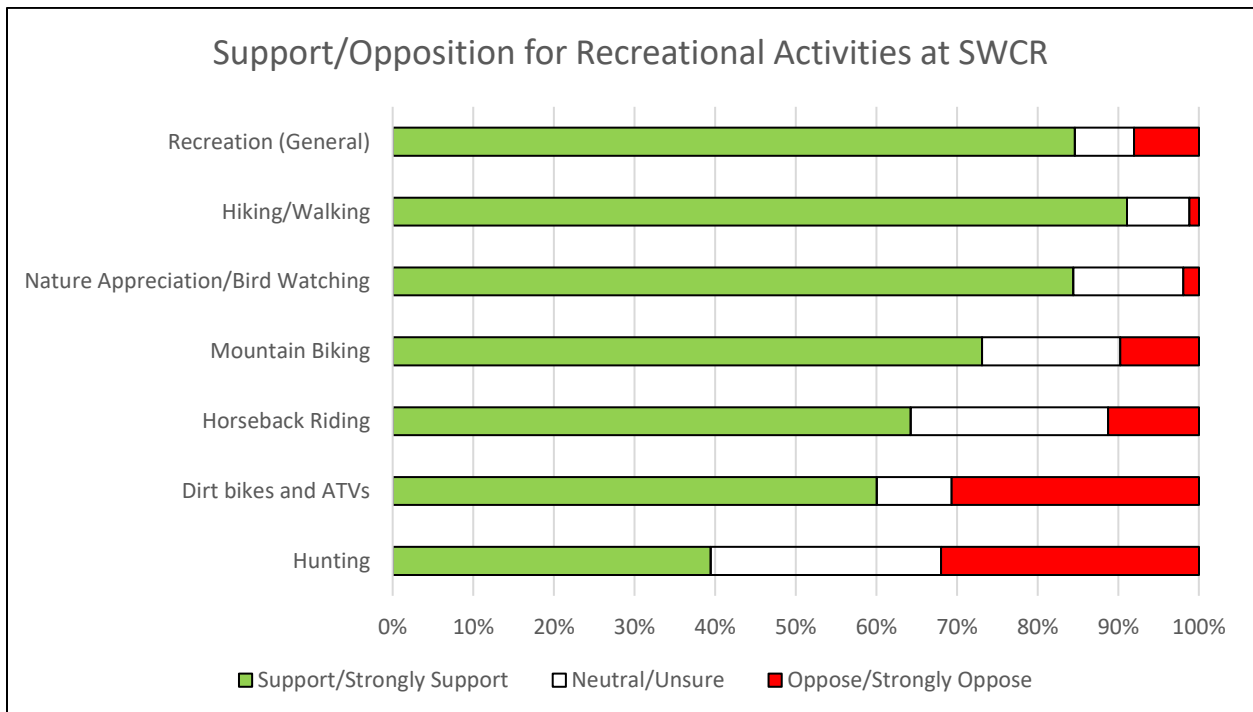
## How do they use the CR for recreation?

- Half (51%) of the survey respondents indicated that their primary use of the SWCR was for motorized recreational activities including riding ATVs, snowmobiles or dirt bikes.
- 23% of respondents indicated they use the SWCR primarily for passive recreational activities such as walking, cross-country skiing, nature appreciation and photography.
- Other primary uses included horseback riding (12%), mountain bike riding (9%) and hunting/fishing (3%).
- Almost a third of respondents (32%) indicated they use the SWCR for walking, hiking or skiing though that was not their primary use.
- A relatively high number of respondents (22%) did not select a secondary use



