



# WILD LANDS ADVOCATE

THE ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION JOURNAL



*The Athabasca River in Jasper National Park (C. Olson)*

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### Volunteer Steward Receives Award



Dorothy Dickson received the Red Deer City and County Heritage Recognition Award for the Innisfail Natural Area in May. The award is given for the preservation of our heritage. A long-time volunteer steward of Innisfail Natural Area, Dorothy praised the City of Red Deer and County for giving this award to a natural rather than a man-made site for the first time. She noted how our natural heritage is being sacrificed for development and inappropriate forms of recreation.

*Congratulations Dorothy!*

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## BEARING WITNESS

This issue of *Wild Lands Advocate* marks my last as editor. It also marks the end of my time with AWA. For almost seven years I have endeavoured to bring you the original voices of Albertans concerned about our wild spaces and wildlife.

The stories I have heard, shared, written, and experienced were at the heart of all my work. I have many people to thank, but here I would like to share with you the words of Terry Tempest Williams, a Utah naturalist and writer, but also our neighbour, as an encouragement to continue to speak for wilderness, for other species, and for our Selves.

“To bear testimony is to bear witness, to speak from the truth of our lives.

Barry Lopez reminds us, “the correspondence between the interior and exterior landscape is story.”

The act of bearing testimony is the act of storytelling, a gesture on behalf of community.

Our wildlands are under siege, even the idea of wildness is being compromised in the name of intellectual abstractions.

We must continue to speak out of the humility of our bodies and the bedrock knowledge we hold in our bones.

Wild hearts. Open minds. Alert eyes. Our testimonies allow us to put our love into action.”\*

— Shirley Bray



S. Bray

*Rumsey Ecological Reserve*

\*Preface to “An Act of Testimony,” Wild Earth, 1995

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## HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE ELK IN THE CYPRESS HILLS?

By Shirley Bray

For two and a half years, an obscure committee met in the southeastern corner of the province to solve the problem of elk in the Cypress Hills. That elk were a problem seemed to be confirmed by the continued complaints of a few cattle ranchers about elk depredation and damage, not only on private lands and grazing leases outside the provincial park, but inside the park as well.

Previous public consultations and management plans had failed to stem the rash of complaints. Local Fish and Wildlife staff felt it was time for something new. Could the elk problem be resolved after more than three decades and three previous public consultation processes? Could old mentalities be wrestled into new ways of thinking? Fish and Wildlife called in Dr. Cormack Gates from the University of Calgary to create a process that held the promise of well-controlled elk and a satisfied community. The game was afoot.

### The Set-Up

What better way to stop people from complaining about a problem than to involve them in the search for a solution? Especially when solutions would require their compliance. Following in the footsteps of other wildlife managers before him, Alberta's Fish and Wildlife regional biologist Dale Eslinger, who fielded the ranchers' complaints, made an informal agreement with Wayne Pedrini, a Parks and Protected Areas Division (Parks) colleague, to adopt a rather elaborate community-based collaborative process being promoted by Gates. It had worked successfully for the sage grouse management plan – why not for elk.

The Cypress Hills Elk Management Plan (CHEMP) process was initiated in September 2003 to address the issue of elk depredation on agricultural lands outside of the park.

It was seen as an opportunity to bring community members together with the government to resolve long-standing disputes and implement solutions, instead of the traditional “agency-centred” approach where government made the decisions and applied the management strategies. Hopes were high that this time around the process would succeed, given the positive relations between government staff and stakeholders.

Gates provided two graduate students: Troy Hegel, who studied elk distribution and landowner perception of damage, and Julie Lefebvre, who evaluated the process. According to Lefebvre, government staff felt that involving local interests was a way to address political pressure applied by ranchers. Ranchers didn't just complain to the local Fish and Wildlife staff – they complained to their MLA.

Stakeholders were to make decisions based on consensus, a process requiring time, a common purpose, a common knowledge base, a full diversity of views, and trust.

Three committees were set up:

- A Steering Committee to oversee the process and provide leadership. Unfortunately, the first steering committee was informal and failed to write down their responsibilities or define the scope and goals of the process, so when two of the members changed early on, it's not surprising that leadership during the process suffered.
- A Technical Committee to provide technical and scientific advice and information. Unfortunately, Hegel, the lone elk expert, left for Alaska soon after the process began and was not replaced.
- A Planning Team consisting of a group of stakeholders who would be seen – when the final plan went out for public review – as balanced, legitimate, and fair, not just by the local community but by the larger public. Government staff eschewed the formal process used to identify the best stakeholders and their issues, relying instead on their personal knowledge of people in the community.



*Cypress Hills Inter-Provincial Park exists as an island of protected natural environment within a sea of agricultural land use. The park is managed for protection of its native biodiversity, while surrounding lands are managed for agricultural productivity. These diverse management purposes result in problems such as elk depredation outside of the park. The Cypress Hills Elk Management Planning process was initiated to address the issue of elk depredation on agricultural lands outside of the park.*

Community-based, collaborative processes have advantages in planning for landscapes that are geographically, politically, and socially complex. In the Cypress Hills, the inter-provincial park, consisting of the West Block in Saskatchewan and the Elkwater Block in Alberta is surrounded by native grasslands with mixed agriculture (ranching and farming) on public and private land, and with some industrial and residential uses. The community had been involved in making decisions about elk for many years, but problems remained. Collaborative processes delve into what underlies the positions and demands of people to understand what their real needs and values are and to find creative solutions.

### The Players

The agencies decided whom to invite, so it was inevitable that some thought the team lacked balance and should have had more interests represented. Others felt landowners whose livelihoods were impacted by elk should have a greater say in decisions. When several participants left the process early on and were not replaced, the perspectives they represented were also lost. Lefebvre interviewed some people who felt they could not be involved because if their views diverged from their neighbours, it might have negative repercussions outside the process.

### The Ranchers

Of the original 12 Planning Team members, three were ranchers representing stock associations with grazing interests in the park. An additional rancher whose grazing interests lay outside the park and the Cypress County representative, who was also a rancher, left the process early on. The ranchers held the position that there were too many elk in the Hills and their goal coming into the CHEMP process was to get the number of elk reduced.

Ranchers first settled around the Hills in the late 1880s. By 1909 elk, along with other large mammal species, were extirpated. Most of the Cypress Hills was designated a federal forest reserve between 1906 and 1911, and livestock grazing was prohibited. However, ranchers argued that cattle



H. Armstrong

*With their reddish coats and dark brown heads and necks, elk are strikingly beautiful. They are the most vocal of the deer; the males have a distinctive bugle to attract females during the rut. Elk in the Cypress Hills are now at risk for contracting chronic wasting disease from wild deer.*

played a role in reducing fire hazards and replacing the grazing influence of bison, prompting the development of regulations to allow cattle grazing under permit. By 1918 ranchers had formed the three stock associations that remain today, and daily management of the range continued largely under their supervision after the transfer of resources to the province in 1930.

In 1937, at the request of some Saskatchewan ranchers around the Hills who wanted elk for sport hunting, the government imported elk from Wainwright Park in Alberta and distributed them on private ranchlands. By the early 1940s there were reports of hay damage by elk in the West Block. The elk spread quickly to the Alberta side of the Hills, prompting reports of hay damage by Alberta ranchers adjacent to the Elkwater Block by the 1950s. Ranchers sought compensation and an open season on elk.

In 1951 the Elkwater Block in Alberta was designated a provincial park, which meant that under the *Wildlife Act*, the area became a wildlife refuge and hunting was prohibited. However, the Game Hunting Regulations could be amended to permit hunting for population management. The West Block in Saskatchewan became a provincial park in 1976. The inter-provincial park designation came in 1989. But with the creation of the park, it was inevitable that management goals would change. By 1968 the park manager's position

was that elk should not have to compete directly with cattle.

Elk are the only ungulate grazer in the park in winter, consuming the nutritious fescue grasses on winter ranges. They would also leave the park in search of forage resources elsewhere, including stored feed, crops, and private or leased native pastures. Fescue grasslands are well adapted to winter grazing but vulnerable to grazing in spring and summer.

Ranchers wanted the park for summer grazing. But they had to deal with competition not only from wildlife, but from a growing recreation interest as well. People didn't expect cattle as part of their "park experience." Attempts to create more grazing areas outside the park simply drew more people to the area, and grazing inside the park continued.

In 1967 the Director of Fish and Wildlife argued that there was extreme competition between elk and cattle in the park and that the park should be for wildlife. He described the condition of grazed lands in the park as "atrocious." The grasslands were being degraded through overstocking, overgrazing, and damage to streams, which were already serious problems by 1945.

To resolve the problem of elk, he suggested (1) informing ranchers that it was their responsibility to protect their haystacks from elk damage, (2) reducing cattle in the park to alleviate competition and reduce the need for elk to leave the park, and (3) allowing a hunting season inside and outside the park. However, he noted that the ranchers, "who are now becoming quite emotional about this whole matter," claimed it was unreasonable for them to have to support elk on their deeded land whether or not they do damage, and they were also opposed to having hunters on their property.

Although some Parks staff felt grazing was not consistent with public policy, they proposed cutting grazing in the park to half of carrying capacity and restricting cattle to certain areas, away from recreational and environmentally sensitive areas such as headwaters, steep slopes, and significant wildlife habitat.

However, the stock associations, which had grazed 90 percent of the park for years, were opposed to



D. Dickinson

*Footprints in the snow show the movement of elk from one wind-swept meadow to another during winter grazing in the Cypress Hills. Primary winter ranges are open to the winds and are usually characterized by shallow snow cover, through which the elk paw feeding craters to uncover the grass beneath. Unlike most other grasses, fescue keeps its nutrition through the winter, providing a critical source of food for elk. As the only ungulate grazers in winter, elk play a vital role in the ecology of the Cypress Hills fescue grasslands.*

cutting their allotments; they were, after all, only paying 20 cents per acre in the park versus \$3.30 on private land. They blamed the overgrazing on wildlife and called for a reduction in their number.

After much wrangling, Parks and the stock associations agreed in a 1980 Letter of Understanding to reduce stocking rates in the park by one-third to 12,000 Animal Unit Months (AUMs), which, based on research on carrying capacity, would allow for a winter population of 700 elk in the West and Elkwater Blocks.

Although Parks was opposed to public hunting in the park as a means of controlling wildlife populations for philosophical and safety reasons, the natural predators for elk had long since been eliminated. The elk population target was to be maintained largely by management hunts within the park and recreational hunting outside the park.

The 1981 master plan for the park brought in the policies of allowing hunting and grazing to be used as management tools to maintain range health and control problem wildlife populations.

By 1984 a joint Fish and Wildlife and Parks Position Paper stated that elk depredation was not a problem; Fish and Wildlife felt its elk management strategies were working.

Nine years later a community-based (non-government) Cypress Hills

Advisory Association was formed to work towards consensus on issues involving management of the greater Cypress Hills ecosystem. It required building good working relationships between members and finding common ground.

The sub-committee for elk management, composed mostly of ranchers, identified the same problems with elk depredation and damage. The group noted that hunting in the park drove elk onto adjacent ranchlands but that hunts in the park were more successful. They recommended extending the hunting season and instituting better compensation programs. After 18 months of meetings and elections in early 1995, the new president, a rancher from the Fox Stock Association, failed to continue the advisory association's process.

Later that year Parks started public consultation for an updated park management plan. Several workshops were held to gather views of local stakeholders. Generally, they agreed that elk should be managed to maintain healthy populations and minimize conflicts with ranchers, but better compensation was needed and Parks observed a need to quantify elk damage on private lands. They discussed reviewing the elk population target of 700 and basing it on scientific data, but some ranchers wanted it reduced to less than 600. They agreed that grazing

should continue as a range management tool in the park, but the stock associations wanted to renegotiate their agreement with Parks for more flexibility in setting the number of AUMs.

A local rancher and range management specialist thought the stock associations had failed to follow many of the actions agreed to in the 1980 Letter of Understanding, resulting in damage to the park ecosystem. He felt that complaints about elk management were misguided and attention needed to be spent on improving grazing practices. As confirmation, a 2001 park range resource inventory by Jon Boyle found that there were almost 12,000 AUMs available in the park for cattle, but it did not account for wildlife as previously assumed. Boyle recommended different grazing practices.

Issues for the CHEMA process were no different. The ranchers said elk were damaging stacked bales, feed supplies, and fences (particularly when chased); foraging in crop fields; and competing with cattle inside and outside the park. One rancher said it was impossible to manage private grasslands with a large elk herd in the neighbouring park, and one thought elk were harming grasslands in the park.

While ranchers were provided with fencing to protect stored feed, they argued that they bore the costs of maintenance and repairs, and lost production on private pastures. They were forced to grow alternative crops less attractive to elk. They had to deal with the unpaid responsibility and inconvenience of hunters to whom they provided access, information, and assistance. They said the current compensation program was hard to obtain and insufficient to cover the costs of damage to private property – for example, there was no compensation for grazing on native pasture – and they were not sure how one could quantify losses or determine what was adequate compensation.

The ranchers knew they could not propose getting rid of the elk entirely (although that sentiment was mentioned) because others valued the elk for their ecological and tourism role. But as they had given up on the



compensation program and decided that the management strategies in place to control the elk population were not effective, they chose to focus on reducing the target population number below the agreed-upon 700, which they felt had not been maintained.

Elk population numbers had varied over the years from 443 to 1,120, with recent surveys showing around 700. Elk had also been more or less evenly distributed between the two blocks, but recent hunting pressure in Saskatchewan had caused the majority of the elk to move to Alberta.

