Threats to our recreational outdoors

exist, says DRAKE HOCKING

Increasing numbers of urban-dwelling Canadians are making more use of outdoor recreational land, particularly natural parks and wilderness areas. The reasons? Deteriorating urban conditions (air pollution, noise, crowding, and so on) and increased affluence, leisure time and mobility.

These factors combine to give projected usage figures for park areas that will undoubtedly place them under extreme pressure, both in terms of overuse of available facilities and in terms of threatening the very elements that people seek in these areas: peace, solitude, grandeur, wilderness, solace. Therein lies a dilemma: establishment and protection of parks depends on popular support, which depends on large scale use, which in turn puts heavy pressure on the parks.

There are problems in the establishment and maintenance of an aesthetic environment for high quality outdoor recreation. Resource exploration, its development, and industrial growth encroach on traditionally recreational land, with consequent land disturbance and water and air pollution. Unaesthetic forestry is practiced, such as clear-cutting of large blocks and disregard for barrier strips along roads and water courses. Research into urban forestry and amenity plantings for difficult sites, such as open prairie (and in cities), is neglected. Over-development and over-promotion of attractive recreational features tend to destroy elements of the landscape and wildlife that make them attractive. Campgrounds deteriorate through poor or no management and heavy use.

There are well-documented, serious, potential ecological consequences in uncontrolled or over-use and in careless exploration and exploitation. More grave are the potential consequences on society. Gradual deterioration and loss of available, accessible outdoor recreational land removes an important relief valve for people

suffering under the mental and social stresses of modern urban life. The relief offered by "wilderness escapes" is quick and real. The degree of "wildness" necessary in the wilderness is the only really subjective element in the situation.

Economic and social costs of the problem differ widely in magnitude and object; that is, in who has to meet them.

Costs to minimize the effects of exploration, resource development and industrial pollution on recreational land may be very high, but must be weighed against the losses to recreational potential. Research by the USDA Forest Service is showing that, in terms of user-days, recreation is rapidly expanding to major economic proportions, easily rivalling certain other land uses where values and royalties of the products are low.

The dollars brought in by over-development of luxury facilities (e.g., the proposed Village Lake Louise) and over-promotion of these, especially in areas remote from the recreation features, often tend to be less than projected and to benefit only a small number rather than society generally.

Real and direct costs of campsite maintenance and development, including amenity plantings on difficult sites, appear large but benefits to local residents are great in terms of reduced travel costs to satisfactory recreational areas. These developments would also tend to ease pressure on more remote, wilderness-type areas.

A tree in the city is worth much more than one in the forest through its rarity value, its aesthetic impact. The economic cost of re-routing a freeway, or building a subway, must be balanced against the social cost of destroying an urban park or a ravine full of trees.

What needs to be done? Initially, closer links must be developed amongst the several research agencies and the management

agencies. First steps have already been taken.

Further, we need research to detect effects of and to control industrial air and water pollution in recreational areas, as well as in cities. We need to determine user wants and needs in outdoor recreation, classified into types of user and types of recreation. Methods of logging practice and its economics must be improved, either to make large clear-cutting less unaesthetic or to develop alternative practices. Reclamation of disturbed lands must be done. Forest research must determine the silvics of native and exotic species in cities and on prairies.

Available technology urgently needs to be applied, educational programs undertaken, and enforcement action initiated where violations of present rules, guidelines, or regulations have occurred. The public needs to be informed and involved in policy planning.

Finally, while the need exists to approach and solve the above elements of the main problems, they are only symptomatic and their solution would be short-term and palliative without an approach to the underlying problem. As long as population and economic growth continue in an unplanned and uncontrolled manner, we will have to change rapidly our expectations in outdoor recreation. The "wildness" will disappear from wilderness parks. It will be "people only — no animals allowed". Will this still meet the basic human needs?

We will eventually have to come to grips with the underlying problem of population growth. Owing to the time lag between recognition of a problem, researching it, social and political acceptance of a solution, and initiation of a program, we must recognize the basic problem now, while attacking its symptoms. Failure to do so would make it more acute and difficult when it becomes compelling. □