

Tuchodi Burn Success!

Controlled burning is a historical and critical part of our Northern BC ecosystem. Many species (flora and fauna), including thinhorn sheep, depend on intermittent burning to maintain and rejuvenate habitat key to their survival. Due to social and economic pressures, natural and controlled burning has been reduced in recent years leading to disappearing travel corridors, unused winter range, higher predation, lower forage quality, smaller winter ranges and ultimately reduced quantity and quality of thinhorn sheep.

In the summer of 2016, Tuchodi River Outfitters (TRO) and Wildlife Infometrics Inc. (WII) (project managed by Alicia Woods, RPBio, MSC), joined together to develop a 5-year prescribed burn plan for wildlife habitat enhancement and restoration in the Tuchodi River valley. Prescribed burns, specific to wildlife habitat enhancement on crown land and in a designated BC Park, had never been done quite like this in the past. This burn program is Guide Outfitter lead for the sole objective of restoring and enhancing wildlife habitat, and burning is intended to happen over a 5-year time span.

Due to the nature of this project there was extensive work that needed to be done by TRO and WII, working co-operatively with government, to identify the mechanisms to make this project successful. The Tuchodi River valley lies completely within the Northern Rocky Mountains Park, and as such, there are significantly more steps and information required to conduct prescribed burn programs. Over an 8-month period, TRO and WII worked with BC Parks, Ministry of Forestry Lands and Natural Resource Operations (MFLNRO) Fish & Wildlife Branch and the BC Wildfire Service to ensure Park mandates and objectives were satisfied, wildlife objectives were clear and in alignment with the regional wildlife management plans, First Nations interests were met, and burn prescriptions met the requirements of the BC Wildfire Service.

While doing any wildlife or range burning in BC there is a considerable liability issue, should a burn escape the fire management zone boundaries, and be deemed a wildfire. Tuchodi River Outfitters assumed **all** liability and risks associated with these burns. Taking on all of the liability and risks was not the ideal situation for TRO, however they felt the need to burn was important and urgent for the wildlife in the valley, that they accepted this risk. In future years of the project, there is hope that this risk can be taken on by FLNRO Fish & Wildlife Branch. This project was precedent setting, and therefore was under the spotlight in Northeastern BC, resulting in significant risk to both TRO and WII.

A generally unrecognized, but an important component of prescribed burn programs is effectiveness monitoring. In this day and age, our projects and activities need to be open, transparent and defensible, and the Tuchodi River Burn Program is no different. Over the 5-year program, TRO and WII intend to conduct on-the-ground monitoring activities to identify vegetation and wildlife response pre- and

post-burning. This type of data collection is being required more and more by government and funding organizations. Effectiveness monitoring is an important component of the project that will allow us to illustrate and quantify the benefits of prescribed fires to wildlife and their habitats, and to ecosystems as a whole. TRO and WII hope to collaborate with the MFLNRO staff and other stakeholders to meet monitoring goals on these burns in the future.

While the entire project was not approved immediately, in the winter of 2017 BC Wildfire Service, BC Parks and MFLNRO approved several sites specific to thinhorn sheep for burning in the spring, many of which that had not been burned since the early 1980's. These sites were selected based on current and historical sheep sightings and documented wild sheep use. TRO and WII approached potential non-government funding partners. Having just held its first Northern Fundraiser in Dawson Creek this past February, the Wild Sheep Society of BC was eager to help push the project forward and committed \$25, 000 of the \$40,000 project budget. Also coming off a successful fundraising season the North Peace Rod and Gun Club (FSJ) contributed \$10,000 from their wild sheep account and the BC Conservation Foundation added the final \$5,000 to complete the funding request. TRO provided a great deal of in kind support including burn permit application fees, mop up crews, accommodations and staging areas. Lastly, Highland Helicopters donated materials for ignition as well as forgiving standby charges.

In total, 11 sites specific to thinhorn sheep were burned, improving over 1,200 ha of critical winter range habitat, creating improved forage and line of sight for predator detection as well as animal access to winter range areas that were previously blocked by heavy blow-down. Because of their relation to important escape terrain, these sites are also expected to minimize spatial conflict with elk.

The project has been a resounding success! A prescribed burn is the end of a costly and time-consuming process and this is a fantastic example of the power of collaboration in the conservation community, one we hope we can continue and expand on in the years to come. Special thank you to the Kwadacha and Kaska First Nations as well as the BC Wildfire Service and the MFLNRO for supporting this important wildlife work.

Tuchodi River Conservation Partners

