

IAN URQUHART — DEFENDING WILDERNESS FROM ON HIGH

By Aaron Davies

When asked what he enjoys about his career in the ivory tower, Ian Urquhart replies, “Students. Their enthusiasm and their belief that they can make a difference are infectious.” Given his articulate critiques of provincial politics and his obvious passion for his work, I would bet that the effect is mutual. Confirmation came when his students nominated him for a Faculty of Arts Undergraduate Teaching Award, which he received this year.

Beneath Ian’s soft-spoken exterior is an uncompromising commitment to speak the truth about Alberta’s current political climate, and in particular, about how it has affected what is so important to him and countless other Albertans: wilderness. In November, Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) will add the Wilderness Defenders Award to Ian’s many accomplishments.

Growing up in Trail, B.C., Ian took advantage of the many opportunities for outdoor activities in the West Kootenays. He was raised

at a time when parents were not as worried about their children’s safety as they are now. “We took advantage of that freedom,” he says, reminiscing about chasing grouse and sitting around the campfire. Most of his vivid nature memories stem from hunting and fishing. “I loved the sense of being away from it all.”

At the age of 22, Ian earned a B.A. from UBC. After a stint as a member’s research assistant in the House of Commons, he earned a Masters degree at Queen’s University.



C. Olsson

Ian Urquhart taking a break in the boreal beauty of Lakeland, northeast of Edmonton.

He then returned to UBC for his PhD and began his career in political science at the University of Alberta, where he has been teaching political science since 1987. His main interests lie in Canadian and comparative resource/environmental policy, federalism, and constitutional politics.

Ian's teaching excellence is matched by his writing skills. He can be counted on for finding just the right creative metaphor to get his point across. His 2002 Parkland Institute monograph, *Making It Work: Kyoto, Trade, and Politics*, deflates the critics of the Kyoto Protocol. He co-authored the *The Last Great Forest: Japanese Multinationals and Alberta's Northern Forests* (1994) and edited and contributed to *Assault on the Rockies: Environmental Controversies in Alberta* (1998), a collection of essays. In these

works and elsewhere, he allows diverse voices to explore the tension between the need to make a living and the need to preserve the basis of that living.

Ian suspects that although Albertans say that they value wilderness, they believe it is more plentiful than it is. Another serious misconception in this province is that wilderness protection is necessarily bad for business. "We need to overcome the prejudice that insists that wilderness protection is bad for economic growth. Environmental amenities are very important to the decisions people make about where they want to live and work. Wilderness is one of those amenities."

Ian began his work with AWA in 2002 when Vivian Pharis asked him to join the board. Arguably with some understatement, Ian suggests that

"Vivian's not a person who is easy to turn down." Earlier, in writing about the Cheviot mine project, Ian had argued that conservation organizations (in this case, including AWA) did not consider seriously enough the futures of people who work at places like the coal mines south of Hinton. This got Ian into some hot water with other environmental organizations, but he was impressed with AWA's willingness to accept criticism.

AWA later contracted Ian to work in the Primrose-Lakeland area northeast of Edmonton. Conservationists in the Lac La Biche community respect him for his diligence in pursuing conservation goals while showing consideration for local traditions like hunting, fishing, and trapping. Ian believes that everyone's interests can be accommodated while still protecting the core wilderness values of Lakeland.

Despite the rapid expansion of industrial growth in Alberta, Ian sees light at the end of the tunnel: "The erosion of declared Tory support and sharp rise in the numbers of us who are 'undecided' offers wilderness protection advocates a tremendous opportunity to press our issues." Controversies such as the Marie Lake incident, he says, suggest that Albertans are finally becoming more aware of the threats to our wild places. However, he also believes that if we do not act quickly, most of Alberta's intact landscapes will be sacrificed on the altar of economic growth.

Still deeply involved in a fulfilling career that allows him to travel, write, and teach, Ian shows no signs of slowing down. He hopes to have a book on the tar sands finished by spring 2008, after which he plans to turn his critical eye on the coal bed methane issue. He is particularly interested in the grassroots opposition emerging from landowners.

Being a defender of wilderness comes naturally to Ian. As "more and more landscapes in Alberta taste the steel of drill bits," as he puts it, his commitment to fair and accurate critique, and to a conservation ethic is as much a part of him as his self-deprecating nature and his love of Alberta's wild places.