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Milk River – Sage Creek: Coming to Terms on a Grassland Wilderness

By Cliff Wallis

This is the story of how the AWA became a founding member of the Milk River Management Society in which it is still an active member today.

Situated between the Cypress Hills and the Canada-U.S. boundary, Milk River-Sage Creek is one of the least fragmented, most extensive and most diverse prairie upland, wetland and valley landscapes on the glaciated plains of North America. This 5000 sq. km area is hard to describe in anything less than superlatives. Its size, unique geology and diverse ecosystems make it a national treasure.

The Great Plains has been profoundly altered by human activities. In just over 100 years, more than 70% of Canada's grasslands have been destroyed by cultivation. Direct loss and fragmentation has changed species' distributions and numbers while transforming entire landscapes and natural ecological processes. It is one of the most endangered natural regions in North America. Despite this, less than 1% of Alberta's remaining grasslands are "protected". This has contributed to the high numbers of species at risk. Of Alberta's vertebrates at risk, over half occur at Milk River-Sage Creek.

The area abounds in unique and rare phenomena, but it is the variety in both the rare and the common features that gives Milk River-Sage Creek its tremendous value. Resting atop a badland butte and gazing across the Milk River canyon and rolling grasslands to the forested Sweetgrass Hills, one can contemplate the natural majesty of the Great Plains. For anyone who has heard the melodies of grassland birds riding the warm summer breezes or watched as a Golden Eagle drifts low over a coulee rim, Milk River-Sage Creek will always be one of the world's special places.

Conservation and Ranching

Grasslands evolved with grazing by large herbivores like bison. While many wild plants and animals prefer moderately grazed lands, several thrive in the luxuriant grass cover of ungrazed sites. Still others like the endangered Mountain Plover seek out sparser, heavily grazed areas. Larger ranch holdings provide flexibility to allow for all types. This uneven grazing is considered wasteful by some range managers. In an attempt to maximize production, they evenly distribute cattle by constructing a myriad of fences, water developments and salt licks. The romantic notion of the west with wide open ranges has largely become a myth in today's highly managed cattle industry. The late George G. Ross, whose family has ranched in the area since 1910, recognized the grasslands' sensitivity. By maintaining native grasslands, Ross won acclaim as a conservationist. He warned of the trend to more complete and damaging use of the range on smaller units of more intensively managed land.

As demand for dwindling public grazing lands grew, new legislation restricted the amount of land which a lessee could hold. The Ross holdings, particularly the Lost River Ranch, far exceeded the new limits set by Alberta Public Lands and, despite protests from Alberta Parks and the AWA, large areas were removed from the Lost River Ranch lease. Most deleted lands became a new provincial grazing reserve, while a remote, largely ungrazed area south of the Milk River Canyon was proposed as an ecological reserve.



**Seeking Protection**

In 1972, the Lethbridge Fish & Game Association recommended wild river designation for the lower Milk River. Both the AWA and the Alberta Fish and Game Association recommended a large wilderness area even if it meant the excluding hunting. Through the mid 1970s, the Ross lease reductions proceeded. Public Lands proposed to sell some lands for cultivation and suggested increasing water development, fencing and intensive management. Alberta Parks became concerned about the Lost River Ranches' loss of flexibility and the resulting ecological damage. To counter Public Lands, Alberta Parks recommended a preservation park in 1976. Land use, including grazing, was to remain unchanged except for the exclusion of petroleum development and control of vehicle use.

In 1977, the Minister of Recreation, Parks & Wildlife assured the AWA that his department and Energy & Natural Resources had agreed to prepare an integrated land use plan for the Milk River-Sage Creek area. Instead, we got only a grazing plan on a small portion of the Ross leases. The AWA was told by the minister, "the comprehensive land use plan will ensure the preservation of the outstanding natural features". Instead, there were more roads, more fencelines, more exploration wells, more stock-watering facilities, more uncontrolled vehicle access, and grazing in previously ungrazed sensitive areas in the proposed ecological reserve.

Some of the problem resulted from within the conservation community -- they wanted the area protected but did not fully support designation of an ecological reserve with its restrictions on hunting. With no clear support for protection, development forces succeeded. Two tactical errors were made: failure to form alliances with government departments and failure to communicate with local residents.

In the early 1980s, public debate heated up over the new Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, and Natural Areas Act. Alberta Parks, which administered Ecological Reserves, wasn't communicating with affected local residents. Misinformation spread and ranchers thought that leases were being further reduced to make way for Ecological Reserves. The first verbal shots were fired in smaller public meetings and a big battle was brewing.

On March 21, 1984 people from all over Alberta went to Lethbridge to show their support for the Milk River Canyon ecological reserve. Others came to vent their anger and frustration. The room was packed beyond all expectations of the Wilderness Areas and Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee who convened the public forum. So hot were the tempers that one local rancher accused a Federation of Alberta Naturalists' spokesperson of being a Trotskyite and, gesturing with his fist to me, suggested we settle our differences outside. Local Fish and Game members were incensed at the apparent ban on hunting. Others, reflecting earlier Fish and Game stances, expressed unqualified support even if hunting was eliminated.

