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Jim Butler: Ever Revealing Our Love Affair With Nature

By Andy Marshall

The words cascade out, clear, joyful and fresh, like water from a mountain spring.

With Jim Butler, you sense an inexhaustible source of enthusiasm for people and the world around him. The adjective eclectic nicely fits this 59-year-old Edmonton environmental advocate, conservation biologist, teacher, university professor, author, poet, ordained Buddhist monk, media spokesman for wildlife protection and, most recently, writer of a musical play complete with fairy princess and the ageless Pan.

"Sure, I have a passion for things. There are so many things out there to be passionate about," he exults. "In my talks, I'm trying to remind people of their own passion and not be afraid of expressing it."

He laughs at descriptions of himself as a bear of man, or a portly '60s survivor with a grey beard and a pony tail. "I'm losing weight," he notes, his voice carrying a fullness and depth from a lifetime of engaging people in rich conversation.

With typical flair, he calls mankind's lure to wild nature "a deep, clandestine love affair involving much more than meets the eye." And, when he delivers the Alberta Wilderness Association annual lecture and receives an AWA Defenders Award this coming Nov. 18, he'll refer to his 40 years spent "studying and exploring the mosaic of the human/nature bond."

Recently retired from a highly active 26-year teaching and research career at the University of Alberta Department of Forest Science, Butler now spends some of his time lecturing around the world on cruise trips on topics from whales to penguins.

Once described as an evangelist, the West Virginia-born man prefers to see himself as an interpreter, helping open people up to the possibilities of spiritual sustenance that comes from communing with the natural world. "There is a tremendous soar in spirituality," says Butler, who has set up a Buddhist sanctuary in one corner of his living room. "So, more people are looking at natural areas and wilderness as sacred."

The house he shares with wife Elaine is filled with memorabilia from his internationally acclaimed career, delving into such areas as boreal forest ecology, national parks management, the relationships of people and nature, and ecotourism. Visitors describe blowguns with deadly curare-tipped darts on the wall, casts of the skulls of early man sitting on a shelf.

His life's activities have been true to the human/nature bond he so often talks about. "I learned early in life that all things are connected," he says. "Trained as an ecologist and thinking as an ecologist, I know that every issue is not just a scientific or biological issue." For a true understanding, he explains, we need to be familiar with disciplines from economics to political science. We also must learn to bring our hearts into play.

You can see the pattern in how, after his undergraduate studies in wildlife management at West Virginia and Ohio State Universities, he went on to complete his masters in humanities from Manhattanville College in New York, with his thesis on "the relationship between man and nature in the new world to the mid-19th century."





Pursuing his doctoral studies at the University of Seattle, Washington, in parks and recreation interpretation, he wrote his dissertation on the “role of interpretation as a motivating agent toward park resource protection.”

During an incredibly wide-ranging teaching career at the U of A, Butler’s lectures on conservation biology, wildlife identification and ecological activism were so full, some students reportedly had to sit in the aisles to fit in. In the activism course, students learned about civil disobedience, dealing with lawsuits and how to work with the media.

With his recent change of status to professor emeritus, the university “will be glad to drop that course,” he suggests with another chuckle. Some people have indeed challenged his right to promote what they consider his own beliefs through his courses.

International consulting assignments have taken him all over the world. Playing an advisory role in planning for environmental protection in China, a national park in the Caribbean, conservation education strategies for Indonesia, and preservation of threatened herons in Kenya, are among numerous projects he has worked on with gusto, many of them for the United Nations.

“What’s in it for him is to share nature, the beauty and relevance of nature with anybody who will listen,” says former student and long-time friend David Dodge.

Butler’s high profile—he’s written many books and has appeared as a frequent commentator on CBC and CKUA—has invariably provoked occasional negative reactions, including some sickening phone threats to his life about seven years ago after helping organize a meeting of farmers with complaints about oil industry activities. The resulting stress pushed him into a six-month medical leave.

He’s well aware of the pressures all conservation advocates face. His clearly articulated commitment to protect special places has often clashed with the prevailing “dysfunctional profit model,” as he calls it.

Aptly, Butler returns to a water metaphor to explain his approach to activism and his frequently sought advice on environmentalist burnout. “Every time there’s a need or someone calls on you to help (with a cause), you tilt the pitcher a little bit,” he says. “Pretty soon the pitcher is empty, and that’s where we start to get into burnout . . . you have to keep the pitcher full . . . just give what’s over the top.”

In other words, you have to take the time to centre yourself in hope; maintain your deep connection with what ever you are defending. In Butler’s case, this can range from seeking to free the dolphins at West Edmonton Mall to saving habitat for Alberta’s grizzly bears.

The philosophical practice has become particularly apparent since his immersion in a Buddhist community while working in Thailand on a U of A project. “Part of my training was to see things not as they are, but as they could and should be,” he says. That means directing your rage when you see a clear-cut to seeing it as a place where a forest is going to grow. “You have to project that model and vision of wellness.”

Not all environmentalists feel comfortable with this approach. But, the man who still likes to volunteer at Christmas to play Santa Claus in his Edmonton community, is not easily deterred.

The extensive publications list in his curriculum vitae includes works on subjects from birds to the boreal forest he treasures so vigorously. Intriguingly, he’s written on such topics as *Zen Buddhism and the Conserver Society* or *The Theoretical Importance of Higher Sensory Perception in the Sasquatch Phenomenon*. Published works also include a book of poems called *Dialog with a Frog on a Log*.





International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, World Wildlife Fund, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, National Research Society and Trout Unlimited are among groups in which he's been active.

And, true to the Renaissance man image, his personal hobbies list includes fly-fishing, photography, collecting antique nature prints, chess theory and philately. Jim Butler has clearly made his stamp on society.