Lefebvre noted that human-wildlife conflicts could be dealt with by modifying wildlife habitat, changing the number or behaviour of wildlife, or changing human attitudes and behaviours. Ranchers favoured changing the population target, while Gates favoured the latter. Hegel set the stage by noting that whether wildlife does damage or not, what drives wildlife damage management is the perception of damage. The only reason to take action is to reduce the perception of conflicts. Understanding what lay behind perceptions and attitudes was critical to defining solutions.

#### *The Conservationist*

Wildlife biologist Dawn Dickinson had roamed the Cypress Hills for decades since arriving in the area; she knew ranchers in the area personally and had listened to their complaints about elk depredation,

and she had participated in previous committees. When she told Fish and Wildlife in the 1960s that they needed to find out how many elk were in the area as a basis for finding solutions, Parks gave her the job. She produced two reports on elk and moose populations, and forage resources and utilization in the park.

She sympathized with the ranchers' problem with elk and supported finding ways to reduce conflicts or fairly compensating landowners for their losses. She thought the team should focus on why elk left the park and suggested, among other things, reducing or eliminating hunting within the park and using cattle-grazing more effectively to mimic natural processes. Although she supported an ecosystem-planning approach to the Cypress Hills, she stressed the different purpose, administration, and policies of the park.

She agreed to represent Grassland Naturalists but argued that other environmental groups needed to be at the table to properly discuss the conservation issues. In the absence of a formal process for selecting stakeholders, she was told she could represent them all.

#### *The Agencies*

The two Alberta agencies involved in CHEMP were the Parks and Protected Areas Division and the Fish and Wildlife Division. Although Fish and Wildlife's Eslinger was of the view that "agency-centred approaches

don't work well" and community-based processes can work, the CHEMP process relied heavily on agency participation.

The Steering and Technical Committees were made up of government staff, and two sat on the Planning Team. The facilitator was from Sustainable Resource Development. Eslinger sat on all three committees but gave up his seat on the Steering Committee when the Planning Team opposed it, concerned about agency manipulation.

Most of the Planning Team members were not strangers, nor were they adversaries. Some had participated in previous processes. They knew enough, however, to decide not to choose a chairperson, an important leadership role, or a public spokesperson from among their ranks, as would normally be done, because they didn't trust anyone to remain neutral enough for the job. People were there not just to find solutions; they made it clear they were there to protect their interests.

They agreed to a Parks staff member for the spokesperson job. But the leadership role of chair was assumed by no one else in the process, including the facilitator. Lefebvre noted this left an important gap. One of the greatest difficulties throughout CHEMP, said Dickinson, was negotiating across diverse perspectives of the participants. The lack of effective leadership and facilitation necessary to establish trust, openness, and dialogue between participants, and to make sure the committees communicated effectively with each other, was arguably the greatest weakness of CHEMP.

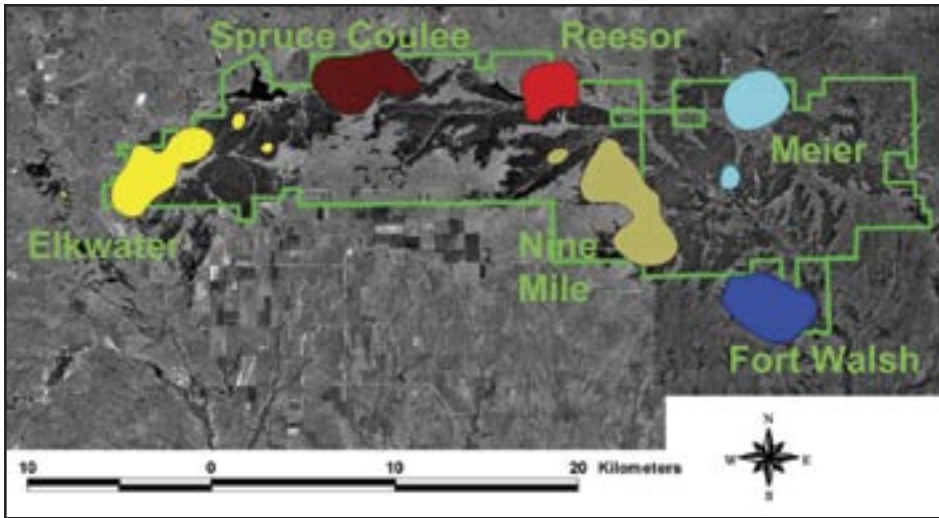
#### *The Facilitator*

The facilitator position for CHEMP, noted Lefebvre, required someone who could remain neutral; understand how the collaborative process worked; help the group define and explore issues; make everyone comfortable enough to speak about their underlying needs, fears, and concerns; and bring about workable solutions and consensus without pressuring dissenting individuals to conform. The facilitator was not supposed to make decisions



D. Dickinson

*This meadow of grasses and flowers in the Cypress Hills is a good example of healthy range for elk.*



Troy Hegel

*The core areas for elk sub-populations named for their location in the Elkwater (Alberta) and West (Saskatchewan) Blocks of the Cypress Hills, as researched by University of Calgary graduate student Troy Hegel. Hegel recommended managing elk according to these more biologically meaningful units rather than considering the population as a whole.*

or contribute ideas unless given permission by the group.

The chosen facilitator, Sam Wirzba, failed to fulfill these requirements and roles, creating a frustrating and inefficient process for participants, said Lefebvre, who felt he did not understand this key role or the process. He appeared to see his job as a controller of the process, the discussion, and what was recorded as the outcome.

According to Lefebvre's evaluation, he failed to follow the planning steps in a logical order, even though he emphasized that this was important; he tended to divide the group instead of helping them develop a common understanding; some felt he was biased and that he marginalized or ignored the concerns of some members; he failed to help the group properly explore issues and interests; he failed to uphold the consensus approach by calling for voting on several issues; and he contributed unsolicited ideas.

Lefebvre also noted the importance of meeting notes being seen as accurate by participants. Dickinson, in particular, an experienced record keeper, felt his meeting notes contained important gaps and inaccuracies. He would say agreement had been reached when it had not; alter the meaning of issues and goals; claim that a personal view represented the team; and often recorded what ranchers thought, but not the views of Grasslands Naturalists.

At the end, there was a backlog of unapproved meeting minutes because he refused to make requested changes; he said it didn't matter because the minutes were not official.

#### *The Graduate Student*

Lefebvre came with good intentions to evaluate the process, but she was conscripted to write the management plan and do other things that conflicted with her presumed role as an objective observer. Because CHEMP dragged on much longer than anticipated, she graduated before the process was finished. A major conflict of interest was that Eslinger sat on the committee for her Master's thesis.

#### *The Hunter*

Medicine Hat Fish and Game Association member Boyne Lewis represented the hunting interests. Unsatisfied with being able to bow hunt only outside the park in early fall, he wanted to open the park to bow hunting in the Facility Zone, an area that includes the Elkwater townsite, popular hiking trails, and most of the recreational facilities, where hunting has never been allowed in the past. He was supported initially by the parks representative, O'Brien Tarnasky. These proposed amendments not only represented a significant safety issue for visitors, but they were also against Parks policy of no recreational hunting in the park, which Lewis thought

should be changed. Bow hunting had too low a success rate to be useful for management.

### **The Game**

#### *Round 1: Terms of Reference*

When Dickinson joined the CHEMP process, she was promised that it would be consensus-based. However, the draft Terms of Reference said that the Planning Team would "endeavour to" reach consensus; otherwise a majority vote would do. Dickinson objected. Before the first meeting Wirzba spent 45 minutes on the phone trying to get her to agree to a majority vote, says Dickinson, a "wearing down" technique that he tried to use several times during the process.

CHEMP also had to accord with Provincial Parks legislation and the two longstanding policies that allow hunting and grazing in parks only as management tools to reach park objectives. The Statement of Purpose originally stated, "Concern has been expressed that elk foraging may result in competition with cattle grazing both within and outside of" the park. Dickinson pointed out that references to elk competing with cattle *within* the park were incorrect – the park was established for the conservation of wildlife, not cows. This was the first of many arguments over park policies; even agency representatives argued policies were meant to be changed.

Wirzba refused to make those changes and Dickinson had to petition the Steering Committee. Wirzba also refused to present the policies to the Planning Team, although this was requested by Dickinson and the Steering Committee, so Dickinson brought them forward herself.

#### *Round 2: Issues and Goals*

The point of the collaborative process was for community members to develop a shared vision for what they wanted. Although on the surface they might hold different positions and perspectives, the underlying issues, values, and interests might show promise for common ground and lead to alternative solutions.

It was essential that the team members work through the issues and values themselves with only assistance from other parties. However, neither the



facilitator nor the Steering Committee really understood the process and both failed to provide effective leadership for the group; instead, the power of the team was constantly undermined, making it impossible to determine common interests and achieve consensus. The issues remained stuck in the same positions – mainly that elk numbers needed to be reduced.

The team achieved consensus on a list of values showing remarkable agreement on the value and integral role of elk in the Cypress Hills ecosystem, and on the importance of maintaining a free-roaming herd, retaining park policies, and compensating for elk impacts on private land. However, the issues were never agreed on. After presentations by team members, Wirzba created an initial list of issues, which he then sent to the Technical Committee before every team member had provided input.

Team to avoid such misunderstandings.

Goals and objectives were to be based on the issues and values. Without waiting to review the issues or develop a final list based on consensus that would provide a vision for a desired outcome, which was fundamental to the process, Wirzba pushed the team to develop goals and objectives. Twice the facilitator did “personal brainstorming exercises” to come up with lists of “themes” to help the team develop goals and objectives, but the team did not consider them useful.

The facilitator gave the Technical Committee six consensus-based goals to review and develop objectives, the team having agreed that for the sake of expediency, the Committee might do a better job at objectives. The Technical Committee said they could not develop objectives because the goals lacked clarity. Dickinson disagreed and wrote up objectives herself to show it was

was trying to control the process. Dickinson objected to the discarding of the team’s consensus-based goals without team members’ knowledge or consent. She felt the Technical Committee had abandoned the community-based collaborative process. At a special meeting with the Steering Committee held to discuss her views, Wirzba accused her of being THE dissenter and holding up the process with too many “high falutin” ideas.

Without any consensus on the new goals, the issues, or the priorities, the team, under the direction of the facilitator, proceeded to review the objectives provided by the Technical Committee. The team spent the rest of the process tinkering with a complicated matrix of goals, objectives, and actions.

### Round 3: How Many Elk?

The ranchers agreed to the values of maintaining a viable elk herd and that elk were an integral part of the ecosystem, and they acknowledged that a significant reduction in the elk herd would not entirely eliminate depredation issues. But they made it clear that their highest priority was to reduce the elk population target below 700 head. Otherwise, they would be stuck with the status quo and CHEMP would be a waste of their time. Based on an informal survey of surrounding landowners, they said they were prepared to tolerate an overwintering population of 200 to 300 head on the Alberta side.

Other team members wanted to keep the 700 target until a scientific approach could be used to decide on a defensible elk population target. Targets, said Dickinson, need to have a sound scientific basis, with an upper limit that does not exceed the carrying capacity of elk winter ranges, and a lower limit that can be set by a minimum viable population estimate. Eslinger and Lewis agreed. Saskatchewan biologists were proposing 450 in the West Block for a total of 750.

The facilitator decided to focus on this issue. Early on in the process, leaving issues and interests behind, he trotted out a ranking tool consisting of three sets of factors, biological/



*Cattle share the range with wild ungulates in the Cypress Hills. Cattle grazing is used as a management tool inside the provincial park to maintain range health. Outside the park, cattle graze on private pastures and on public land grazing leases. In the foreground is shrubby cinquefoil, a sign of overgrazing*

The Technical Committee altered the issues to be stated in neutral terms, leaving some team members thinking their issues had been deleted. One rancher said, “If the [Technical Committee] is to decide the issues for us and rank them in whatever order they prefer and delete what they don’t like, then it looks to me like the CHEMP team is being used as a show pony.” Eslinger explained that the ranchers’ issue that the elk herd was too large was a position, while the real issue was elk impacts on private land. The Technical Committee should have worked directly with the Planning

possible. Eslinger, who sat on both committees, failed to inform or consult with the Planning Team.

Instead of having the Technical Committee work with the team to clarify and improve the goals, there was a six-month hiatus. The Steering Committee reorganized the process; they directed Lefebvre to complete the list of issues and the Technical Committee to develop new goals and objectives based on those issues, essentially abrogating the role of the Planning Team.

Some team members were concerned the Technical Committee

ecological, social, and economic, that could be used to determine a target. He wanted team members to vote on each factor to determine which should be assigned the greatest weight in achieving a target. The team didn't like the ranking tool and soon dropped it. Voting conflicted with consensus and the tool went against the entire point of the interest-based collaborative process.

The failure to adhere to the proper process left the team bargaining for their positions. After much discussion, a target of 300 on the Alberta side was agreed to (a) to show that progress had been made in addressing legitimate landowner complaints and (b) to make progress in scaling back (or perhaps eliminating) the need for a management hunt in the park. The number was not meant to be absolute but subject to change if it was found to be too low or if landowner tolerance increased.

Lefebvre criticized the focus on the elk population target, saying it limited thinking about the bigger picture and alternative solutions. It wasn't inclusive of everyone's interests and wasn't based on facts. She emphasized the need for stakeholders and experts to work together to collect and analyze information and work from both scientific knowledge and firsthand experience.

#### *Round 4: Information*

Relevant information was not compiled prior to the beginning of the process, nor was it readily available to team members, and some reports were too technical. Some team members were not interested in having more information; they wanted to get down to decision-making and solving problems with what they had already.

In spite of the volume of information available, there were critical pieces missing, such as recent data on carrying capacity, how much damage elk really do, and how much they really compete with cattle. With the real number one issue being elk depredation, it seemed logical for Dickinson to suggest that the team needed data on the extent of elk damage. At the beginning of the process, one rancher replied, "Bullshit!" At the end of the process, another rancher replied, "That's a waste of taxpayer money."

