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Dawn Dickinson: Conservationist Relishes Ups and Downs of Advocacy Role

By Andy Marshall

For Dawn Dickinson, as for any of Alberta's intrepid environmental leaders, the path to conservation success has its ups and downs.

It's like negotiating the knobs, kettles and slumps adorning the Cypress Hills and the province's southeast mixed grasslands that Dawn has directed so much passion to and that still draw her at every opportunity. You have to watch your step.

And, just as this region of Alberta contains a breathtaking variety of ecological contrasts, so, too, does the 75-year-old Medicine Hat citizen present an inspiring dichotomy of human attributes that have made her such an effective advocate for the natural environment.

Considerate and gentle to the point of self-effacing diffidence, the lady with the refined English accent can also bring to the table a no-nonsense tenacity and inner resolve.

"I get that from my Scottish background," she says with a laugh, paying tribute to her mother and other relatives with Scottish origins. She's surrounded by piles of papers and reports, accumulated from her more than 16 years of volunteer efforts while living in Medicine Hat for groups like the Grasslands Naturalists (GN), the Federation of Alberta Naturalists (FAN) and the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA), as well as from her earlier career as a biologist and her travels throughout Western Canada and the North.

She has relished the many adventures and challenges in her life, from a two-week solo canoeing trip in the Yukon to a summer spent camping on Devon Island in the Arctic Circle helping a doctoral student in a study of plants. Her B.Sc. with first class honours in zoology from the University of Alberta in Edmonton in 1972 at age 42 and then her masters in zoology from the same institution four years later are further testimony to her enterprising ways.

Honoured by FAN and the recipient last year of the Prairie Conservation and Endangered Species Conference Award, Dawn Dickinson will receive an AWA Wilderness Defenders Award in November. With typical modesty, she downplays the recognition and is loathe to rest on her laurels.

"You think you're making progress, but they never seem to stop," she says of the inevitable setbacks to conservation initiatives. She fondly remembers her active involvement in Project Swiftsure in the early 1990s, leading to the destruction of chemical warfare agents at CFB Suffield. Then came the disillusionment, at least for her, of the way the decision was reached to deal with the wild horses at the army training grounds.

She played a lead role in the Meridian Dam forum that led to the welcome cancellation of the project for economic reasons. Then came the much-applauded dedication of the Suffield National Wildlife Area, only to be threatened two years later by Encana's application to drill up to 1275 shallow gas wells there.

"You have a momentary feeling of accomplishment and then you find out it isn't permanent," she says quite matter-of-factly





That only serves to stiffen the resolve of this soft-spoken woman, born in Lethbridge but who grew up in the U.K. when her mother returned there after the death of Dawn's father.

In her quest to make a difference, she now questions the effectiveness alone of writing letters and briefs, attending open houses and workshops, meeting with government agencies and corporate personnel—actions she has devoted much of her life to. Today, she acknowledges the need to add economic action, such as boycotts, to the conservationist arsenal. “We have to find new ways of doing things,” she says.

Her abiding love of the natural landscape came early in life, guided by the influence of her mother and new step-father and practised in her frequent walks over England's South Downs and later over the splendour of Dartmoor in the southwest.

While in her 20s, Dawn Dickinson returned to her native Lethbridge. Then she moved to Medicine Hat where a summer job surveying elk for Alberta Fish and Wildlife helped spark a life-long fascination with conservation issues and an understanding for the conflicts that can occur over land use.

As a biologist, in later years, she did a variety of work for Western Ecological Services in Edmonton, including a contract with the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee at the time of the Berger Inquiry into the Mackenzie River pipeline. That was followed by a contract with the Northwest Territories Science Advisory Board. Those experiences gave her exposure to some outstanding, experienced scientists, she says.

“While her single-minded determination to see management decisions based on sound science has not always been popular with some, Dawn has never wavered nor been intimidated from abandoning her principles,” says FAN president Dennis Baresco.

While applying these carefully thought-out scientific principles, she has also brought an emotional attachment to her conservation efforts.

“You've had so much pleasure in places you've worked in and been to, you have a feeling of obligation,” is how she explains her unquenchable motivation. “Because you've been given so much, you owe the land itself something.”

Painting, photography and writing—including composing poetry—are among other skills she's used to express this gratitude. In addition to scientific reports, she has written scripts for a six-part series of natural history films produced by Karvonen Films more than 15 years ago. *Prairie River*, which went into a second edition, and *A Flight of Deer* are among general audience publications she has contributed to.

Currently, she's working on a natural history book of essays on her beloved Cypress Hills. The aging process imposes its natural restrictions, of course, but the passion and the ever-inquiring mind still burn brightly.

“I'm more limited in what I can do, but I can't say I'm not going to try,” she notes. Wilderness defenders everywhere can only be grateful.

