

# CHERYL BRADLEY: DEFENDER OF WILDERNESS

By Debby Gregorash

In 1971, the year John Lennon recorded and released *Imagine*, Alberta received what her friends and colleagues would argue was an even greater gift: Cheryl Bradley, one of the recipients of the 2007 Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award, moved west from Ontario.

While working on a BSc in environmental biology and then an MSc in geography from the University of Calgary, friends invited Cheryl on an Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) hike to the Porcupine Hills, linking her up with people who would influence her in the coming years and steer her toward environmental advocacy. One of her professors, Richard Pharis, was involved with AWA, and he soon had her volunteering with the organization, stuffing envelopes and running errands. Through the hikes and the companionship of this network of protectors of nature, Cheryl came to realize how much she enjoyed the wilderness, especially the emotional connection to the landscape and its people.

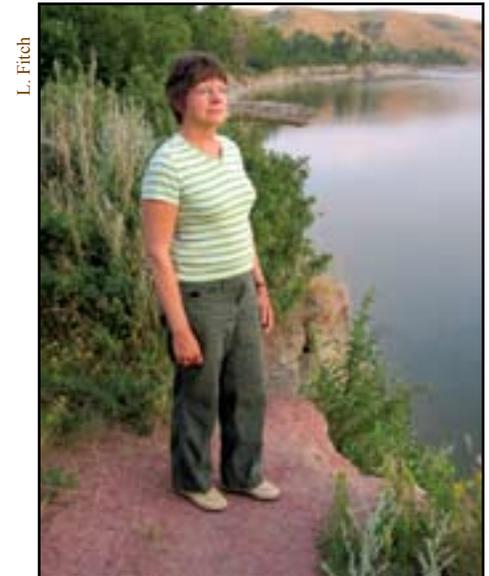
Cheryl took a job with Alberta Ecological Survey and then Alberta Parks in Edmonton, engaging in early work on defining a protected areas system. This was her first opportunity to work with another "Defender," Cliff Wallis. She visited wildlands throughout the province and her first

serious advocacy work was preventing the construction of a canal through Lesser Slave Lake Park. Working with active and efficient people like Brian Staszewski, Vivian Pharis, and Dianne Pachal had a significant influence on Cheryl. "I cut my teeth on environmental advocacy with the AWA," she says, "and looking back, I couldn't have done what I've done without those who build platforms to work from."

She was vice-president and then president of AWA from 1979 to 1983. It was about this time that she met Orville Pall (1951-1986), who was also once honoured with the Wilderness Defenders Award. Recalling how involved in AWA she was, Cheryl explains, "This was before email, and I found myself either on the phone all day or at meetings, while trying to complete my Masters. Fortunately Orville was doing his own thing, too."

In 1988, four years after Orville's tragic death in a plane crash, Cheryl met biologist Lorne Fitch at an Alberta Irrigation Projects Association annual meeting. "We were both fish out of water," explains Lorne, who later started the well-known Cows and Fish program. Together, they have made Lethbridge, Alberta their home.

Many groups that advocate for wildlife habitat protection have appreciated the unwavering leadership



L. Fitch

*Wilderness Defenders Award winner Cheryl Bradley beside the Oldman River in Pavan Park, Lethbridge. Cheryl and Lorne often enjoy walks in the cottonwood forests and grasslands that the City of Lethbridge has protected from development.*

of this remarkable woman. In the mid-1980s, Cheryl was research director with Trout Unlimited Canada during its formation. Beginning in 1993, she initiated and managed the South Country Protected Areas Project in an effort to protect significant environmental features in south-central Alberta. She has been heavily involved in the Alberta Native Plants Council, Oldman Watershed Council, and Prairie Conservation and Endangered Species, not to mention local environment and naturalist groups. Recently, she participated on the South Saskatchewan River Basin Planning Committee, and she is currently working hard to defend the integrity of the Suffield National Wildlife Area.

In the late 1970s, Cheryl began promoting awareness of the Aspen Parkland Natural Region. Through field trips with government, the Energy Resources Conservation Board, industry, conservation groups, and interested members of the public, she brought the Rumsey Wildland, the largest block of representative Aspen



M. Miller

*Much of Cheryl Bradley's professional botanical work has been done in the prairies. Here she tries to identify a plant of the mixed grass prairie in Grasslands National Park, SK. On hikes, she spends an inordinate amount of time on her knees.*

Parkland in Canada, to the attention of Albertans. She was instrumental in bringing about the legislated protection of this previously unrecognized wilderness gem.

In the early 1980s, Cheryl opened her own environmental consulting business, and today she conducts vegetation inventories and rare plant surveys, organizes and facilitates workshops and public meetings, and prepares summary reports. She describes herself as “a synthesizer of information who can translate and communicate to others.”

Environmentalist and friend Dorothy Dickson, who has advocated for wilderness beside Cheryl for decades, says it’s about time she receives the Wilderness Defenders Award, but Cheryl feels humbled. She isn’t convinced that her

accomplishments have been that extraordinary, given the privileges she’s been given: great friends and colleagues, stimulating work, and a free country. Around the world, many who are working to protect wilderness must deal with war, poverty, and lack of freedom. “These people put their lives on the line,” she says.

Quoting Thoreau, “In wildness is the preservation of the world,” Cheryl adds, “Wilderness has the lessons we need to survive, and if we want to operate sustainably, we can look at how nature works. We must bond with wilderness and understand the diversity of nature. We need grounding.”

Cheryl Bradley’s sense of wilderness protection has expanded over the years. Small areas have been protected. “Those are little pieces and they give me great joy, but

bigger pieces need to be set aside that protect watersheds, airsheds, and soil functions. This is why my interest went from wilderness to something much broader like feedlots, water quality, urban sustainability – they are all connected.”

Does Cheryl ever get angry or discouraged? “Long ago,” the botanist says, “I was filled with righteous indignation when I saw the stupid things mankind was doing to the earth.” Now she understands that she can only focus on her corner of the earth. But she brightens and declares, “I do approve of the same righteous indignation in today’s youth!”

*Debby Gregorash is an agricultural and environmental writer living near Coaldale, Alberta. She owns and protects 240 acres of aspen parkland near Police Outpost Provincial Park.*