Hegel's research showed that of 59 landowners in the area surrounding the park, only 14 had conflicts with elk on 36 fields, both crop and native pasture. He found that landowners were more likely to perceive conflicts with elk if they were found in alfalfa fields, were closer to a residence, and were farther from cover (more visible).

About a year and a half into the process, Eslinger provided some numbers: from 1996 to 2005, five payments, totaling \$10,984, had been made for elk damage in the Cypress Hills, three for stacked hay damage and two for grain damage. From 1981 to 2004, 21 formal complaints were registered in Cypress Hills for elk feeding in pastures, stack damage, crop depredation, and broken fences. The actual damage figures may have been higher, but the team was told that many landowners found the compensation program unsatisfactory and did not bother to make a claim or went through the Hail and Crop Insurance program rather than Fish and Wildlife.

When Dickinson complained that the team was not getting any response from the Technical Committee to their questions, she was given the task of developing a list of research and information needs required to fill gaps in knowledge for managing the elk herd. She was also asked to indicate why the research and studies were needed and how they would promote informed decision-making. She became responsible for setting up the goal and objectives for scientific research into the carrying capacity and minimum viable population values.

Lefebvre noted that decisions improve with the quality of information available, especially different perspectives that challenge preconceived ideas. But the Planning Team never met with the Technical Committee to discuss issues, share knowledge, and build a common understanding of the situation, which would have been more useful, said Lefebvre, than the facilitator's "exercises." Promised expert presentations were started only after the Planning Team had begun formulating goals, and the presentations were considered of limited benefit. The Technical Committee was used to do the work of the Planning Team instead

of providing the technical and scientific perspective needed for quality decision-making.

In June 2005 SRD no longer required registration of elk kills in the province, removing a crucial piece of information needed to manage the elk population effectively, particularly in the Cypress Hills; however, Parks said they would still require registration of kills in the Cypress Hills provincial park.

#### *Round 5: Paid Hunting*

In early 2006 the Steering Committee demanded that the Planning Team reach consensus on all items within two meetings or it would disband the team and terminate the process, and the plan would never go to public review. Consensus failed on three contentious issues, including allowing bow hunting in the park, and whether to include a list of mechanisms to reduce elk numbers – the product of one the facilitator's exercises that never achieved consensus.

The last issue on which consensus failed was that of allowing landowners to benefit economically from elk. The only example given was allowing landowners with elk conflicts to sell 10 percent of the annual elk tags, which was essentially paid hunting. There were up to 600 elk tags for the area selling for \$32 each. Ten percent would amount to less than \$2,000. So landowners would be allowed to negotiate a price with hunters and the tags would be valid outside and inside the park.

Since paid hunting would require a change in regulations under the *Wildlife Act*, it violated the base rules for CHEMP. But the idea was supported by some team members, including Eslinger, who argued that this was not paid hunting, but no definitions were ever provided. Conservation groups supporting Dickinson advised against opening the door to the idea even a crack. Paid hunting goes against the foundations of our wildlife conservation model, which is based on public ownership and egalitarian access to wildlife, not on profit.

But the facilitator refused to let it go and focus on the more than 100 actions the Planning Team did agree on. Experts know that collaboration will

not work if fundamental values that cannot be negotiated are involved.

### The Final Cut

At the last meeting in April 2006, Kevin Redden of Saskatchewan hoped something would come of the work, “but in the end the Alberta and Saskatchewan governments can say ‘to hell with you’ and do what we want,” he said, laughing heartily with Eslinger in front of the entire team that had spent so many volunteer hours.

Parks staff are currently developing a new draft management plan, including a grazing plan. They hope to incorporate ideas from CHEMP, and also re-affirm their commitment to park policies.

Gates said he was bitter about the failure of CHEMP to follow the process. He is now pursuing a new initiative, based on a similar process to CHEMP, on getting a landowner incentive program in place called the Alberta Land and Wildlife Stewardship

Project. He’s on all three committees and there is criticism about unbalanced representation.

In the meantime, Fish and Wildlife continue with their usual management strategies, and the latest survey found only about 450 elk in the Hills.

*I would like to thank Dawn Dickinson for inviting me to CHEMP meetings and assisting with this article.*

### Cypress Hills Elk Management Planning Process Members

#### Steering Committee

Ron Bjorge – Head of Wildlife Management, Fish and Wildlife Division, SRD  
Wayne Pedrini – Area Manager, Parks and Protected Areas Division  
Julie MacDougall – Site Manager, CHIPP

#### Secretariat

Facilitator – Sam Wirzba, SRD  
Assistant – Rosemary Jones, Parks

#### Technical Committee

Coordinator – Dale Eslinger  
Range Management Specialist – Barry Adams  
Parks Resource Management – Cam Lockerbie  
Fish and Wildlife Officer – Dave Ferrier  
Parks Conservation Officer – Paul Avery  
Elk Researcher – Troy Hegel\*

#### Planning Team

Battle Creek Stock Association (CHIPP) – Dan Reesor  
Medicine Lodge Stock Association (CHIPP) – Ernie Mudie  
Fox Stock Association (CHIPP) – Wayne Brost  
Grazing Interests Outside Park – Harry Seitz\*  
Society of Grasslands Naturalists – Dawn Dickinson  
Medicine Hat Fish and Game Association – Boyne Lewis  
Cypress County – George Russill\*  
Parks Conservation Officer – O’Brien Tarnasky  
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation – Robert Nowosad\*  
Conservation officer, SERM – Kevin Redden  
Alberta Fish and Wildlife – Dale Eslinger  
Business Community – Horst Haage\*

\*Left the process early.



D. Dickinson



## LAND-USE FRAMEWORK HAS SUPPORT OF LESS THAN HALF THE CAUCUS, SAYS MORTON

By Joyce Hildebrand, AWA Conservation Specialist

The latest public consultation process initiated by the Stelmach government, the Land-Use Framework, has the enthusiastic support of Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) Minister Ted Morton, but even he admits that most of the Cabinet may not be fully behind it. “I am confident that we will have the support of close to half of caucus,” said Minister Morton at the first multi-stakeholder meeting on June 5 in an effort to put a positive spin on the weak support from government.

“That’s not enough” was the almost unanimous response from the representatives of a variety of sectors, including Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) and other conservation groups, landowners,

industry, municipalities, and First Nations. Despite serious skepticism, AWA and other environmental groups have decided to continue with the process in the hopes of convincing the rest of caucus of the urgent need to address the increasing cumulative effects of human activities on Alberta’s landscape.

With former Premier Klein’s words – “There was no plan” – ringing in its ears, SRD has finally picked up speed on developing an overarching land-use plan for the province. Can we relax, knowing that our leaders are serious about stewarding the land in the interest of future generations?

“The Land-use Framework will provide context and guidance for land use in Alberta,” states the invitation for participation in the process, received

in mid-April. It says nothing about how the framework will produce on-the-ground changes in how land is managed in the province.

The process as outlined by SRD in the invitation to participate carries few indicators of success. The problem the LUF is meant to address has not been defined, there is little indication that the process will result in binding effects and, most importantly perhaps, the Premier and Cabinet have made no commitment to implement recommendations that may result.

Having led the way in the public land debate for 25 years, AWA has invested enormous resources on this issue; we therefore found the decision about whether to participate in the LUF process very difficult. To make the best decision possible, we engaged





*Cumulative effects west of Hinton*

in intense discussion internally and with a number of environmental and landowner groups in the province.

As a result, along with 11 groups, AWA signed on to a letter to SRD (May 10) that was accompanied by a document outlining our “Criteria for Effective Process and Substantive Policy Direction for Alberta’s Land-Use Framework.” This led to a meeting with SRD Minister Morton (June 1), attended by AWA Director Cliff Wallis and representatives from CPAWS, Pembina Institute, Livingstone Landowners Group, and Alberta Environment Network. Based on what we perceived to be a strong commitment by the Minister to the process, Nigel Douglas represented AWA at the first LUF meeting in Red Deer on June 5.

After more discussion following that meeting, AWA decided to continue participation, which will involve as many as eight days of meetings over the next few months, culminating in a written report by the end of September 2007.

There is a strong suspicion on the part of conservation groups that the LUF, supposedly based on public consensus, will be used by the government to justify business as usual. Although Minister Morton emphasized at the June 5 meeting that the status quo is not an option for him, with little buy-in from other departments this may simply be another government public relations strategy. Vigilance is critical

at a time when the appearance of public consultation on an issue of concern to all Albertans could lull us all back to sleep while business continues as usual.

“We’ve been involved in too many failed public processes over the years to jump in quickly on one that may drain our limited resources once again with no meaningful outcomes,” says AWA Director Vivian Pharis, who has been championing sustainable management of public land for wilderness values for decades. Memories of the Bighorn process four years ago are still strong.

In 2002 conservation specialist Tamaini Snaith represented AWA on the Bighorn Access Management Plan multi-stakeholder committee. The committee was to devise an access plan for the 4,000-km<sup>2</sup> Bighorn Wildland, an area with outstanding wilderness values. “The Access Management process utterly failed,” said Snaith when the plan was released. “We are appalled by Cabinet’s complete lack of respect for the views of Albertans.”

While giving the appearance of consultation with Albertans, the government ultimately ignored public opinion and the Advisory Group’s majority recommendations to prohibit industrial development or all-terrain vehicle access in the Bighorn: the final plan allowed for both activities. “We find it abhorrent that the government will ignore public opinion and environmental policies to please the small number of Albertans who want to ride ATVs into the wilderness,” said

then-AWA President Cliff Wallis.

Fly over the Rockies from the west and the truth of conservationist Roderick Haig-Brown’s statement made four decades ago becomes only too evident: “Where land or water seems to be unclaimed, or weakly claimed, someone will try to claim them.” As the plane descends toward Calgary over the Eastern Slopes and foothills, human impacts on the land multiply: clearcuts, logging roads, seismic lines and well pads, highways, farmland, and finally acreages and the sprawl of Calgary. Wildlife such as cougars and grizzlies have been forced against the Rockies’ front ranges, and rivers originating in those mountain valleys, such as the Bow and the Oldman, are in serious trouble. The aerial view of most other regions of Alberta is similar.

There have been enough motherhood statements about “balance” and “sustainability.” With national and international attention on Alberta’s flagrant disregard for anything but economic growth, we need courageous decisions from our leaders that reflect what most Albertans want: a truly sustainable economy that creates healthy communities while recognizing our dependence on the earth and all its creatures.

### **A Pledge to Invest in Alberta’s Future**

Alberta’s groundwater is at risk from unprecedented drilling. The Rosenberg International Forum on Water Policy, a respected group of global water experts, has declared Alberta’s groundwater policies inadequate and concluded that “there is little information on the quantity of groundwater extraction and virtually no information on groundwater quality.”

If you are concerned about Alberta’s groundwater, or you know anyone who gets their water from a well, consider signing on to a pledge for poison-free groundwater at [www.perceptionaudit.com/albertapledge](http://www.perceptionaudit.com/albertapledge).

The pledge, by Perception Audit Research, will be sent to Premier Ed Stelmach and Environment Minister Rob Renner.



## SKILLED SKIPPERS NEEDED TO NEGOTIATE ALBERTA'S TROUBLED WATERS

By Joyce Hildebrand, AWA Conservation Specialist

On March 22, 2007, Liberal MLA Dr. David Swann asked Premier Stelmach in the Legislative Assembly to explain his refusal to slow economic growth in light of water shortages in the province. The Premier's response is revealing and alarming: "Mr. Speaker, as one that has grown various crops in this province of Alberta, we do depend on the good Lord to give us a sprinkle from time to time to grow our crops. I mean, without rain we don't have any crops." Next question please.

Albertans deserve a better answer from their leader, given the series of water events in the province over the last few years.

2001 – The total allocation of water from the Bow River exceeds its natural flow.

2002 – Minimal spring runoff after a dry winter results in surface water supply shortages, causing significant crop stress, water shortages and feed shortages.

2003 – A water moratorium is imposed on new applications for water allocations from rivers in the Oldman Basin.

2004 – A drought worse than that of the Dirty Thirties parches the province.

2005 – Floods across Alberta trigger the Disaster Recovery Program.

2006 – A federal review panel is told that contaminated drinking water on Alberta reserves is to blame for sickness and possibly even deaths. A moratorium is placed on new water allocations for the Bow and South Saskatchewan rivers.

2007 – A new study co-authored by Canada's top water expert, Dr. David Schindler, reports that the amount of water available in northern Alberta isn't enough to both accommodate the needs of oil sands development and preserve the Athabasca River.

It's simple – there's only so



J. Hildebrand

*The Athabasca River near Fort MacKay. A report released last month and authored by top scientists including Drs. David Schindler and Bill Donahue concludes that projected oil sands extraction will not leave enough water to sustain the Athabasca River and Delta.*

much fresh water in the world and all life depends on it. While we can live without oil, wood products, or natural gas, a few days without water and we're toast. So why is water at the bottom of our priority list in Alberta, after oil and gas production, timber harvesting, motorized recreation – even horse racing and shopping?

### Water for Life Strategy

To give the government credit where it's due, in 2003 the Water for Life strategy was launched, promising to "develop a new water management approach." But before we gulp this down and move on, we may want to see what actions have followed up on that document's soothing words: "The Government of Alberta is committed to the wise management of Alberta's water quantity and quality for the benefit of Albertans now and in the future."

Where are we four years later? How are our provincial leaders dealing with activities impacting the

watersheds that provide our drinking water and the aquatic ecosystems that we depend on?

