

Ski club seeks to save Sandilands

By Martin Zeilig

WHILE trudging through the deep, soft snow alongside a cross country ski trail in Sandilands Provincial Forest, Laurie Silversides stopped for a moment to survey her surroundings. The tall, thick stands of jack-pine, birch and poplar trees — there are even some white pines — shelter against the wicked winter wind on a bleak winter day.

Sandilands, which is 2,772 square kilometres in size, is located about 25 minutes east of Steinbach, off provincial road 210. A fire late last May destroyed almost 3,400 hectares of the forest in less than a day.

Silversides suspects, as do others, that it was caused by careless ATV riders out for a weekend poker derby.

“It’s time to stand up for the environment,” says Silversides, a registered nurse in Steinbach, who is president of the Sandilands Ski Club. “The forest has an unspoken beauty. It can be -25 C with a strong wind chill, and you can be in the forest and not feel the effects of the cold when you’re active and properly dressed.”

After the conflagration, the ski club embarked on a letter writing campaign to Premier Gary Doer and Conservation Minister Stan Struthers, calling for forest protection in Manitoba’s provincial forests.

“Cross-Country skiing and cycling are fabulous sports that promote health and fitness,” says the letter, which can be found at www.sandilands.ca. “It’s fun and it’s good for the environment. But our forests are being lost at an alarming rate, largely because of clear-cut logging and forest fires. This natural resource is disappearing in huge chunks with mind-numbing speed. Sandilands forest fire is a perfect example.... The time to act is now.”

Blair McTavish, director of headquarter operations for Manitoba Conservation in Winnipeg, says the government takes protecting provincial forests seriously.

“Our concern is about any activity that may cause a fire in the forest,” he says. “We want to reduce any impact that may cause fire. We’re attempting to obtain a balance between user groups. We want to make sure there’s no conflict between motorized and non-motorized (activities). It might mean restrictions on the use of motorized vehicles on some non-motorized trails. We’re looking at



Lauren Silversides at the Sandilands Ski Club.

a policy to permit poker derbies, so we’re better able to manage them.”

Such a policy will be done by the Ministry and will likely be in place by next spring, McTavish says.

“There is a concern because of the fire in Sandilands last May,” he says. “Currently, no permit is required for poker derbies or rallies. We’re working with the various user groups to accommodate most peoples’ interest in the forest.”

Silversides says motor vehicles on the trails, especially ATVs, are creating havoc in the forest.

“Back in 1985, I could mountain bike on the trails and there wasn’t very much sand showing,” she says. “Now, the natural erosion has been compounded by the use of motorized vehicles on the trails. There are deep crevices in the hills and also the tree roots are just sticking out of the ground. So, we can’t start grooming the ski trails until later in the season.”

The Cross Country Ski Association of Manitoba has given the club a grant of \$500. That will help to replace signs and a warming hut that burned down in the fire.