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## Activist's Odyssey Far From Finished

Andy Marshall

Soon after Martha Kostuch arrived in Rocky Mountain House from her native Minnesota almost three decades ago—husband, baby and \$600 cash in hand—she became an active, outspoken and successful opponent of the Odyssey resort project proposed on pristine land by the Cline River on Highway 11.

As a remarkable testament to her resiliency and dedication to preserving our natural environment, here she is today, raring to take on the Abraham Glacier Resort proposal close to the site of the original project she helped sink all those years ago.

"I'm always circling. Issues don't seem to go away," says Kostuch, 55, still living above the animal clinic she bought with borrowed cash in 1975, two years after graduating from veterinary college in Minnesota.

Is she daunted by the prospect of yet countless more hours of research, appearing at yet more hearings and taking on yet another corporate juggernaut? "Not at all. I'm looking forward to the fight. I'm rubbing my hands together," she says in half-amusement.

Her tone, so clearly identified as a prime voice for environmental activism in Alberta, has an edge to it. Arising from a character that won't back down in the face of the most insurmountable-appearing of odds, it is direct, often blunt. That original Odyssey struggle certainly launched an adventure-filled journey, creating almost mythical status for the mother-of-four sons.

Kostuch stands five feet, three inches. She jokes that her industry and government adversaries like to describe her as "seven feet with two heads." She has thick skin, she adds, an attribute learned growing up as one of eight children on their Moose Lake, Minn., hobby farm. "It was natural for us to have arguments at the dinner table."

Those early years also taught her an easy familiarity with all kinds of animals and creatures. She spent a large part of her time "out in the woods," developing the love of the natural world that keeps inspiring her into action today.

Add "effective" to the other words of praise from supporters and opponents for Kostuch. In her own words: "I don't lose." Along with forming the Alberta League for Environmentally Responsible Tourism (ALERT) in 1978 to block the Odyssey project, she became active at about that time in tackling the issue of sulphur dioxide emissions she linked to cattle and human sickness in the west-central region of Alberta.

Today, as a key member of the Clean Air Strategic Alliance (CASA), Kostuch can note with satisfaction the emissions from two sour gas plants near Rocky Mountain House are less than a fifth what they were when she arrived.

"Through CASA, we've also made huge progress on flaring and venting," she says. That was achieved through volunteering hundreds, if not thousands, of hours participating in hearings and, as she says, "making a lot of noise." Not one to rest on her laurels, she adds: "There's still lots to be done."

Other key activities raising her profile throughout Alberta and Canada include her involvement with the Friends of the Oldman River fighting the Oldman River Dam, her advocacy on behalf of the fisheries, as well as her campaign against the logging practices of Sunpine Forest Products.





While the dam was eventually built after an epic battle in the courts and through the news media, and was chalked up by some as a loss, Kostuch sees a victory.

“As a result, well over \$100 billion in projects have undergone environmental assessments . . . we have stronger federal assessment legislation,” she explains. “The protection of fisheries has been strengthened . . . and not a single large dam has been built in Canada since.”

Kostuch brings many other skills to her activist agenda. Analytical and passionate at the same time, she has a steel trap of a mind that can grasp all kinds of legal questions—useful in the Supreme Court battle over the Oldman Dam, for example. She has a facility for organizing ideas and people. And, she’s driven by an ethic that says: “If you see something wrong, you have a responsibility to do something about it.”

She won’t accept passively what officialdom will hand down from on high—a virtue she associates with her U.S. upbringing and which she worries is less ingrained among polite Canadians. She’s definitely persistent, she agrees.

She also doesn’t get flustered doing more than one job at a time. While being interviewed for this story, she is preparing a chicken barbecue for some of her beloved family members. No longer married to Tom, she has 13 grandchildren, some from people she informally adopted in their teens.

As a former environment reporter at the Calgary Herald, I recall Kostuch taking calls and responding to complex issues while operating on an animal in her clinic. “I multi-task a lot,” she says.

A fundamental aspect of her modus operandi has been her acceptance of a range of strategies—from non-violent civil disobedience to collaboration. “I am pragmatic,” she explains. “If there’s not much awareness about an issue, then I have to make a lot of noise. But once you have people’s attention, then sitting down to find a solution might be a better approach.”

From the co-operative to the adversarial approach, “I happen to have the ability to work in all of those.”

Because of the respect Kostuch engenders, she has built up a wide network. “I work with many sectors: individuals, government, industry, the environmental movement and the media,” she says.

Significantly, she’s worked hard to avoid attacking people. “I deal with issues,” she says simply. A testimony to that is the annual canoe trip down the North Saskatchewan she offers to government and industry types. “Apart from being a good idea, I enjoy it,” she explains. “Many of my enemies are my friends.”

A further sign of the widespread respect was her nomination for Alberta Environment’s first individual Emerald Award about 10 years ago. Some in government bitterly opposed the nomination. But, she won anyway.

The Canadian Nature Federation award last year and the Canadian Geographic silver award one year earlier are among more recent honours. And, in the fall, she will receive an Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award. “I don’t do what I do for awards. But recognition helps me gain more credibility and ability to do things.”

Apart from the groups already mentioned, Kostuch has played leadership roles in many organizations, including the Alberta Environmental Network, Prairie Acid Rain Coalition, National Air Issues Co-ordinating Committee, Friends of the West Country and the Rocky Mountain House Chamber of Commerce.





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Despite the hectic pace, she still savours the company of her extended family and loves to spend time with the grandchildren. Although as a concession to age she doesn't help as much with the calving, she also loves her job as a vet.

And when pressures mount, she can still go walking in the woods. "I'm a very proud tree-hugger," she laughs. "I get a lot of energy from nature."

Future adversaries, watch out. Kostuch has a lot of fight left in her.