According to Alberta Energy's latest figures (mid-May 2007), 123,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Crown land have been leased for petroleum and natural gas production since the Water for Life strategy was launched in December 2003. That's 14 percent of Alberta's land base and 23 percent of the province's public land. More than 18 percent of those leases, or 22,600 km<sup>2</sup>, were sold for oil sand exploration, which is – along with agriculture – one of the thirstiest of our industries. These figures don't include any of the other increasing pressures on Alberta's land, including forestry, residential development, agriculture, transportation, and motorized recreation.

Premier Stelmach has made it clear that he has no plans to slow down development – so what has the government done to back up the brave words in Water for Life?



## Proliferating Water Groups

In May 2004, the Alberta Water Council (AWC) was appointed to “monitor and steward implementation of the Water for Life strategy and to champion achievement of the strategy’s three outcomes:

- Safe, secure drinking water supply,
- Healthy aquatic ecosystems,
- Reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy” (AWC Annual Report 2005-2006).

Under the direction of Alberta Environment, the AWC comprises 25 members from government, industry, and NGOs. In late 2006, two additional seats were opened to environmental groups (formerly only one ENGO delegate was allowed), and Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) was appointed to fill one of those positions. Unfortunately, we are still waiting to attend an AWC meeting, since the Council began a transition in 2006 to become an arm’s-length organization of the government. As that process drags on, it appears that it will be more than a year from our appointment before we will be allowed to participate.

This lengthy transition is indicative of the glacial pace of government processes that are intended to deal with the cumulative impacts of stampeding industrial development. We are running out of metaphors to describe the horses-have-left-the-barn syndrome.

The government plan to deal with water issues in Alberta, centered around the Water for Life strategy, includes a variety of groups in addition to the AWC, but their mandates and the relationships among them remain as muddy as the spring runoff that recently caused a boil water advisory in the Drumheller region. Although the government lists Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils (WPACs) and Watershed Stewardship Groups (WSGs) as “partners” of the AWC, their responsibilities, governance, and authority is unclear. “Providing recommendations and input” appears to be one of their core responsibilities, but nothing is said about what will be done with that input.

Some of the half-dozen or so WPACs (Environment Minister Renner mentions 15, but only five are listed on the Water for Life website) evolved



*Wetlands near the Athabasca River. A new Wetlands Policy, one of the projected outcomes of the Water for Life process, has been bogged down in controversy.*

from previous organizations; others have come into existence since Water for Life was launched.

One of the longest-running WPACs is the Bow River Basin Council. AWA’s representative on this Council has pushed hard for a focus on the protection of the Bow’s headwaters, the source of water for communities across the southern prairies. Only recently has the Council stated this as a priority, and we hope to see recommendations to the government that will support our concerns for these southern Eastern Slopes watersheds.

Although some of the WPACs are doing worthwhile research and making valuable recommendations, there is currently little coherence or consistency among these groups. The WSGs are even more disparate – while Alberta Environment’s Watershed Stewardship in Alberta directory lists more than 120 WSGs, they range from field naturalist and birdwatching groups, to urban sustainability groups, to land trust societies. There appears to be no unifying governance or mandate, and no structural connection to the AWC.

All of this points once again to the government’s lack of leadership on issues that might cause a stir among industry leaders and to its downloading the responsibility for land use management to citizens.

J. Hildebrand

But the citizenry, including rural voters, is getting increasingly restless. Shawn Campbell, a Ponoka-area farmer, choked back tears at a news conference recently as he added his voice to those of other rural Albertans who are worried about groundwater contamination. About 90 percent of rural Albertans rely on groundwater. Campbell’s words express what many are feeling in this province: “I’ve lost total faith in our government today.”

## Is Groundwater the Answer?

One of the long-term actions (2010/11 to 2013/14) listed in the Water for Life strategy is the need to “understand the state of the quality and quantity of Alberta’s groundwater supply.” With river flows – including that of the Athabasca – becoming increasingly depleted in the province, the big water users are looking to groundwater to meet their needs. The serious lack of information about Alberta’s groundwater resources, however, means that ongoing approvals for projects like enhanced oil recovery, coal bed methane extraction, and oil sands production are being made in a knowledge vacuum.

In the February 2007 Rosenberg report, an international panel of experts convened by the Alberta government state the following: “The existing network of groundwater monitoring is insufficient to provide reliable information on water quality and water levels and their variability.” They go on to say that “the development and projected exploitation of oil sands and coal bed methane are likely to pose special threats to both groundwater quantity and quality.” As Rachel Carson noted in *Silent Spring* almost 50 years ago, “In the entire water-pollution problem, there is probably nothing more disturbing than the threat of widespread contamination of groundwater... [P]ollution of the groundwater is pollution of water everywhere.”

The Pembina Institute report *Protecting Water, Producing Gas*, released in April 2007, lists a number of groundwater issues that need addressing in the province:

- In the early 1990s, approximately 400 wells were monitoring groundwater levels in Alberta.



That number has been halved, while Manitoba, for example, has maintained approximately 600 groundwater monitoring wells.

- Alberta's 200 wells are concentrated in the settled area of the province. If they were distributed evenly across the province, there would be only one well for every 3,000 square kilometres.
- If knowledge of Alberta's groundwater is not improved, groundwater could become overallocated and aquifers could become depleted and no longer able to provide a viable source of water.
- Excessive withdrawals from groundwater can trigger unwanted hydrochemical changes, leading to the requirement for expensive treatment for domestic use.
- Very large volumes of saline water and other forms of waste from drilling, exploration, and production have been injected into deep saline aquifers for many years. If these aquifers are not deep enough or are in communication with non-saline aquifers, contamination of fresh groundwater could occur.

In *Oil and Troubled Waters* (2003), Pembina notes that some of Alberta's wetlands depend on groundwater recharge, and that "water withdrawals resulting in drawdown effects will eliminate or severely impact these areas, many of which serve as important habitat and are ecologically significant."

### Government Ducks Leadership

It seems that whenever a new water issue arises in Alberta, the government calls for yet another multi-stakeholder group. After the release of the Rosenberg report mentioned earlier, Premier Stelmach asked Environment Minister Renner to renew and resource the Water for Life strategy. Renner asked the AWC to establish yet another project team – this will be the eighth – to make recommendations to that effect by the end of 2007. Another request for volunteers went out to overstretched groups with limited resources.

Although AWA believes firmly in public involvement in government decision-making, these invitations by government are generally made in the



*Inheritors of Alberta's water legacy frolicking on the shores of Lesser Slave Lake.*

absence of clear identification of the problem to be solved, firm government commitment to take action, clear buy-in to the process from Cabinet, and offers of adequate resources for participants. If the government is unwilling to meet these criteria, its commitment to the Water for Life strategy and similar public participation processes must be questioned.

Yet another task was laid on the AWC when the Balzac mega-mall, the biggest Alberta development outside of the oil sands, came to public attention. In late April, the Calgary Herald reported that project construction had been suspended due to snags around water availability: with a moratorium on additional water allocations from the Bow and South Saskatchewan rivers, the developer is looking to the Red Deer River.

According to author Kevin Ma (*The State of the Sturgeon River and the Alberta Water Crisis*), water diversions between basins "almost guarantee the transfer of fish, plants, and parasites between watersheds, creating fox-in-the-henhouse situations where newly introduced species run rampant due to lack of natural predators." Since Alberta's *Water Act* places the Red Deer within the South Saskatchewan basin, the diversion that the Balzac developer is planning is considered an intrabasin transfer, a transfer between sub-basins. The *Water Act* only prohibits interbasin transfers between what it defines as the seven

major basins in the province.

No new water licences are necessary for the Balzac project to go ahead. The only thing holding it up is municipal reluctance: recently, the Town of Drumheller unanimously rejected a request to treat and pipe water for the project. Alberta Environment has responded to public concern about the intrabasin transfer by creating yet another AWC Project Team to determine if such transfers are valid and to make suggestions for policy changes, if necessary. But the province has already committed \$4.8 million to the construction of a pipeline needed to transfer water 68 km from Acme to Balzac, suggesting that this latest AWC assignment is just window dressing.

### River Flows Declining

While recognizing that water is a finite resource, Environment Minister Renner recently told the Lethbridge Herald that storage is the "main answer" to our limited water supply. Once again, the government is avoiding the need to slow down development by implying that water flowing during peak snow melt and spring runoff is water wasted. Water storage means disrupting the natural flow of rivers and streams, using precious land for reservoirs, and working against healthy aquatic ecosystems, one of the three priorities of the Water for Life strategy.

According to a 2006 study by Alberta's top water experts, Drs. David Schindler and Bill Donahue,

water flows in three of Alberta's large rivers have experienced astounding drops. Summer flows in the South Saskatchewan are running at 15 percent of what they were in the early 1900s; the North Saskatchewan's flow is down 40 percent from that of 1912; and the flow of the mighty Athabasca has dropped 30 percent since the 1970s. There is now widespread recognition that the Athabasca could soon be in trouble.

In February 2007, Alberta Environment and Fisheries and Oceans Canada released the long-awaited Water Management Framework for the lower Athabasca, based on the work of the Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA). The Framework begins, "This Water Management Framework is designed to protect the ecological integrity of the lower Athabasca River during oil sands development."

The Framework does nothing of the sort, declares a subsequent joint

news release by Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Fort Chipewyan Elders, Mikisew Cree First Nation, and Pembina Institute. The authors state that the government is "misleading Albertans and Canadians because it does not require industry to turn off its pumps when the River hits the red zone." Pat Marcel, Chair of the Elders group, adds, "We're talking about the survival of the Athabasca River, but more than that this is about the survival of our people."

The Framework defines three status levels – green, amber, and red – depending on in-stream flows. The red status is defined as "a zone where withdrawal impacts are potentially significant and long-term, depending on duration and frequency of withdrawals" – in other words, where withdrawals threaten the river's ecological integrity. Although the Framework caps the amount that can be withdrawn in the red zone (8 to 15 m<sup>3</sup> – or 50 to 90 average bathtubs – per second), it does

not put in place a threshold where withdrawals have to stop to protect the river. (For perspective, each Alberta household has a statutory right to approximately 20.5 bathtubs of water per day.)

### Providence Isn't Enough

The Water for Life strategy appears to be pooling behind a dam of government inaction. "It's in the same bin as the Kyoto protocol," said one resident in the vicinity of the Sturgeon River, another Alberta river in a state of crisis.

Relying on providence may be appropriate when nothing else can be done, but the water issues in this province, and in the world, have human causes. If we want safe, secure drinking water, healthy aquatic ecosystems, and reliable, quality water supplies – and surely no one would argue against those three priorities of Water for Life – we must push our politicians to the front of the parade and demand that they lead us into human solutions.

## TWO NATURAL AREAS DOWN – HOW MANY MORE TO GO?

The Parks and Protected Areas Division is planning on removing the protective designation for two Natural Areas – Astotin and North Bruderheim. According to a notice by the Fort Saskatchewan Naturalist Society, stewards of the area for 20 years, the land will be sold. BA Energy and CP Rail are planning to set up a rail yard and connect to existing rail lines to service the Heartland Industrial Area east of Edmonton.

The Society received the news at a May 29 meeting with Parks, even though Parks had been negotiating behind the scenes for about two years. Prior to the meeting, one Society member said, "The powers that be are attempting, as usual, to take away natural area, the commons, bit by bit. We, as concerned citizens, are being called to step forward and protect it, one bit at a time."

The meeting was well attended, but the plan was basically a done deal.



J. Douglas

*Boreal Natural Areas like Astotin attract many migratory birds like this northern flicker.*

To adhere to their policy of "no net loss," Parks had to acquire land of a greater area and ecological value. CP had bought up other parcels,

supposedly on speculation, and traded them for the Natural Areas. The traded parcels will be used to extend Lois Hole and Miquelon Lake Provincial Parks, and Ministik and Beaverhill Bird Sanctuaries.

However, some argue that uncommon sand hills were traded for more common aspen woodland and wetland. Parks said they were trying to extend more marginal areas to make them more sustainable and that some of the smaller islands that they believe are less viable may disappear in the process.

Parks has been trying to sort out the large and diverse group of Natural Areas, which have a low level of protection, but it's time they started consulting the public, rather than industry, on what Albertans want for their protected areas. Where is the openness and transparency, and how many more Natural Areas are on the chopping block?



## WILL THE GOVERNMENT ALLOW PARKS TO PROTECT RUMSEY?

By Shirley Bray

When the Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture says he isn't going to uphold even the basic environmental standards of oil and gas operation in a protected area, you have to wonder what he's wearing. In March, AWA sent a letter to Minister Hector Goudreau objecting to Pioneer Natural Resources coal bed methane (CBM) well in Rumsey Natural Area (NA), a protected area southeast of Red Deer, encompassing the endangered landscapes of aspen parkland and northern rough fescue grassland. The company had planned to drill the well in early March, but was prevented by unfavourable ground conditions (see WLA April 2007).

AWA pointed out that former Environment Minister Ty Lund promised Albertans that there would be no new wells or roads in Rumsey after its designation as a protected area in 1996. Pioneer's CBM well would be drilled on a new pad and have 120 metres of new access road. The Parks and Protected Areas Division (Parks) also approved the well site within 100 metres of wetlands, which is a violation of EUB's *Directive 56* and Public Land's guidelines for the prairie region. AWA plans to do a field check of this site this summer. We asked why Parks was not requiring even the basic environmental standards to be upheld.

The minister replied that the surface disturbance of the proposed well would be limited to a casing pit 1 by 1.5 metres, ignoring the need for a pipeline and the long access route that would inevitably become well-established and attract invasive species. In fact, the first and only CBM well in the area, drilled by Trident Exploration in 2004, is a perfect example. The pipeline and the access route have thriving populations of invasive species.