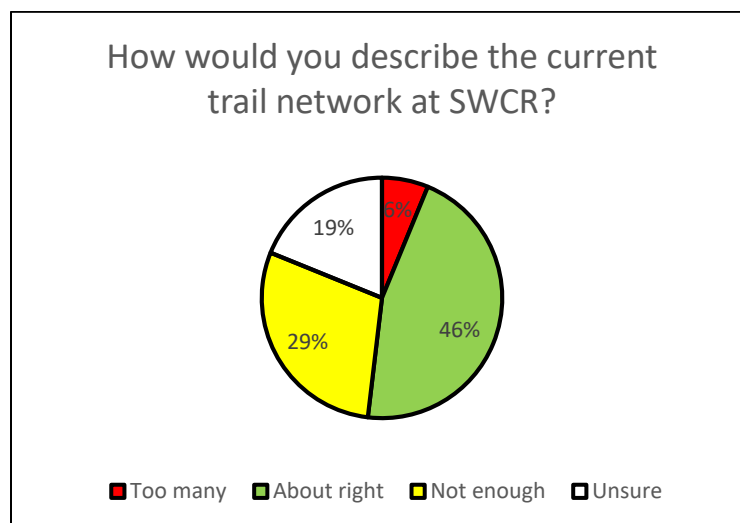
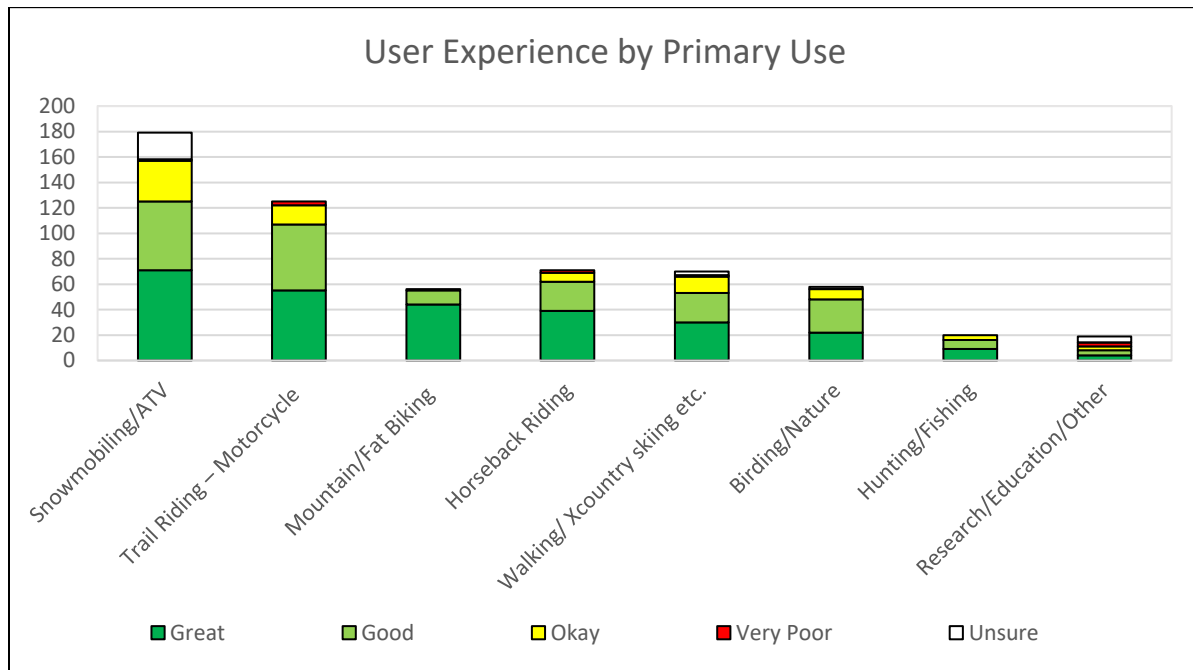
## Support for Recreational Activities

- As expected given the target audience for this survey, most respondents (85%) indicated they supported recreational activities in the CR.
- Hiking/walking and birding/nature received almost universal support regardless of the respondent's recreational interests.
- Over half of the survey respondents supported mountain biking, horseback riding and motorized use (dirt bikes and ATVs) but there was some opposition to these activities, particularly in the case of motorized use.
- The motorized use category included ATVs, dirt bikes and snowmobiles and respondents could not indicate support/opposition for specific motorized activities.
- Hunting had the most divergence in support/opposition.
- The survey provides some insight into how the various user groups perceive other user groups.



## User Experience

- The majority (79%) of respondents indicated their overall experience of the CR is Great or Good: Only 2% indicated their experience was Very Poor.
- Almost half (46%) of the respondents felt the number of trails was about right, but 6% thought there were too many trails, 29% thought there were too few, and 19% were unsure.
- Most users indicated their enjoyment of the CR was being adversely impacted by some other users not following the rules and/or causing damage to the trails and habitats.



## **Knowledge of the CR**

- Over 76% of respondents indicated they were aware that the CR has rare and sensitive habitats that support one of the highest remaining concentrations of species at risk in Canada

## **What do they recreational users value about the CR?**

- Surprisingly, less than half of all respondents (44%) to the survey selected Recreation as the value that was of most importance to them.
- Almost a third (32%) of respondents selected Natural Heritage as their top objective.
- In the overall rankings, Recreation (3.7) scored slightly higher than Natural Heritage Protection (3.6), followed by Education (2.9), Research (2.6) and Cultural Heritage (2.6).

## **NEXT STEPS**

This public survey was one element of a recreational consultation strategy developed by the working group that is updating the Operations Plan (OP2) for the Conservation Reserve. Targeted interviews with key recreational stakeholders were also carried out as part of the recreational consultations. The results of the survey and stakeholder interviews have been reviewed by the SWCRCC and MNRF and are being considered in preparation of the SWCR Operations Plan. The findings are also being used by the Community Council to inform their communications strategy and education program.

The Operations Plan outlines activities needed to advance implementation of the long-term Management Plan for the SWCR over the period 2019-2028. In addition to identifying priority areas for habitat restoration and protection over the next 10 years, the Operations Plan identifies opportunities for outdoor recreational activities that are considered compatible with the natural heritage protection objective.

The OP2 working group is comprised of: staff from the Aylmer District office of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF), which is the agency responsible for management of the SWCR; representatives from the SWCR Community Council (SWCRCC), a local not-for-profit organization that works with MNRF to implement the SWCR Operations Plan; and the lead consultant for the plan update. The recreation survey and interviews were designed and implemented by a communications consultant under the direction of the OP2 working group.

In fall 2018, there will be an opportunity for the public to review and comment on the proposed SWCR Operations Plan 2019-2028.