



TOM BECK – NEW AGE PIONEER

By Vivian Pharis, AWA Director

Tom Beck does not look or speak like a revolutionary but he is a true pioneer in the greening of the Canadian petroleum industry and in the evolution of councils and committees in Canada's Arctic. It would be easy to devote the entire space allotted an article describing this quiet, calm man who will receive one of AWA's 2010 Wilderness and Wildlife Defender's awards, to lists of his accomplishments, committees and task forces he has sat on, appointments and awards he has received and positions he has held in corporate and volunteer environmental work and in federal, provincial and territorial councils and committees.

His citation in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* (1988) tidily summarizes his career: "Beck pioneered environmental protection and management in the Canadian petroleum industry. Twenty years in the Alberta oil business led to his appointment as environmental co-ordinator for Elf Oil Exploration and Production Ltd and later Aquitane Co Ltd. From 1980 to 1982 he was director of Environmental and Social Affairs for Petro Canada. Dedicated to maintenance of natural environments and to sensitive development of natural resources, Beck has had wide influence. He was a founder of the Alberta Wilderness Assn, governor of the Arctic Inst, and Chairman of the Canadian Environmental Advisory Council in 1978-87."

In the early 1970s, Tom was one of the first in Canada to head the environmental efforts of a large oil and gas exploration company, Elf Oil Exploration, and is rightfully proud of close consultation and joint stewardship efforts with the Inuvialuit people of Banks Island in the Western Arctic and, in later years, with communities on Baffin Island, the Mackenzie Delta and Beaufort Sea. These efforts resulted in various conservation initiatives, for example limiting industrial activity to

winter, thus avoiding terrain damage and voluntary avoidance of all activity in a valuable snow-goose nesting area and no activity until after the Arctic fox completed denning each year on Banks Island. Tom suggested a candidate national park site to Parks Canada and, eventually, following the settlement of the Inuvialuit Land Claim, Aulavik National Park became a reality. The Inuvialuit also approved of two other parks in their settlement region.

Years later Tom was appointed to the Mackenzie Delta-Beaufort Sea Land Use Planning Commission. The resulting plan was based on close consultation and community-based planning, with land and wildlife protection as core values. This plan became a requirement for applications for land-use permits by industry, government and public, including Inuvialuit beneficiaries. Environmental screening of permit applications is conducted by the Environmental Impact Screening Committee for the Western Arctic (Inuvialuit) Claim Settlement Area. Tom was Chairman of this Committee from 1992 until he resigned in 2000. He chaired this committee at the request of the Inuvialuit, by federal Order in Council.

He takes pride in his volunteer work too as, for example, with the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC). Tom joined NCC on condition the organization would become more focused on the West and is proud of the fact that his first NCC initiative led to the establishment of the Cross Conservation Area (a 4,800 acre day use natural area southwest of Calgary). Thanks to the generosity of Sandy Cross, this was the largest donation of private land for conservation in the history of Canada. Now operated under the Sandy Cross Conservation Foundation, the area has an excellent record as a place for public viewing and environmental education for school children. Tom served as Foundation Vice

Chair for seven years.

In 1989 Tom was recognized for his long service to the greening of industry, to hearing and acting for aboriginals and to protecting the environment, by being presented with an Honorary Doctorate of Laws by the University of Calgary. This was no small achievement for this self-made man who was forced to leave school and take work in a steel mill at age 14.

So, where did this man of many achievements gain his expertise? There were no universities giving courses in environmental management in the 1950s and 1960s when Tom might have prepared for his career. Actually, it would not have mattered if there were because Tom then did not have the basic qualifications to enter university.

Tom left school at 14 to work in the same ancient, polluting mill where his father had previously died in an accident. Times were tough in Scotland in the post war 1940s and Tom's newly widowed mother made the courageous decision to emigrate. Her daughter, Chrissie, had moved to Cochrane Alberta as a war bride, to join her husband, the late Jimmy Mackay. This offered an obviously attractive destination for Tom and his family. For Tom, this new world of clean air and wide open spaces made it seem like he had died and gone to heaven.