The minister also said the 100-metre setback from wetlands "is a

guideline" and the 1993 Regionally Integrated Decision (RID) that acts as a management plan for the NA "indicates avoidance of wetlands, not a defined setback distance."

Using the RID as an excuse is unacceptable. AWA has repeatedly shown that the government is not implementing key aspects of the RID that promote protection and communication with the public. However, the government is always ready to implement aspects that deal with development, even though CBM was never contemplated by the RID. AWA considers it a new and non-conforming, destructive industrial use. Every defence made for Pioneer's well, we told the minister, is an offence against the protection of this globally significant area.

From discussions with Parks staff, we also learned that no one from Parks intended to monitor the drilling. Full-time environmental monitors are already being hired for sensitive private lands, why not for an internationally significant protected area? A lot of nasty things can go on at well sites without a watchful eye.

Field research by a technical team last year found serious problems with invasive species, significant non-compliance by the energy industry, and a lack of reclamation. The dwindling rough fescue has never been successfully restored.

The minister refuses to alert AWA to future energy applications, even though the RID calls for "ongoing and meaningful public involvement," but said he encourages companies to contact stakeholders. He did not indicate if Parks had told Pioneer to contact AWA, whom the minister himself identified as an important stakeholder in a previous letter. Pioneer failed to contact either AWA or the Alberta Native Plant Council (ANPC), claiming they did not know of our involvement.

### New Management Planning Process Promised

Parks plans to involve public stakeholders when it revises the management plan, which has never been updated since Rumsey South became a protected area. Knowing how such projects can sit on the back burner



S. Bray

*The Rumsey area – a mosaic of trembling aspen woodland, northern fescue grassland, and wetland habitats – is the only large, relatively undisturbed area of aspen groveland on hummocky disintegration moraine left in Canada. It is representative of a landscape that is almost extinct and provides a valuable ecological benchmark.*



for years, AWA wants a timeline for the process. AWA also wants the minister to call a moratorium on any further oil and gas activity until a publicly developed management plan is completed. The original RID committee expected oil and gas activity to be phased out in the area, but Alberta Energy overrode that commitment. What will prevent this from happening again? As late as 2001, a review committee still expected a phase-out, seemingly unaware of the threat of CBM. AWA wants no new activity and a renewal of the phase-out commitment. The government says it is aiming to phase out industry in protected areas – does Rumsey count or not?

Before a management planning process can take place, we need information, such as research on the health of rangelands and riparian areas, on past reclamation efforts in rough fescue grasslands in Rumsey and elsewhere, and on the cumulative effects of past, current, and projected land-use activities. Since the government has neglected to do the conservation studies called for in the RID, there's a lot of work to be done, and we expect the government to come up with the cash.

### The Feigned Innocence of Alberta Energy

Alberta Energy is deciding whether to grant Pioneer's third request for a Section 8 continuation of their lease, a process it says is confidential and does not provide opportunity for third party (e.g., public) intervention. Energy says the decision is based on policy and includes consideration of unforeseen circumstances and "things the company should have known but waited too long to address."

In the meantime Energy says it will continue to sell rights and operate according to the RID until given new direction. "Alberta Energy responds and is not proactive," said Don Bradshaw, manager of Land Access and Development for Alberta Energy. When asked how many wells there could potentially be in the NA under the RID, he replied, "We are unable to determine the number of wells that industry might want in this or any other area since the Department of Energy is not the regulator of well spacing and does

S. Bray



*Trident Exploration drilled the first, and so far, the only coal bed methane well in Rumsey. Their site shows the visible scar of the access route, which also goes to a nearby conventional well. The access and adjacent pipeline routes are inviting sites for invasive species that displace native grasslands. Rough fescue grasslands have never been successfully restored and are therefore at extreme risk from the greatly increased footprint of coal bed methane development.*

not issue well licences. Well licences are issued by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (EUB)."

AWA and ANPC have submitted an objection to the EUB. We asked the Board to consider whether allowing Pioneer's well to proceed would be in the public interest, given the intent of government policy articulated in Alberta Energy Information Letter (IL) 2003-25, the international significance of Rumsey, the insignificance of one CBM well to the provincial economy, our inability to restore rough fescue grasslands, and the lack of effective mechanisms for ensuring compliance of a company's surface activities with conditions placed on them to protect the environment.

Bradshaw also said that it is up to Parks to define any new direction. That may be what Energy is telling the public, but behind the scenes, discussions about what is allowed in Rumsey have been going on for some time to determine what policies will take precedence in the NA, and Energy has hardly been a willing follower. In fact, it continually shows itself as a big bully that certainly does not act in the public interest. A FOIP request by AWA gave us a sampling of these discussions from January 2005 to April 2006.

### Parks and Energy Battle over Access in Rumsey

The discussions dealt largely with whether IL2003-25 would apply in

Rumsey and nine other NAs.\* IL2003-25 states that mineral commitments existing in protected areas prior to their designation will be honoured and can be renewed; however, as they are developed and depleted, "it is expected that protected areas will eventually contain no existing mineral commitment." That might take 100 years in some places. New commitments are to be sold with a no-surface-access addendum. Pioneer's well is a new commitment, but surface access was allowed.

An October 2005 briefing note by Alberta Community Development (ACD, former department for the Parks Division) explained that 10 of the first 26 protected areas designated under the Special Places program, including Rumsey NA, are not covered by the no-surface-access addendum for ongoing mineral sales. ACD requested that Energy amend the addendum on all lands included in these sites, contending an administrative oversight resulted in the failure to update the addendum at an earlier date. They argued that mineral rights with surface access sold after NA designation violated the IL.

"It may be impossible to protect the integrity of Rumsey over the long-term from the impact of honouring the 35 existing commitments," wrote ACD's Deputy Minister Fay Orr. "Providing additional access for any of the 56 interests purchased since site

designation will make this task more difficult.”

For at least a year, ACD had requested that a no-surface-access addendum on all future Crown mineral sales be applied in Rumsey NA. “This is especially important given the ecological significance of Rumsey, and the negative attention that coal bed methane development in the area has received from provincial conservation organizations,” says a January 2005 memo from ACD to Energy. “To minimize conflict at Rumsey, it is important to ensure that this site is managed in accordance with IL 2003-25.” Placing a no-surface-access addendum on all lands within Rumsey “would ensure that oil and gas activity will eventually be phased out of this site” and reduce controversy.

Energy argued that Cabinet’s Special Places commitment to no new development in protected areas did not apply to these 10 sites. They argued this despite signing off on the IL 2003-25, which refers to all 81 protected areas established under the program. Energy also argued that since government policy was to treat CBM the same as conventional gas, ACD had to provide access to CBM within legislated protected areas if they were existing commitments.

“We in no way feel that this IL is inconsistent with the management plan for Rumsey,” wrote Joe Miller, executive director of Alberta Energy, in a February 2005 memo to ACD.

“Alberta Energy believes that the RID continues to provide the appropriate, approved site-specific management direction for Rumsey Natural Area. As such, we do not support a request for an all encompassing no surface access addendum.” However, in March 2005 Energy agreed to review the status of subsurface commitments and sales activities in the 10 sites and to assess potential options for resolving the issue.

An April 2005 email from ACD Assistant Deputy Minister John Kristensen notes that people considered CBM as a new use because of the impact of greatly increased well density on the land and were upset about the possibility of CBM within protected areas. “We therefore need to minimize to the greatest extent possible CBM development inside [parks and protected areas], notwithstanding IL2003-25, in order to show Albertans that the [Government of Alberta] is aware of the balance required in extracting natural resources and protecting PPA’s.”

In September, Parks threw down the gauntlet and said it expected that all future requests for sales affecting any lands within Rumsey would either be postponed until ongoing discussions between the two departments related to IL2003-25 was concluded or that sales would have the requisite no-surface-access addendum. Parks said they would not provide ministerial consent for surface access on any new interests

sold after September 2005. Did Alberta Energy meekly follow that lead? An October 2005 memo to Parks argued that the RID took precedence over the IL. “Alberta Energy will continue to sell mineral rights in Rumsey and other protected areas consistent with the level of access restrictions identified in the respective government approved management plans. When mineral rights are sold the Crown is obligated to provide access in accordance with the level of access indicated at the time of sale.”

ACD Deputy Minister Orr replied, “The IL clearly applies to Rumsey Natural Area, and therefore in those cases where conflicts exist between the IL and the 1993 Regionally Integrated Decision ..., the IL which was signed most recently would prevail.... This is an important and contentious public issue that must be addressed as quickly as possible.” However, mineral postings in Rumsey went forward in December, usually Energy’s biggest revenue sale of the year, and Energy expected conditions regarding surface access in the RID to apply.

By March 9, 2006, ACD was still flogging their position that sales affecting the 10 sites of concern would be postponed pending the outcome of further discussions and agreements or sold with the no-surface-access addendum. They then set a new date of March 2006 beyond which they would not give consent for surface access for new interests sold.

On March 13, 2006 Kristensen and Miller signed an agreement to do a review of the 10 NAs to review those with a “surface access subject to specific restrictions” level to determine if they merited any change. They agreed that IL2003-25 would apply to existing mineral commitment in all protected areas, that management plans would take precedence, and that changes to levels of access would require consultation with affected departments and even affected stakeholders. We have asked Goudreau to provide us with a copy of the review, which was due June 2006.

On March 17, 2006 a *Memorandum of Understanding: Management and Issuance of Land Dispositions on WAERNA and Provincial Park Lands* was signed



*A conventional well site by Pioneer Natural Resources in Rumsey Natural Area. Well operations on this particular day were extremely noisy, making for unpleasant conditions for those on a public field trip to this piece of Wild Alberta.*

by the deputy ministers of SRD and ACD, making Parks the lead agency in management of designated NAs. This was fortunate because Parks had not known about Pioneer's plans in January 2006 when contacted regarding the need for a Historical Clearance. But no one seemed to alert then-SRD Minister David Coutts, who subsequently told the media that identifying areas that are too environmentally sensitive for development or declaring areas off-limits to oil and gas activity doesn't fall under his domain but that of the Energy minister (*Calgary Herald*, March 20).



In April, Parks complained that Energy was pressuring them to approving well applications before they had adequately reviewed them. ACD sent another memo to Energy that echoed the October 2005 one. How much progress has been made since is anyone's guess. But while the two departments fiddled, Pioneer's CBM well was approved, with new surface access, in February 2007.

### Government Out of Step

When asked in the legislature (March 12, 2007) if there was an opportunity to limit the amount of oil and gas activity in Rumsey, Goudreau replied that his staff were continuing discussions on those particular concerns with Alberta Energy to further

the government's goals of "managing growth pressure and improving Alberta's quality of life."

Does the government think allowing CBM in the threatened landscape of Rumsey will be better for Alberta's quality of life? Does the government care what Albertans want for their protected areas? If Rumsey's future is to include full CBM development with all the accompanying pads and access routes, what is Rumsey protected from?

Goudreau told the legislature (March 13) that "we need to ... strike a balance between protection of our parks and the economic activity that needs to go there." He was referring to the need to honour existing commitments in protected areas, which he claimed is "extremely important" to Albertans. Which Albertans? Not the 93 percent who said in a Special Places poll that they didn't want industrial activity in protected areas – does the government think a majority of Albertans have changed their minds? Besides, many proposed CBM wells in Rumsey are new commitments. Why is the government still selling new mineral commitments with surface access in this protected area?

It is time the government allowed Parks to be the pack leader for protected areas, rather than the runt of the Cabinet. The government would do well to consider this statement: "Alberta may one day become so hard-pressed for cash or so low on mineral resources that it will have to consider opening provincial parks to industrial exploitation. But that day is still a long way off." That's from a 1970 *Calgary Herald* editorial protesting the approval of gas drilling in Cypress Hills Provincial Park.

"By approving the gas-drilling permit in Cypress Hills park," the editorial continued, "the Alberta government has shown that it is out of step with the times. The emphasis today is being placed by visionary governments on creating and preserving quality in the environment." We're hardly hard-pressed for cash these days and we're still waiting for that visionary government.

*\*The nine other NAs that were subject to the access review by Parks and Energy are Bentz Lake, Bridge Lake, Centre of Alberta, Child Lake Meadows, Noel Lake, Sand Lake, Town Creek, Whitecourt Mountain, and Yates. A more detailed account of the history from AWA's FOIP request can be found on our website under Issues and Areas/Rumsey/History.*

## PANEL INVITES PUBLIC COMMENT ON ENCANA'S DRILLING PROJECT IN SUFFIELD

The Joint Panel reviewing the proposed EnCana Shallow Gas Infill Development project in the Suffield National Wildlife Area is asking for the public's comments on the adequacy of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) filed by the proponent, EnCana Corporation. The EIS assesses the anticipated effects of the proposed project on the environment according to the Guidelines that were issued by the Panel in December 2006.

Based on the comments and EnCana's response, the Panel will determine whether the EIS is sufficient or if EnCana must provide additional information prior to the public hearings.

The EIS and more information on the project are available at [www.SuffieldReview.ca](http://www.SuffieldReview.ca) or on the Canadian Environmental Assessment Registry at [www.ceaa-acee.gc.ca](http://www.ceaa-acee.gc.ca), under registry # 05-05-15620. The deadline for comments is July 27, 2007.

**Send your comments by mail, fax or email to:**

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## HIGH ISLAND INCIDENT HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

*By Aaron Davies*

The installation of two communications towers in High Island Natural Area came as a bitter surprise to residents of the Lac La Biche area, who knew nothing of the government's plans. The incident sparked heated controversy and brought into sharp focus the lack of process for public involvement in government decision-making regarding protected areas in the province.

