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Meridian Dam -- It's Not Over Until the Wild River Sings

By Cliff Wallis

Once again we have stopped the Meridian Dam. Everyone should give themselves a hearty slap on the back. Congratulations are certainly due but don't pop the champagne corks yet. This was the easy work but the dam (sic) issue won't go away until we have legislated protection for the entire 100 km long stretch of the South Saskatchewan River Canyon from the Alberta-Saskatchewan border to the city of Medicine Hat. It is nationally significant, one of the deepest on the Canadian prairies, and a home for rare fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals and plants. It is important for wintering deer, nesting birds of prey and overwintering snakes.

With this kind of impressive portfolio, it shouldn't be too hard to get protection--right? Wrong--the AWA has been working this issue for 25 years. There is hope--we are on the verge of getting a National Wildlife Area to protect most of the western side of the valley. The NWA has been delayed since designation has been hitched to the federal Species at Risk Act.

For the eastern side of the valley and the areas north and south of the Suffield Military Reserve, the AWA has proposed a "wild and scenic river" designation under the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas (and soon, Heritage Rangelands) Act. Alberta has joined the Canadian Heritage Rivers Program.

In 1995, the Water Management Review Committee expressed its support: "*The objectives of the Program are to recognize rivers having natural, cultural and/or recreational heritage values of national significance. The WMRC recommends that Alberta continue its commitment to this Program.*" Alberta's commitment has been weak, preferring to propose dams on nationally significant waterways rather than protect them.

Instead of fighting every destructive scheme that Alberta proposes, the AWA has long advocated for protection. The lack of "wild river" legislation does not prevent us from getting one. There is a variety of protected areas legislation with enough flexibility to create regulations tailored to the protection of a wild and scenic river. There is one Ecological Reserve on the east side of the river. The new Heritage Rangelands category would likely find favor with local people who might otherwise be opposed to protection. It allows extensive use of the land, .e.g. ranching, but regulations could protect the river from industrial use and the construction of instream structures such as dams and weirs.

Wild places like the South Saskatchewan Canyon are our "Crown Jewels". While residents of the big cities must play a big role, protection ultimately lies in the hands of a few local people. This is the hard work--the long, slow process of building trust in rural communities, something that the AWA has recently rededicated itself to. Fortunately, there is a small group of interested residents on both sides of the border. Working with them, I have no doubt that one day this wild river will sing with the joy that comes from the security of legal protection.