Some ranchers and farmers outside the local area also lent their support for the reserve. Most briefs supported the Milk River Canyon becoming Alberta's first ecological reserve and about 200 people left the meeting elated at their apparent "victory". Another 50 left disgruntled and surly -- mostly ranchers, farmers and hunters, people who had lived near the Milk River for generations and, in some cases, had protected the area. There was little assurance that they would have much say in the area's future. They felt threatened and betrayed -- conservationists and government had ganged up on them. The next day, the local MLA's telephone nearly rang off the wall.

Unhappy with local reactions, and recognizing the value of past local management, the AWA demanded, and got, a task force comprised of local citizens and provincial conservationists, with no government members. The task force was asked by the Minister of Recreation & Parks to develop a plan to "protect





the ecological character of the Milk River Canyon". Major participants included a local county councillor, two local ranchers (including the one who shook his fist at me), three members of the local Fish and Game Association, an instructor from Mount Royal College in Calgary, and a representative of the AWA. A rancher from outside the area chaired the task force.

Submissions by task force members showed great concern for the area. Almost everyone opposed any activity, such as roads, pipelines, or cultivation, which would alter the land surface. The contentious issues were hunting, vehicle access, and legal aspects of designation. Task force meetings were sometimes stormy and there was considerable soul-searching.

Conservationists pushed for a better deal for the ranchers, including long-term tenure to ensure management and ecological stability. They also suggested that the government contract the ranchers to manage the protected area. Even the fist-shaking rancher came up with outstanding ideas. Concerned that the task force would win protection on the smaller area and let the surrounding land "go to hell", he pressed for better management on the larger area. As some of the task force members noted from the outset --much of the conflict was often more perceived than real.

Giant Steps Forward

To the surprise of many, the task force recommended establishment of a 72 sq km natural area with no grazing in sensitive wetlands, the Kennedy Creek valley and adjacent uplands. Grazing elsewhere would be at much reduced stocking rates. *"The absence of any commitments on this land allows the opportunity to develop a grazing strategy which is more in harmony with the ecological character. Modern range management is not totally compatible with protection of the ecological character of an area."*

Recreation facilities, roads, oil and gas drilling, pipelines, power lines, cultivation, removal of natural materials, and disturbance of archeological sites would be prohibited. Local citizens and conservationists would be responsible for long-term management. Other recommendations included long-term contracts with local ranchers for management and encouragement of scientific research. Hunting was allowed on a draw basis and vehicle access only permitted on a designated trail on the upland immediately south of the Milk River Canyon. Changes to the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, and Natural Areas Act were requested to have more flexibility on hunting.

In May 1985, Alberta's Advisory Committee on Wilderness Areas and Ecological Reserves recommended to the Minister of Recreation & Parks the establishment of a natural area/ecological reserve on the entire 72 sq. km area. They also asked for an inventory of special features; consideration of bison for management; revisions to legislation; participation of local residents in developing a management plan; and an integrated plan for the surrounding area. The long promised integrated plan never materialized but most recommendations were acted upon. Though unsuccessful, the AWA submitted a joint proposal with a local rancher to use bison for management.

What Have We Learned?

Communication should be the first resort, not the last. Conservation networks must extend to affected local communities. The rural contribution is not only helpful; it is essential to long-term management. Urban conservationists must be receptive to ideas of the local community and must appreciate their fears about changes that they perceive, sometimes correctly, will upset their way of life. Local communities, on the other hand, must realize that these prized areas are not just local treasures.

The Milk River Task Force took some giant steps forward, recommending more protection than was ever





thought possible. The government accepted the task force report, defusing a volatile situation with practical and ecologically sound solutions. Ranchers, hunters, academics, conservationists and local authorities demonstrated a willingness to cooperate on conservation despite differing philosophies.

Lots of Work to Do

The AWA is a founding and still very active member of the Milk River Management Society that was established in June, 1990 with members from local government, the ranching community, conservation groups, and provincial agencies. The society holds the lease for the Milk River Natural Area and advises on resource use and management of the Milk River Natural Area and Kennedy Coulee Ecological Reserve. An Operational Management Plan prepared by the society was endorsed by the Alberta Government in September 1992. The society works on plan development, implementation and monitoring. The protected area is one of the longest term monitoring sites for vegetation, bird, mammal, amphibian and rare plant work in the grasslands of Canada. Researchers from Montana are considering its use as a benchmark riparian area since they have nothing of similar quality.

There have been recent additions to the protected area network along the Lost River valley and on the Pinhorn Grazing Reserve. While we have been successful in protecting significant small blocks, the long-term conservation of the entire 5000 sq. km Milk River-Sage Creek wildland is not assured.

Milk River-Sage Creek is a high plains survivor, for generations protected by its isolation. Those factors are changing rapidly and there is a high degree of urgency to securing long-term protection on the entire wildland. In 2000, the AWA was successful in blocking industry attempts to secure mineral leases on the legislated protected areas. What started as a trickle of energy development may soon turn into a flood. Energy companies have "rediscovered" this once forgotten corner of Alberta and there is every indication that some parts may be intensively developed. A major pipeline corridor was approved in the late 1990s and constructed despite opposition from environmentalists and a dissenting opinion on approval from one National Energy Board hearing panel member.

The AWA remains at the forefront of efforts to secure protection for Milk River-Sage Creek. The lessons learned and relationships built over the last thirty years give us hope that we will be successful. We must continue working with the local community and seek new ways to protect this outstanding area on the glaciated high plains.