Lac La Biche, approximately 2.5 hours northeast of Edmonton, was first designated as a Bird Sanctuary in 1920 by the Government of Canada. It became a Provincial Wildlife Sanctuary after the passing of the *Alberta Natural Resources Act* in 1930. The lake was nominated as a globally significant Important Bird Area (IBA) site in 2000 because of its large numbers of nesting California gulls and western grebes. The lake is also a very important migration stopover for several other rare species, such as the long-tailed duck, red-breasted merganser, and a multitude of different shorebirds. Lac La Biche is the home of Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park and two Natural Areas: Black Fox Island, and High (Shorty's) Island.

High Island, an ecologically sensitive island between the east and west basins of the lake, was designated as a Natural Area in 1995. Less than seven hectares in size, it is home for a rare Caspian tern colony and a great blue heron colony. It is also an important nesting area for California gulls, herring gulls, bald eagles, and the white-winged scoter, and a reliable place to see the ruddy turnstone.

Named after Einar "Shorty" Pederson, who had a fox farm on it in the 1930s, High Island has also been referred to as Prairie Island because of the lovely meadow, a treeless micro-environment, which crowns the island. Its flat top was identified as one of the island's significant features when it was designated a Natural Area. Only a handful of islands have been designated Natural Areas in Alberta.

The island is also an important prehistoric site. An archaeological study identified a number of artifacts, and plants with medicinal and spiritual value to aboriginals, as well as bison and other skeletal remains, have also been found. High Island sits on a big-game crossing at the narrowest part of Lac La Biche – deer and moose

are regular users of the game trails traversing the island.

In late March 2007, Alberta Parks and Protected Areas began the installation of two communications towers in High Island Natural Area. This installation came as a surprise to residents in the area. The public was not consulted or notified of this development. Chris Bruntlett, Area Manager for Parks and Protected Areas in Lac La Biche, said the tallest tower (15 meters) will be used to relay the signal of a camera that will film the nesting birds. The camera will be mounted on the smaller tower (6 meters), with the footage uploaded onto the Internet for research purposes.

Currently there is no requirement for public consultation or notification of plans like these for protected areas; the decision is left to the discretion of the individuals involved. When asked in a phone conversation as to why the public was not notified, Bruntlett responded, "We have to draw the line somewhere. We can't consult the public on everything." Bruntlett went on to compare the installation of the towers to "building an outhouse in a provincial park."

T. Maccagno



*These were some of the photos sent by local naturalists to Minister Hector Goudreau to show the damage done to the island. Left: The road created during the installation of the communication towers in High Island Natural Area in Lac La Biche. Right: The cleared area at the top of the island for the erection of the taller of the two towers that the government installed, presumably to monitor bird activity on the island.*

Former mayor of Lac La Biche and then-president of the Lac La Biche Birding Society Tom Maccagno believes that “what has occurred is clearly contrary to the supposed aims and purposes of Natural Areas.” He adds, “A terrible price has been paid because of a lack of an opportunity for public input.”

During installation, the contractors responsible for construction brought vehicles and a cat onto the island. A long winding road was cleared to the top, where in several places it would be easy for two vehicles to pass each other. The top of the island is also excessively cleared. The tallest tower now sits on an important nesting area for the white-winged scoter, and the smaller tower sits adjacent to the great blue heron colony. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of these events is the press release published by the Alberta government after the issue hit the local papers and the Alberta Legislative Assembly. The press release states: “Prior to the installation, an Alberta parks staff biologist conducted an environmental screening of the site considering impacts to wildlife, ground disturbance and plant species. No problems with the installation were identified as it is located in an area that was once a fox farm. In addition, conditions were put on the contractor installing the project to minimize impacts including the size of equipment and no clearing of trees or vegetation. “The biologist also monitored the installation, which was accomplished on frozen ground to minimize both plant and soil disturbance, and before birds began to arrive on the nesting site. A few willow shrubs were sheared off but will grow back in one growing season.” The biologist responsible for the environmental screening, which was apparently conducted during the winter months, was not monitoring the installation of the towers during any visits made to the island by locals. Vegetation was cleared into piles to make a road, and some trees were knocked down near the island’s meadow top, as seen in the photos taken by Tom Maccagno during installation. The fox farm was not located on top of the island where the tower is located, but rather on the lower portion of the island, as many locals

A. Davies



*High Island is a federally designated Bird Sanctuary, a Provincial Wildlife Sanctuary, and a nominated Important Bird Area. This rocky shore serves as a nesting area for gulls and cormorants.*

can attest to.

Chris Bruntlett insisted that the equipment did not expose any top soil on the island, but simply “drove over the snow and frozen ground.” In fact, the warm spring weather and heavy equipment combined to create what locals see as considerable impact, and it became fairly obvious that one of the project’s planners hadn’t even visited the island during installation of the towers.

When asked about the island in the Legislative Assembly, Minister of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture Hector Goudreau responded with direct quotations from the government press release. “I need to say that all of that work was done on frozen ground to try to minimize both our plant and soil disturbance, and that was accomplished,” he said in the Assembly on April 11, 2007, indicating that he likely did not view the photographs that contradict his statement, sent to him by several Lac La Biche residents.

The preamble in the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas and Heritage Rangelands Act* states that “it is in the public interest that certain areas of Alberta be protected and managed for the purposes of preserving their natural beauty and safeguarding them from impairment and industrial development.” It also states the purpose of Natural Areas is to

“protect sensitive or scenic public land or natural features on public land from disturbance.” High Island was made a Natural Area under this Act, but locals who visit the island regularly believe that the Act has failed to protect it from its supposed caretaker, that this action has undermined public confidence in the Act, and that Parks appears to have discretionary powers that supersede the legislated mandate.

As of May 2007, both towers are up and have been connected together by a ground cable. Large solar panels have also been installed. A URL address to view the footage has not yet been made public. Another path has been made to the top of the island, presumably because the original path became too muddy and vehicles ran the risk of getting stuck. This second path runs directly across the meadow top, again damaging quality habitat.

Some of those who have been monitoring these activities question Parks’ priorities – why did towers to watch birds warrant fiscal priority over the needs for staff, trails, and facilities? Some wonder if it is simply a response to the need for high-speed wireless Internet in the area.

What is painfully obvious here is the need for public input. If the public had been notified and asked for their participation, the entire conflict would likely have been avoided. Locals who

know the island intimately could have provided information that may have mitigated the impact of the project or perhaps caused the plans to be abandoned. Environmental groups have long been asking for a clear public lands policy that includes transparency and public involvement in decisions that impact protected areas. The High Island incident once again highlights the need for timely accessible information with the opportunity for the participation of concerned Albertans.

Not only has the once pretty and unique island been marred by the tower on its top, but it is unclear whether noxious weeds will replace the grasses where the heavy equipment plowed a road, or whether the island will recover from the damage that has been done.

Government botanists plan to inspect the site later this summer after it has had some time to recover in order to assess the amount of damage. A Parks planner recently called the island's meadow top an "evolving old field" and "not unique" in an email to the Lac La Biche Birding Society. Local naturalists disagree and find the tone contemptuous.

The alarm that has activated the residents of Lac La Biche adds to a growing wave of concern throughout Alberta. Albertans are not happy that important decisions are being made without a proper public lands policy and overarching framework to guide decisions, whether they are being made at the provincial, regional or municipal level. The lack of public policy results

in decisions being made in isolation and often without regard for the priorities of Albertans.

We have seen the government's lack of commitment to parks and protected areas on a number of fronts, including Rumsey. With the proposed highway extension through Lakeland Provincial Recreation Area and the continued development of oil, gas, and forestry in the Lac La Biche area, the High Island controversy must serve as a symbolic reminder to the government that public lands are public and Natural Areas are meant to remain natural.

*Aaron Davies' love for wild Alberta developed during childhood trapping and camping expeditions in the Lakeland area with his family. He is a high school teacher in the Lac La Biche area and has recently been nominated for a provincial teaching award.*



## THE WOODLAND CARIBOU CONTROVERSY

By Dick Dekker

*Alberta's Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan calls for the shooting of moose as well as wolves. Will this vicious cycle of killing spill over into Jasper National Park?*

Although accurate census data are not available, intensive field surveys by provincial biologists leave no doubt that Alberta's population of woodland caribou has been in decline for the past three decades (Edmonds 1986). However, concrete plans toward recovery were not finalized until very recently with the publication of a 48-page report by the Alberta Fish & Wildlife Division (AFWD), in cooperation with a consortium of public and private agencies.

The *Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan: 2004-2014* contains information on the animal's biology and current status, as well as the management measures deemed necessary to halt the decline (Hervieux et al. 2005). Unfortunately, the authors fail to emphasize that the surest way to save the caribou from extirpation is by closing off critical winter habitat



A. Ernst

*Caribou along the Icefields Parkway*

to resource exploitation and private vehicles. All parties concerned about caribou survival strongly believe that the protection of large chunks of west slope woodland must be a crucial first step toward recovery. However, such demands from the public and wildlife experts alike have been lost like cries in the wilderness of Alberta's political reality.

Given its limited mandate, AFWD ignored the urgent need for the establishment of foothills forest preserves, and instead, as its first

priority, focused on the caribou's natural enemy, the wolf. Details of the first year of operation were duly made available to the public and reported in the *Edmonton Journal* and *Nature Alberta* (Dekker 2006a, b; 2007). Last winter, 89 wolves were shot from helicopters in the region northwest of Hinton. Full particulars were also disclosed of an ambitious program to protect newborn calves from predation by taking 10 pregnant caribou cows into temporary captivity.

Comparative figures for 2006-





*In my view, the official species' name "grey wolf" (or "gray wolf" in American spelling) is a misnomer. In northwestern Canada and U.S., 30 to 40 percent of wolves have black fur. The percentage of blacks in Jasper National Park is even higher, and amounts to 74 percent of some 500 wolves I have seen there over 42 years.*

2007 were not yet available at the time of this writing, but a spokesperson for Alberta Sustainable Resources said that more wolves have been killed on caribou range.

Are government wildlife managers trying to protect the woodland caribou at the expense of other wildlife?

The Recovery Plan identifies wolf predation as an increasingly serious limitation on caribou populations on the basis of the following theory. As formerly closed stands of old-growth forest are opened up by oil and forestry companies, the altered habitat favours the expansion of moose, elk, and deer, which in turn attracts more predators, compounding the vulnerability of caribou. In order to protect them, the killing of wolves is seen as a necessity. However, the document includes a warning that the removal of predators will result in even more hoofed mammals, thus enlarging the prey base for wolves. Furthermore, as soon as controls are lifted, the predators can be expected to come back in greater numbers than before.

So, what is the next stage in the vicious circle? David Ealey, spokesperson for Alberta Sustainable Resources, explains it this way: "The objective of reducing alternate prey such as moose is essential if the larger scale caribou conservation efforts are to be successful." Apparently, the planned reduction of moose – as well as deer and elk – is to be achieved by increasing hunting allocations under

general licence throughout caribou range in west-central Alberta.

However, wouldn't this bring even more guns into the field and aggravate the potential danger for caribou? Although the season on them was closed 26 years ago, the secretive woodland dwellers are sometimes shot by accident because they are mistaken for elk, moose, or deer. To further complicate matters, aboriginal and Metis people are allowed to hunt wild animals, including caribou, throughout the year.

A more target-specific, but not yet implemented, method of moose reduction might be aerial shooting by government technicians. If left in the field, the moose carcasses could serve as food for the local wolves. With a full belly, these predators are not likely to go after other prey, thus mitigating predation risk for caribou. Supplemental feeding of wolves and bears, by providing them with the carcasses of traffic-killed ungulates, was practiced in Alaska two decades ago with the aim of reducing mortality rates of newborn caribou calves.

As for the wolves that have thus far been shotgunned from the air, most of them were indeed left in the field for practical reasons. Helicopter crews chasing a fleeing pack of wolves have no time to land and search for dead or crippled victims. They have to press on in pursuit of other pack members. Neither do airborne wolf hunters want to waste time by cruising on a

haphazard course over the wilderness. Instead, they make use of the best technology available. For instance, they net-gun single wolves during summer or fall and release them again fitted with radio transmitters. Called "Judas wolves," these animals will later lead the hunters to the family pack.

Another sure way to zero in on wolves is to dump large baits, such as the carcass of a moose, on frozen lakes. After a wolf pack begins feeding at the open bait site, the helicopter swoops down, intercepting the animals before they scatter and escape into the woods.

Helicopter hunting is expensive. The cost of a campaign in British Columbia in which 996 wolves were shot over two winters was \$2,500 to \$3,000 per wolf in 1980 dollars. Ironically, the massive control effort was deemed a waste of time as well as money: after three years, the local wolf population was back at its former strength (Dekker 1997).

The most effective method of wolf control is poisoning, a common practice in past years. However, today it is frowned upon since it jeopardizes the lives of many other scavengers besides wolves. Surprisingly, AFWD was considering it as a last resort in the current wolf campaign.

### Will War on Wolves Spill into Jasper?

The Caribou Recovery Plan includes the following recommendation: "Alberta Fish & Wildlife Division and Parks Canada should determine options and a schedule for implementing control of predators and (possibly) other prey species on caribou ranges where herds are in immediate danger of extirpation or in serious decline."

Does this mean that the killing of wolves and moose is also going to take place in Jasper National Park? The answer is as yet unknown. Parks Canada officials are involved in ongoing discussions with the Alberta Caribou Committee. Whereas the proposal for active wolf control in the park will likely be turned down, it is highly probable that provincial crews are shooting wolves just outside the Jasper Park boundary. Another yet to be resolved question is whether Parks Canada will eventually approve of an

indirect method of dampening wolf numbers by lowering their prey base. In this case, that would involve reducing not moose numbers but elk.

