

Tourism affected by disasters in Kaslo area

by Jan McMurray

Tourism had a slow start this year in our area due to extremely wet weather this spring, leading to road washouts, flooding and landslides. Probably nowhere else was hit harder than the Kaslo area.

Kaslo and Area Chamber of Commerce President Steve Hoffart, and Vice-President Daphne Hunter, who works at Kaslo's Visitor Centre, report they are still getting phone calls from people asking if it is safe to come to Kaslo.

However, they are optimistic about tourism in Kaslo going forward. "We are confident in our community's resilience and we know that we have a world class tourism product," said Hoffart. The Chamber of Commerce continues to work to promote the area through strategic initiatives and partnerships. Adversity makes us stronger and working together will ensure that we thrive once again."

The "adversity" was a series of disastrous events in the Kaslo area this year.

At the end of June, there were washouts on many roads, including Highway 31 north of Kaslo, which was closed at Gerrard for three days. Meadow Mountain and Glacier Creek Forest Service Roads, which access popular recreation areas and hiking trails, were also washed out in the spring and remain closed, as they have not been repaired.

Also at the end of June, the dam for Kaslo's water system washed away in a debris torrent in Kemp Creek. A temporary water system was set up immediately, so Kaslo was never without water. However, the large amount of debris in the creek resulted in high turbidity in the water, so the Village put out a Water Quality Advisory, advising people with weakened immune systems to boil the water or use an alternate water source. Although there was always water, and the water was always safe for most people to drink, Hunter says people are still calling the Visitor Centre to ask about the water.

Kootenay Lake was at its highest level in 40 years at the end of June and beginning of July, causing flooding at marinas, on the Kaslo Waterfront Trail and in some basements.

Then on July 12, the Johnsons Landing landslide occurred, bringing media outlets to Kaslo to report on the

devastating event.

"That's when the phone really started to ring off the hook," said Hoffart. "Many people thought the landslide happened in Kaslo, and that Kaslo was being evacuated."

Hunter said that a 20-30 percent cancellation rate was reported by local accommodators going into the Kaslo Jazz Festival weekend, although that was offset by people making the last-minute decision to attend the festival.

Hunter reports that Visitor Centre statistics show May was down 18 percent despite the busiest May Days weekend ever, June was up slightly, and July was down 19 percent compared to last year's figures.

The visitors finally started to arrive in August, but the effects of the wet spring are still putting a damper on tourism. "We're finally getting visitors,

but Meadow Mountain Road and Glacier Creek Forest Service Road have been washed out since spring, so our visitors can't get to some of the most popular hiking in the area, like the MacBeth Icefield, Monica Meadows, and Jumbo," said Hunter. "This is really affecting tourism at the north end of the lake as well."

Hoffart commented that forest service roads are very important to the community's recreational and tourism economy, and they are in need of attention. "We have to be able to access these roads - they are very important to our economy." He pointed out that there used to be four access roads to Kokanee Glacier Provincial Park, and now there is only one. The other three have been closed for years.

Hunter added that Cody Caves Provincial Park just south of Kaslo, a

major tourist draw, has been closed for three seasons now. The government cannot find an operator since they increased the operator's fee from \$100 to either \$250 or \$1 per visitor per day, whichever is greater. In 2009, the last year Cody Caves was open, the caves saw 4,500 visitors.

A Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations spokesperson reported that the Meadow Mountain Road is a low priority road and there are no immediate plans to repair it. He said Glacier Creek Forest Service Road, however, is a high priority road because of its high recreation value. The repair is held up because a slump in the road at the 13-kilometre mark is still moving. "We still plan on repairing the road this year when the engineer determines the movement has slowed to an acceptable risk level," he said.

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