

Gathering History of Rattlesnake Underpasses in Southern B.C.

Submitted by Leonard Sielecki, Environmental Issues Analyst

The Ministry of Transportation's pioneering efforts to protect deer, elk and moose on the Coquihalla (Highway 5), the Okanagan Connector (Highway 97C), and the Vancouver Inland Island Highway (Highway 19) have been recognized both nationally and internationally. However, not much is known about some of the ministry's earliest initiatives to protect other species of wildlife, especially those creatures that are slimy, scaled, and bite.

For years, rumours have circulated that rattlesnake underpasses were built by the ministry in the Southern Okanagan. Some stories mention a culvert installed by a district employee to protect rattlesnakes near Okanagan Lake, around 1957. From bits and pieces of information collected to date, it appears that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the ministry installed at least three culverts for rattlesnake passage under roads and highways. Apparently, these installations were completely local initiatives, championed by district staff wanting to protect rattlesnakes. The passages were constructed decades before the concepts of environmental stewardship and underpasses for wildlife were recognized by transportation agencies.

A number of ministry folks with long memories have been really helpful filling in the details of the rattlesnake underpass



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

history. They include Okanagan-Shuswap District's Stan Beaulieu, District Development Technician; Rusty Hewitt, District Technician; Stan Warkentin, District Sign Technician, and Grant Lachmuth, District Manager, and the Northern Region's Mike Hovde, Manager, Operations, Corporate and Operational Services.

A lot has happened in the Southern Okanagan since the late 1950s. Numerous highway upgrades and alignment modifications have occurred. It is very unlikely that the original culvert rattlesnake underpasses exist in their original form, as they have probably been replaced over time. Although it has been over 50 years since the underpasses were first constructed, the information about them is still important for documenting the ministry's early efforts to protect rattlesnakes.

If you know about the rattlesnake underpasses, or if you know a former ministry employee, or anyone else, who might know about them, please contact me (Leonard Sielecki, Environmental Issues Analyst, Engineering Branch). I can be reached in Victoria by telephone at (250) 356-2255 or by email at:

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