The reasoning goes as follows. Wolves are relatively common in Jasper Park by virtue of their large food resource -- the elk population, which is estimated at 600 head for the Athabasca Valley alone. Known wolf numbers in the main valley system are currently between 30 and 40, exceeding past estimates (Dekker et al. 1995). The assumption is that these wolves pose a threat to the park's scarce caribou, which became of special concern after they were declared a threatened species within Canada by federal directives. On the strength of this designation, park officials have jumped to attention and feel obligated to reduce predation pressure on their caribou. The obvious question is this: if elk were made less common, wouldn't that force the wolves to hunt other prey species, increasing the risk for caribou?



C. Olson

*Because caribou depend on tree lichen for survival, forestry is one of the industries contributing to the cumulative effects that lead to population decline. As shown by this 2005 research site, forestry companies are involved in research studying the effects of forest thinning on lichen growth.*

Nevertheless, some people argue that Jasper's elk population exceeds natural levels anyway because their main food base -- grass and forbs -- has been enlarged by human development. Elk readily graze along

highway margins, around motels, and on town site lawns. They also consume sprouting bushes and trees. A high elk density, therefore, leads to the destruction of willow and aspen, which are home to songbirds and insects. This is where we run into another potential conflict, and the buzzword here is *ecological integrity*. The overpopulation of elk is believed to negatively affect the dynamic interrelationship of plants and animals.

Ironically, for the past two or three decades, park biologists have been worried about the progressive loss of open montane habitat due to natural plant succession. Inexorably, trees invade grassy meadows. There are two ways to halt this process: one is through fire, the other by heavy grazing and browsing, which is exactly what the elk are providing free of charge. By removing poplar shoots and spruce seedlings, the herds are in fact maintaining their own preferred open habitat. Consequently, a proposed cull of the park's elk herds would not only lead to misguided interference in the natural order of things, but park staff would set back wildlife management in Jasper to the dark ages of half a century ago.

To sum up, no matter how well intended, it is unfortunate that the threatened species label is forcing government wildlife managers, federal and provincial, to hands-on action that boils down to favouring one species at the expense of another, with the added risk of disrupting the entire large mammal system of our foothills forest and the adjacent national park.

### Do We Need More Research?

Prompted by appeals to help save a threatened species, and to assuage their collective conscience, the energy and forestry industries have sent representatives to the Alberta Caribou Committee. Several companies have donated huge amounts of money to pay for ongoing field research. Much of this money ends up in the pockets of helicopter crews contracted to capture some of the last of our caribou with the goal of fitting them with radio collars. Although this research is seen as an important management tool, it boils down to added harassment with a risk of lethal accidents.

In my opinion, the last of our caribou should be left alone, particularly in the national parks, where there is no resource extraction, no hunting, and no public access for ATVs or snowmobiles. After all, the inherent value of national parks is that here, and only here, is nature supposed to be allowed a free reign. Of course, even in Jasper there are some complicating factors, mainly because of human use of roads and trails. Nevertheless, given their full protection, if the last of the herds cannot make a stand in Jasper National Park, then it may be that Mother Nature is telling them to move on.

Similarly, if our foothill forests have become unsuitable for woodland caribou, mainly through habitat deterioration, it is inevitable that the southern limit of their population will adjust by shifting farther north. Retreating northward is what this ancient and adaptable species has been doing ever since the melting of the last ice age.

Trying to set the clock back by a vicious circle of haphazard management that offers no guarantee for recovery may cause more trouble than expected. If we are really serious about helping the last of the caribou, it is imperative that we redouble our efforts to create a habitat refuge where the last of the herds can balance out their own needs with those of other indigenous mammals including the wolf.

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## B.C.'s WOODLAND CARIBOU RECOVERY PLAN CALLS FOR EVEN MORE DRASTIC MEASURES THAN ALBERTA'S CURRENT CAMPAIGN

By Dick Dekker

Like their Alberta conspecifics, British Columbia's woodland caribou have been declining for several decades, giving rise to growing concern among provincial wildlife managers. In fact, the notion that wolves need to be controlled in order to save the remnant B.C. population was first proposed in 1992 and later echoed in Alberta (Seip 1992, Dekker 1997).

In October of last year, the B.C. Mountain Caribou Science Team released an updated report bemoaning the loss of caribou habitat to industry, the proliferation of trails open to snowmobiles, and the intrusion of commercial ski operations in caribou winter range. But the threat identified by the scientists as the most pressing was the loss of caribou due to predators. For this reason, the plan not only recommends the killing of wolves, but also cougars, lynxes, wolverines, and bears.

Bears, and in particular the grizzly, are known to prey on young caribou calves, but this relevant factor is overlooked by Alberta's wildlife managers. Our grizzlies are considered an endangered species and are therefore untouchable.

Besides predator controls, B.C.'s caribou panel called for the reduction of the predators' prey base, which means that moose, elk, and deer populations are going to be thinned out as well. What it boils down to is that major portions of the province are to be managed exclusively for the protection of the caribou.

On October 28, 2006, the plan received a scathing review on the editorial page of the *Vancouver Sun*. Under the title "Killing off other species to save caribou seems worse than the problem," the editors point to the inherent weakness in the report, which is that its authors admit "decisions on predator management

R. Bürglin



*Woodland caribou (Rangifer tarandus) is listed as Threatened under Alberta's Wildlife Act. This species continues to decline in Alberta in both population size and distribution, reflecting its high sensitivity to human activities.*

will have to be made in the context of multiple uncertainties."

For instance, the word the scientists used to describe the perceived advantage of culling deer, elk, and moose, and its downward effect on predator populations, was "presumably." Evidently, the authors of the report did not really know whether

their proposals will work or what the unintended effects will be. According to the *Vancouver Sun*, this is not good enough to justify a killing spree.

The only good news, according to the paper, is that the report of the Mountain Caribou Science Team was released for public comment and is not being implemented immediately. The public comment period ended in March 2007. According to Andy Miller, staff biologist for the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, the caribou issue generated 12,000 letters. Since that time, the B.C. government has not yet proceeded further with its recovery plan.

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*Since emigrating to Canada from his native Holland, wildlife biologist Dick Dekker has spent much of his life in the Canadian Northwest - among lakes and rivers, forest and mountains - observing wildlife from a tent or remote cabin. His many publications on the subject range from technical papers to popular books, including Wolves of the Rocky Mountains - From Jasper to Yellowstone and Two decades of wildlife investigations at Devona, Jasper National Park, 1981-2001.*

### Is the Establishment of a Caribou Park an Idea Worth Considering?

Given the level of concern and uncertainty about the continued survival of mountain and woodland caribou in western Canada, the designation of a special sanctuary might provide a management option of last resort. I suggest that a number of animals could be captured and transported to a new provincial or national park containing suitable habitat, either in Alberta or in B.C. and perhaps straddling the provincial boundaries.

Such a move would follow the successful precedent set by Elk Island National Park, which was created a century ago to give the remnant herds of plains elk and bison a safe haven into perpetuity. Like Elk Island, the proposed caribou sanctuary should be fenced and not contain any large carnivores. Given the prospects for successful reproduction, surplus caribou might eventually be released back into the wild.





## COLLATERAL DAMAGE MAY BE WORSE THAN BEETLES

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

“War,” “crisis,” “state of emergency.” These are all words that have been used recently to describe the impacts of a small species of native invertebrate, the mountain pine beetle (MPB). If Alberta is going to wage a “war on beetles,” AWA is concerned about the collateral damage, not least of which is a loss of any sense of perspective.

With the April 25, 2007 announcement of another \$50 million from the Alberta government going to fight the beetle, two questions arise. First, it is important to ask whether all of this money will actually make any difference to the predicted beetle outbreak. And second, will a knee-jerk reaction of trying to “fix” the pine beetle problem actually do more damage than the beetles themselves?

So is this beetle battle going to work? The Canadian Forest Service website states that “the magnitude of the current mountain pine beetle infestation means that intervention to bring the epidemic under control is not feasible.” Lessons from British Columbia suggest that measures to identify and remove individual trees in the early part of a pine beetle outbreak can slow the insect’s spread. This seems a prudent and balanced approach.

But where the scientific basis for pine beetle control begins to get left behind is in the rush to harvest trees ahead of the beetles’ advance, to turn trees into lumber before the beetles can infect them. There is no evidence that this will do anything to stop the beetles. But we know for sure that there will be casualties.

The hyperbole about pine beetles leads us to imagine a beetle outbreak being like a forest fire, sweeping through and devastating everything in its wake. But of course MPBs mostly affect pine trees over 50 to 60 years of age, leaving behind spruce, fir, deciduous trees, all the undergrowth – and healthy younger pine trees.



*Beetle-killed pines in southwest Alberta during a 1980s outbreak.*

It has been shown that woodland caribou can survive perfectly well in forests that have been attacked by pine beetles. The lichens that the caribou rely on will persist for some time after individual trees have died and will continue to grow on non-pine species. What caribou can not survive is clear-cut forestry: it will take decades for cutblocks to grow back sufficiently to allow caribou to return.

The Alberta government’s *Interpretive Bulletin on Planning Mountain Pine Beetle Response Operations* acknowledges that beetle control measures need to recognize some of the non-forestry values of forests. “The urgency of planning MPB control and prevention must give due consideration to the impacts these measures may have on other values,” states the bulletin. “Habitat considerations for species of special concern must be assessed and managed appropriately throughout the MPB priority area.”

But despite these statements, the Alberta government has already directed forestry companies to clear-cut in critical woodland caribou habitat in the Narraway Region of central Alberta, seemingly taking the approach of “do as I say, not as I do.”

Alberta’s approach to pine beetles is just one symptom of the outdated attitude that what is good for forestry is good for forests. But of course forests

are so much more than a bunch of vertical timber.

There is reason for some optimism that attitudes may be changing in Alberta, particularly with a growing appreciation of the value of forests for supplying clean water. Ted Morton, Minister for Sustainable Resource Development, recently commented, “In the proper context, timber harvesting and forest management planning could be used as an innovative tool, within a broader land management scenario, to create wildlife habitat and watershed integrity and support natural areas and conservation.”

This approach is clearly supported by Albertans. A 2006 poll for the Alberta Forest Products Association found that “82 per cent of 2,881 participants favour an integrated land management approach to Alberta’s forests, taking into account environmental, social and economic sustainability.”

Now is the time for the Alberta government to start putting these words into practice. Declining grizzly bear populations, threatened woodland caribou, drinking water concerns, and protests against clear-cutting near Bragg Creek: these are all symptoms of a misplaced sense of perspective that still puts timber production above everything else. Changing this perspective – now that would be a “war” worth fighting.

AWA Files



## ALBERTA'S GRIZZLIES. GOING, GOING...

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

New government figures for Alberta's beleaguered grizzly bears now peg the provincial population at fewer than 500 bears, considerably lower than any previous estimates. Only five years ago, the population was believed to be around 1,000 bears, but even this was enough to warrant a recommendation by the government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee to list grizzlies as a "threatened" species. The government has so far ignored that recommendation, but now even that figure of 1,000 seems to have been overly optimistic.

It remains unclear how far this decline in numbers represents an actual decrease in the number of grizzly bears, and how much it is just that we are getting better at counting them. One of the recommendations of the 2004 draft Grizzly Bear Management Plan was to improve our knowledge of grizzly bears and their habitat. To implement this recommendation, in 2004 the Foothills Model Forest was contracted by the government to initiate a program of detailed DNA census work. Three years' worth of studies have so far been completed, covering the north of Highway 3 in the Crownsnest Pass to Highway 16 west of Edmonton.

So what happens next? Imagine a young grizzly bear struggling to make its way in the unprotected Bighorn wildlands. Does it help that grizzly that a draft recovery plan has been written? No, not in itself it doesn't. Does it help that grizzly that we are better at counting grizzly bears than we used to be? No, not really. These are vital steps along the way towards the final goal of protecting grizzly bear habitat, which is the only thing that will help Alberta's grizzlies in the long run. But without this final goal, they are a waste of time and money.

Grizzlies need secure habitat. They need places where they can get

M. Degner



*New government figures based on three years of DNA census work indicate that less than 500 grizzlies remain in Alberta, down from the estimate of 1,000 five years ago.*

away from people. The draft Recovery Plan points out that, on provincial lands in Alberta, 89 percent of human-caused mortalities were within 500 metres of a road; in the National Parks, this goes up to 100 percent within 200 metres of a road or trail. It has been proven time and time again that roads lead to dead grizzly bears. To give our grizzlies the chance to survive, Alberta must reduce the vast network of industrial roads, trails, and seismic lines that crisscross the landscape.

If there is one ray of light in the shocking mismanagement of Alberta's grizzly bears, it is the fact that we know that, with sufficient will power and resources, they can be recovered. This is one of the lessons from the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, arguably the most successful species recovery program in North America. From an estimated population of 136 individuals when the grizzly was listed as "threatened" in 1975, the population is now believed to be more than 600 animals.

Dr. Chris Servheen, US Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, stresses that habitat security is the most important factor in grizzly recovery. "Motorized access compromises habitat security," he adds, and the Yellowstone plan certainly acted to protect key grizzly habitat (the plan saw more than 1,000

km of roads closed). Unfortunately the Alberta government continues to show considerable reluctance to address this fundamental issue.

If, as he has already suggested, Premier Stelmach will not be using the brakes on Alberta's economic juggernaut any time soon, it seems that Alberta's grizzly bears will continue to be the roadkill. He's been speeding past those wildlife crossing signs, gas pedal slammed hard to the floor, and he doesn't show any signs of letting up. If he just eases back on the gas, maybe Alberta's grizzlies still have a chance. But he won't do that until Albertans insist on it.

