

Dave Sheppard – Community Solidarity His Living Legacy

By Sharon McIntyre

Dave Sheppard has achieved what many of us long for: a successful career, peer recognition, a loving family, friends who care deeply about him, a log home in the magnificent foothills of the Canadian Rockies, a profound connection with his wilderness surroundings, and deep roots in his supportive community.

The only thing he would probably still like to add to this inspiring list of accomplishments is the designation of the Castle Wilderness region as a Wildland Provincial Park.

“Back in the 1970s, when the AWA first proposed the South Castle as a Wildland Recreation Area, no one thought it would be so difficult,” admits Dave. “But we’re getting closer now to achieving some significant protection there, thanks to the hard work of so many groups and individuals who have refused to give up on the Castle.”

Dave Sheppard is the recipient of the 2008 Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award, to be presented in November at the AWA Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture. The award recognizes his many years of leadership in the conservation community, the significant contribution he made to AWA’s formative years, and his unrelenting efforts to have the 1,000-km² Castle region (south of the Crowsnest Pass and north of Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park) protected.

Dave’s dedication to this remarkable wilderness area was first recognized with the 1996 Parks Canada Award. “His sense of hard work, innovative approaches and mediation qualities have held the Coalition together since its inception,” states the Government of Canada news release. “He has unified a diverse mix of interest groups ... all with their own interests in the Castle Wilderness.”

Educated as a conservation biologist, Dave taught biology at the University of Saskatchewan. By the late 1970s, Dave and his wife, Jean, found their dream



Dave Sheppard enjoying his beloved Castle Wilderness.

PHOTO: K. JERICO

location in the foothills near Pincher Creek, Alberta. He soon recognized the ecological importance of the Castle region’s diverse ecosystem and unique landscape, including its role as habitat and north-south corridor for wildlife.

Dave’s goal became to protect this area from harmful human intervention, and he encouraged supporters to work with him. Their efforts culminated in the formation of the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC) in 1990.

Dave and the CCWC Board initially set about building the informational groundwork needed to support a Castle Wilderness protection proposal. Dozens of reports, inventories, brochures, letters, and discussion papers were researched and produced, most of them written or co-authored by Dave. He also understood the importance of informing and involving local area residents, and spent countless hours meeting with people and motivating them to also become environmental protectors.

The CCWC saw their intense labours bear fruit in 1993, when an application to expand Castle Mountain Resort in the West Castle Valley was approved by the Alberta government’s Natural Resources Conservation Board (NRCB), but with the caveat that the rest of the area must receive Wildland designation. The

CCWC was an intervener at the Pincher Creek-based hearings, and the summary report read like an endorsement of Dave’s teachings. However, the government rescinded its decision less than two years later, and today the struggle continues to protect the Castle Wilderness from encroaching use and development.

“We didn’t fully understand how the political game was played back in 1994,” Dave explains. “The forces of opposition simply out-gunned us. In hindsight, had we been better organized and more willing to compromise on some of the smaller points, we might have been successful. The government’s reversal was a big blow. It’s taken this long to finally get the Castle back to where the government is willing to at least discuss it again.”

Included in the range of titles Dave has held in his environmental protection efforts are AWA Lundbreck Chapter President, CCWC President, and Volunteer Hike Leader for the many ecological field trips he loves to lead, inspiring a new generation of wilderness defenders.

Now retired and thinking about writing a book, Dave has perhaps made the most lasting impact in his role as community leader. His innate ability to rally a disparate group of people behind a common cause, humbly take on the grueling time and travel requirements, maintain an even keel when things get rough, and create lasting social bonds among those he meets has not gone unnoticed. “Dave is a humble, gentle and hard-working volunteer *par excellence*,” says friend and fellow-conservationist Klaus Jericho. “As a result of his extensive research, he knows the Castle Wilderness inside and out. I’m very happy to see that his dedication to this important cause is being recognized by his conservation peers.”

Thanks to Dave’s commitment to wilderness and its protection, Albertans have a living legacy of environmental stewardship that will echo through the Castle Valley and beyond for decades to come. 🍷