



Wild Lands Advocate 12(4): 10 – 11, August 2004

Having Fun Still Vital to the Cliff Wallis Approach to Conservation

Andy Marshall

Get out in nature, have fun, make money and make a difference is Cliff Wallis's startlingly straightforward motto for life. "If you don't work on the first three, you won't have much success with the last one," he says. "They all seem to be quite compatible."

Other unfathomable, mysterious forces may exist along the way, he agrees, but, by and large, sticking with this practical recipe has gained him the reputation as one of Alberta's most respected and effective advocates for the natural environment.

Scientific rigour and love for the outdoors, combined with down-to-earth common sense and an informal and occasionally wry affability, are keys to Wallis's considerable success as a dedicated volunteer in the conservation movement and in his career as a professional biologist. Participation in both of these roles has taken him to many parts of the world.

His work for Alberta Wilderness Association as an active director since 1980 and as president in 2003, as well as leadership roles in other groups, including the Environmental Law Centre, the Canadian Nature Federation, the Alberta Native Plant Council, the Canadian Environmental Network and the Friends of the Oldman River, offer solid evidence of his ability to make a difference.

Successes include helping form a ground-breaking alliance of environmentalists, government agents, ranchers and residents in southern Alberta to support the Milk River management plan, designed to protect the area in an ecologically sound manner.

Forging links with First Nations people and the oil and gas industry, he spearheaded the designation of the Hay-Zama Lake area in northwest Alberta as a wildland park. The federal designation of the 458-sq km Suffield Wildlife Sanctuary in southeast Alberta is also attributed in a large part to his efforts.

Wallis has managed to redirect natural gas pipelines away from sensitive areas and was a leading force in stopping the proposed Meridian Dam on the South Saskatchewan River.

He has been widely recognized for his professional and volunteer activities. Special awards include the Governor-General's Canada 125th Anniversary medal and the World Wildlife Fund's Prairie Conservation Award. He will receive an AWA Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award this fall.

The latest adventure in his role as owner-operator of Calgary-based Cottonwood Consultants since 1978 has taken him for several months in the past year to Inner Mongolia. He is working there on nature reserve management planning and environmental education, advising the Chinese government on biodiversity protection and community development.

"They know they have degradation of grasslands, and air and water-use pollution," Wallis says. Ever the straight shooter and lining up a long-favoured target, he adds: "They try to seek solutions, as opposed to here where guys in southern Alberta say 'there's tons of water, just give us more for irrigation.'"

Wallis, 53, recalls practicing the "get-out-in-nature" part of his motto from an early age. Born in London, he was six when his parents ended up in Calgary. "Almost the first thing they did was out with the tents and down to Waterton," he says.





Travelling with his farm equipment service manager dad, Wallis developed a love for prairie and parkland, later becoming a particularly passionate and strong advocate for what he jokingly refers to as the Rodney Dangerfield of the natural landscape – “the part that don’t get no respect.” He adds: “I like to root for the underdog, like native plants and songbirds.”

After graduating from the University of Calgary in 1972 with a BSc in botany and zoology, he worked for seven years for Alberta Parks, doing biophysical inventories and planning. His growing awareness during this time of the loss of the natural landscape, particularly the grasslands, sparked his involvement in the environmental movement.

Whether genetically predisposed or not, and despite being frequently in the eye of the storm of conflicting ideas, Wallis has maintained the “have fun” aspect too. Fun is just being outdoors – savouring the rush he still gets from the Milk River Canyon, the Mexican coast or Fish Creek Park near the south Calgary home he shares with his wife of 34 years, Terry. They have a 21-year-old daughter, Lindsey.

Taking pictures, putting together audiovisual presentations, birdwatching or strumming on his guitar and singing folk songs continue to bring joy. He loves to travel and relishes new experiences. A conservation project in Cameroon since 1998 has taken him to this African country several times. With a long-held interest in international issues, he notes he’s been on every continent except South America.

Driven by a natural curiosity, he’s trying to learn some Mandarin during his current China project.

Fun for Wallis is also seeing things get done. “I don’t mind getting into controversies, as long as they’re not tedious or leading nowhere,” he says. “If I see results at the end, it makes it all fun.”

After a lifetime in the conservation movement, which can break down the strongest advocate, Wallis describes himself as neither more nor less optimistic than he was as an idealistic student. “I’m a realist,” he explains. “That means roll up your sleeves and get to work. Change only happens with hard work – and a little bit of luck.”

Maintaining a positive outlook is another key to the success formula. “Although you’re not winning all the time, you can look back and see things changing for the better,” he says. “If you don’t win on the issue at hand, your efforts can still help the next person raise the bar. You have to take the long-term view.” In his characteristically informal and feisty tone, he adds: “It’s important not to let the bastards win.”

Science alone won’t win the day. Passion by itself will have less effect. But combine the two, and you have a winning combination, is his belief.

Another apparently innate ability is taking on several different challenges at the same time, although in middle age, Wallis finds himself cutting back a little. He still likes to get up early, though – the best time for him is 4:30 in the morning – and remain active long into the evening.

“There are still many good things I haven’t experienced, things to look forward to,” he says. He continually sees new aspects to areas he’s visited many times before. He does a lot of reading and interacting with others to keep up with his knowledge and understanding. “New challenges and new learning are all part of keeping oneself in a good spirit.”

The interview doesn’t explore too closely the “make money” admonition of his motto, but Cottonwood has taken on numerous and varied projects over its 26-year history, including a lot of work for the provincial government that he has tackled so tenaciously as a conservationist. “People respect the work we do is on point. It is presented in the most factual way possible.”





Discussing money, however, Wallis does acknowledge the importance of linking economics with environmental protection. "You can't separate the two," he says. When he was younger, "it was all about the biology." In a pragmatic approach that has undoubtedly been another basis for his successes, today he accepts that people rarely do things for spiritual/aesthetic reasons alone. "Society needs to see what the economic benefits are, too."

That view is behind a strategy Wallis has actively promoted to take the environmental movement debate right into the marketplace. "The most influential levels of decision-making are quite often around the market," he notes. That's not to say governments are off the hook – they still administer public lands and control natural resources. "You're just more strategic in how you deal with government," he says.

Wallis has a lot on his plate. But one of the projects dearest to his heart is his involvement with the Northern Plains Conservation Network, a highly ambitious coalition of conservation groups seeking to restore and conserve parts of a massive prairie ecoregion across two Canadian provinces and four U.S. states.

This is "make a difference" on a truly large scale, but Wallis is eager to make the effort.