### Alberta's Disappearing Grizzlies 2002

**Estimated population 1,000 bears.** Alberta government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee recommends that the grizzly be designated as "threatened" under the provincial Wildlife Act.

### 2004

**Estimated population "less than 700 bears."** Draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan is submitted to Alberta government.

### 2007

**Estimated population less than 500 bears.** The data from three years of genetic population studies result in revised estimates.

# ENCOUNTERS OF THE WILD (FLOWER) KIND

By Julia Millen

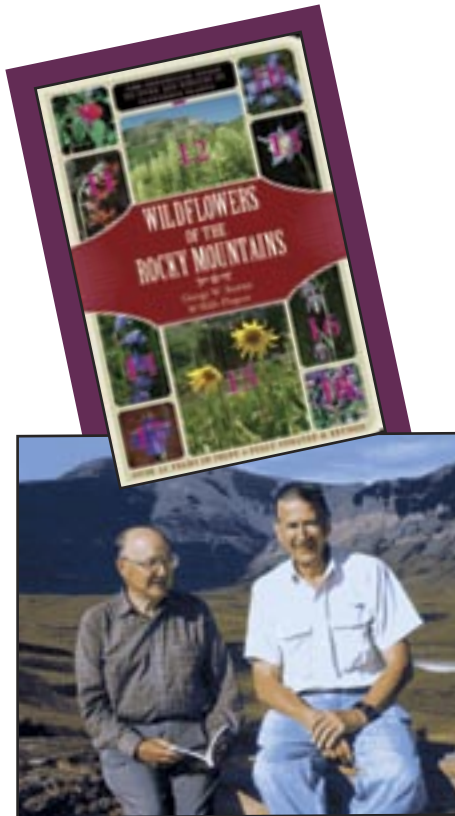
Going for a hike in the Rockies this summer? Walk carefully. You may encounter elephants, kittens, monkeys, sailors, chatterboxes, hedgehogs, dwarves, gypsies and even the Old-Man-of-The-Mountain himself. If those don't sound like ordinary sightings for a mountain outing, pick up a copy of the new book, *Wildflowers of the Rocky Mountains*, by George Scotter and Hälle Flygare, to discover where to look.

This book introduces the vast array of colourful wildflowers which make mountain hiking a joy. Indeed, you'll likely find yourself doing armchair hiking before heading out, since the lovely photographs and clear layout entice you to turn the pages. *Wildflowers of the Rocky Mountains* is an expanded and updated version of the book *Wildflowers of the Canadian Rockies* originally published in 1986. George Scotter notes, "Although no field guide can be complete and still be of reasonable size, I wanted to add more wildflowers to make the new book more comprehensive." The expanded version covers the Rockies stretching between the BC/Yukon border all the way to New Mexico.

It's challenging to cover such vast territory and diversity yet remain comprehensive. The book strikes a balance, providing a brief overview of the ecoregions and geology, and provides photographs, descriptions and natural history information for more than 360 flower species (about 100 more than the previous book).

If you're accustomed to the first book, you'll find flowers organized with the familiar colour system, a popular identification tool allowing non-botanists to navigate with ease. However, due to the book's expanded range, and the authors' dilemma of selecting representative species from thousands of floral candidates, you may find that you're only able to take identification down to family or genus rather than species. Perhaps that'll spur you on to explore the additional references listed in the book. As

George Scotter says, "We tried to cover some of the more common plants users of the guide would encounter in the Rockies. Occasionally we included uncommon plants that are of special interest or beauty to keep users searching for new plants."



Author George Scotter and photographer Hälle Flygare

Range maps are included, quickly showing the distribution of each plant; however, these maps are painted with a broad brush. Entire states or provinces are coloured to indicate that a plant species is found in the Rockies of that particular area. At first glance, for example, you might believe that Bear Grass is found all across Alberta, when it is actually limited to Waterton National Park in the SW corner of the province.

Since the first publication many scientific names have changed - an impetus for the new book. In addition, Scotter wanted to use standardized common names. "As you know, some plants can have ten or more common

names. I much prefer the system used for birds where the common names are standardized." You'll now have up to date scientific and common names in a handy reference. Although an effort has been made to include additional local common names, you may not find all of your favourites. For example, Western Wake Robin has become Pacific Trillium. With standardization to the system suggested by the United States Department of Agriculture comes the loss of the colourful poetic diversity contained in local lore and names.

The process of creating the book created lore of its own. As George Scotter recounts, "We were photographing wildflowers in the Rowe Lakes basin in Waterton Lakes National Park. I was going ahead of Hälle Flygare and my wife, Etta, finding additional wildflowers that I wanted photographed for the book. Hälle was down on his belly taking close up photos of Big Mountain Gentian when Etta noticed a bear in some bushes a short distance away. Rather than protecting Etta from the bear Hälle went on taking pictures. Etta says she only forgave him because he stopped every 10 minutes to take a new picture and every 30 minutes to eat and that was just the pace she liked to hike." That certainly gives an appreciation for the gentian photograph on page 205!

With *Wildflowers of the Rocky Mountains* you are well equipped to share the authors' appreciation and enthusiasm, encounter some new flowers and begin building your own personal collection of floral lore. Happy flowering!

*Julia Millen has worked as a naturalist and environmental educator in southern Alberta for over 20 years, teaching wildflower courses, guiding hikes, and sharing her delight in nature through photography.*



## Frozen in the Glare!

Dear Editor,

There he is, Ed “The-Big-Buck” Stelmach, frozen in the middle of the road, eyes glazed over by the semi-trailer bearing down on him. Not a new situation for Alberta premiers, but this time, the lights of the world’s people and the world’s best climate and natural scientists are brighter than they have ever been. And he still can’t move his feet!

Conservative governments in Alberta have been leading the oil and gas industry through the darkness known as Alberta’s democracy for well over 30 years. In that time, I suspect some of them were smart enough to see the catastrophic local and growing global environmental impact of their excesses. But under the guidance of people like Ralph Klein, they spent their energy and time, along with our resources, trying desperately to dim the lights of public and scientific scrutiny. This they did with the help of an army of columnists; energy, chemical, and coal industry big wigs; and a vocal complement of hangers on, geologists, trade associations, all attached to the energy industry by cash flowing through an umbilical cord as big as a sewer pipe.

Now the Stelmach government claims it can’t move because it has to take care of those who would lose their share of the pie. These are the people whom the government, the media, industry, and horn-blowers like the Fraser Institute call the winners. For 30 years they’ve received more than their share, and paid less than their share, and sent an awful lot more of our share out of the economy to other countries and foreign shareholders.

These are whom the conservatives and economists call the winners, beneficiaries by virtue of prejudicial gain from public resources and processes. That, and of course, having to carry a Conservative Party membership card. And Stelmach says their well-being has to come first, before he can make a move on carbon emissions, water, and land-use issues.

J. Hilderbrand



*Highway 63 north of Fort McMurray in the mineable oil sands area, leading into Mildred Lake Village. While many Albertans express dismay at the direction our province is going, the Stelmach government continues down the road to lost democracy and irreversible ecological damage.*

Why is there such a stench associated with this sudden and misguided caution?

I’m asking myself: what of the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of Albertans, who have already paid dearly for the excesses of this government and the oil and gas industry? Why aren’t they the first priority? They’ve already been screwed; they’re the ones already in the proverbial waiting room, already socially, economically and politically injured, already taken advantage of.

What about the tens if not hundreds of thousands of Albertans who have been slowly poisoned or debilitated by toxic fumes and effluent from the oil and gas industry? What about the hundreds of thousands, perhaps a million and a half Albertans who have had the door slammed in their faces – democracy denied - - because they don’t wake up in the morning and raise the Tory flag?

What about the hundreds of thousands, actually millions of Albertans who have seen the Conservatives subsidize multinational giants in the oil and gas industry with billions of uncollected, overlooked, and deliberately excused tax and resources revenues?

What about the tens of thousands of people who depend on streams and subsurface water flows degraded and diverted by thousands of kilometres of roads, pipelines, well sites, well bores, and seismic lines? What about the families that have been bombarded with noise, dust, construction, and service traffic, and intimidated by the oil and gas industry and its soothsayers, the Energy Utility Board, for 30-plus years? What about the thousands of landowners invaded by coal bed methane exploitation that pockmarks the countryside and disingenuously hides under the skirts of experimental? Yes, it’s true. These people don’t count in Conservative Alberta. In the Stelmach Conservative Book on how to exercise absolute power, they’ve already been had. Stelmach and the Conservative crew make it very clear they feel no moral obligation to treat all Albertans as equals. Under Klein and preceding premiers, and now Stelmach, any sense that there was a legal commitment to treat all Albertans equally has been deliberately and systematically destroyed.

These are people who don’t trust Albertans. They behave as though Albertans are too numb, too uninformed, too busy, too dangerous to participate in democracy. After all, we might not do what they’ve done, which is roll over for the oil and gas industry. And they’re right. I don’t think there is any doubt we would do things differently, but they have laboured feverishly to make sure you and I aren’t going to have a say in how this government operates and how it doles out our resources.

That’s never been good enough for me, and I know other Albertans for whom this is not good enough. But a democracy lost is nearly impossible to recover without rage and rebellion. The forces of political and economic resistance to the people’s right to be informed and their right to participate in the operation of government prior to final decisions being made – rights entrenched, for example, in Montana’s constitution – are immense and intense.

I get no sense of rage and rebellion in Alberta, at least not one imminent enough to boil over into democracy; it may fall to other Canadians, clear-minded and honest, and tired of the petulance of made-in-Alberta charades like “emission intensity,” to free us. The rest of the

world, perhaps even Americans in two years, may help.

As the prestigious journal Nature says in editorial commentary, those who have ruled Alberta and those industry-funded skeptics who waged 20 years of trench warfare against our democracy and our environment

are now “looking marooned and ridiculous.” Great damage has been done to Alberta and our freedom, and even more severe losses are yet to come, but I must remain optimistic that the people can and will overwhelm the influence of big money and political corruption.

— Brian Horejsi

## EVENTS

### SUMMER DAY HIKES

Pre-registration is required for all of these hikes, and will take place on a “first come–first served” basis.

Cost: \$20 – AWA members  
\$25 – Non-members

Details: [www.AlbertaWilderness.ca](http://www.AlbertaWilderness.ca)

Contact: (403) 283-2025

or 1-866-313-0713

[awa@shaw.ca](mailto:awa@shaw.ca)

Online: [shop.albertawilderness.ca](http://shop.albertawilderness.ca)

Saturday, June 23, 2007

#### **Kootenay Plains, Siffleur Falls**

With Bertha Ford

Montane area of the Bighorn Wildland.  
Easy hike

Saturday, July 7, 2007

#### **Adanac Ridge – Castle**

With Reg Ernst

Mountains 1.5 hours southwest of Lethbridge. Moderate hike

Saturday, July 14, 2007

#### **Bighorn Ridge**

With Heinz Unger

Mountains 3 hours southwest of Edmonton. Moderate hike

Saturday, July 21, 2007

#### **Rumsey Natural Area**

With Dorothy Dickson

Parkland protected area east of Red Deer. Easy hike.

Saturday, August 11, 2007

#### **Ya Ha Tinda**

With Will Davies

“Prairie in the mountains” in the Bighorn Wildland. Strenuous hike

Saturday, September 8, 2007

#### **Beehive Natural Area**

With Nigel Douglas

Mountain headwaters of the Oldman River. Moderate hike

Saturday, September 22, 2007

#### **Eagle Watching in Crowsnest Pass**

With Peter Sherrington

Moderate hike

Saturday, September 29, 2007

#### **The Whaleback**

With Bob Blaxley

Montane habitat, 2 hours south of Calgary. Moderate hike.

Saturday, September 29, 2007

#### **Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve**

With Vivian Pharis

Table-top mountain in southern Kananaskis. Easy to moderate hike.



Friday to Sunday  
July 27 – 29, 2007

#### **Backpacking in Yarrow Canyon Ridge**

With Reg Ernst and Nigel Douglas

Stunning views of the Rockies’ Front Ranges, delicate subalpine wildflowers, and refreshing mountain streams. Join us for three days of backpacking, led by experienced guides intimately familiar with the Castle Wilderness. The trip begins 1.5 hours southwest of Lethbridge and is rated moderate to strenuous.

Cost: AWA members \$100  
Non-members \$125

Friday September 14, 2007

#### **Wild West Gala**

Fun & games, great food, outstanding wine, superb entertainment all night long featuring the Foothills Brass and Auctioneer Jessie Starling.

Tickets on-line at:  
[Albertawilderness.ca](http://Albertawilderness.ca)

## IN MEMORIAM

### **Dr. Gerald Wright**

*May 17, 1917 – March 31, 2007*

Friends and family of Dr. Gerald Wright of Lethbridge, Alberta recently celebrated his life and the many gifts he shared with all of them. Gerald was a conservationist, an explorer, and an avid hiker and backcountry enthusiast. His passion for our Rocky Mountains is well known

and will always be remembered. Memorial tributes were made by friends to Alberta Wilderness Association, and as a lasting tribute to this fine man, Gerald’s name will be added to AWA’s memorial plaque that hangs on the wall of the Hillhurst Room of AWA’s Calgary office.

# ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION PRESENTS FIRST ANNUAL WILDERNESS AWARD AT CALGARY YOUTH SCIENCE FAIR



Dylan Achen and Christopher Salahub from Wildwood Elementary School received AWA's first annual Wilderness Award at the Calgary Youth Science Fair, March 17, 2007. The award is given to the best project that shows the dependence of wildlife and water on wilderness. The winning project, called "Fine Feather or Foul," featured the importance of protected areas, and measures to keep wildlife safe while examining the best cleaning solution for wildlife caught in oil spills. AWA's executive director, Christyann Olson, presented the award.

Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to:



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