Still a teenager, Tom took a job in the laboratory of Canada Cement at Exshaw and met the Canadian Rockies head on. He was awestruck by the beauty around him; he was soon fishing in foothills streams and developing a keen interest in hunting. Public lands and wild places were becoming personalized assets.

A couple of years later, Tom joined an American oil company and over a 20-year period gained wide experience. He also married Shirley, a local nurse, and they began a family that would include five children along with horses and hunting dogs. During these 20 years



Tom Beck PHOTO: M. STURK

Tom's passion for wild places, fly fishing, hunting, horseback riding and packing and the pleasure of roaming freely grew steadily stronger. He and Shirley built a lovely little log cabin in the Foothills where they, family and friends, still escape to enjoy adventures in nature. It was there that I interviewed him recently, hummingbirds flitting past the window as we talked.

Another passion was stirring too that was perhaps ignited back in the misery of a Scottish steel mill – a passion for human rights. In the early days of petroleum development in Alberta this passion manifested on behalf of landowner rights and made Tom uneasy about a government that would allow agricultural and public lands to be so freely disposed to this new industry. Alberta was just getting a taste of riches after a long time as a “have not” province and the lust for wealth began to drive the government's agenda. Landowners were taken aback by their treatment and the public began to raise alarms about abuse of wildlife habitat and public lands. Tom even encouraged the formation of an organization willing to make a collective stand for the rights of land and wildlife, although he admits that he and others in industry bore some penalty in those days, for supporting Alberta Wilderness Association and other conservation efforts.

A gut feeling that land and people's historic and traditional rights needed to

be treated with care and respect led Tom in several new directions. He left the company he had been with for 20 years, a company unwilling to embrace the rising tide of 1960s environmental protection. New petroleum companies were coming on the scene though that considered someone like Tom, with obvious environmental leanings, to be an asset. He joined one – the French company, Elf Oil Exploration – and Elf introduced Tom to the Arctic.

For 30 years Tom served the Inuvialuit, including as Commissioner of the Mackenzie Delta-Beaufort Sea Land Use Planning Commission and as Chair of the Environmental Impact Screening Committee for the Western Arctic (Inuvialuit) Claims Settlement Area. These claims were enacted under federal legislation and tied to the Canadian constitution, creating a security that continues to please Tom. For 50 years Tom has also calmly and quietly served the Canadian public through work on many national and regional committees and task forces and through volunteer services to numerous conservation efforts and groups.

My husband Dick and I have known Tom over much of his career and have had the pleasure of sharing a number of back country horse packing trips with him. An incident on one particular trip is a great illustration of Tom's capacity for tempered diplomacy – a trait that has served him so well in his long career of negotiation.

We had planned an early fall hunting and pleasure trip into Job Creek, a remote part of the Bighorn Wildland. Our route took us through the Blackstone Gap to the Brazeau River, then along it to Job Creek,

and on up to our camp. It was a 3-day pack in and we were on the last day but were still at least three hours from camp when the incident happened. We had slogged through muskegs and clambered over deadfall along the south side of the Brazeau River for most of the day before encountering a particularly nasty, log-filled bog. Here, the notorious trapper, Mad Bill, had built his home cabin – a slab hut with a grizzly's hide tacked to the outside. It was an eerie spot that I always liked putting behind me.

The horses plunged through the bog, all except two that decided instead to seek refuge with Mad Bill. Their milling around his cabin awakened Bill and he stumbled out, rifle in hand, inserting a bullet clip. The situation was suddenly tense. Tom and I were just opposite Bill, across the bog. Tom whispered to me that we should dismount and get behind our horses – let them take the shots. From behind our horses, Tom gently negotiated with Mad Bill until the rifle was laid aside and he even agreed to shoo the errant pack ponies across the bog. Tom's diplomacy saved the day yet again and we lived to tell this tale and many more about Tom. 🐾



Sure-footed Chinook by Kathy Austin and Veronica Murphy. The goats on this mountain side are indeed sure-footed and remind us of the critical habitat our mountains and forests provide.

PHOTO: K. MIHALCHEON