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The South Saskatchewan River Leaves Its Mark On All Who Visit

By John Geary

There are very few large pieces of wild and natural prairie ecosystem left in Alberta. One of the largest and few remaining truly wild areas on Alberta's southern prairies lies along the South Saskatchewan River. The stretch of badlands from Medicine Hat northeast to the Alberta-Saskatchewan border is particularly spectacular.

That section would have changed irrevocably if plans to build the Meridian Dam had gone through. However, the valley's beauty will, for the near future, remain unaltered by any mega projects.

The beauty of the badlands prevalent along the river valley east of Medicine Hat exerts a mystical pull on visitors from the very first time they encounter it, a pull that never really lets go.

Dawn Dickinson of Medicine Hat is a longstanding member of the Grassland Naturalists, and co-author of the book, *Prairie River*. She first experienced the river almost 40 years ago, and still finds herself drawn by its allure.

"I was going down the river with a group of volunteers banding prairie falcons for the Canadian Wildlife Service, as it is a prime area for nesting raptors," she says. "We camped along the way, and it was just beautiful ... we watched rattlesnakes, antelope and saw all kinds of birds.

"I've never forgotten drifting silently down the deep canyon at the end of the day, watching the sun just hit the top of the cliffs and seeing a pair of marvelous golden eagles sitting there on a nest, catching the full gold of the sun."

"It is a lovely river, not touched very much by all the developments that have gone on."

She has paddled a canoe down the river many times since then, and never tires of its beauties.

Calgary resident Greg Fredeen is an avid paddler and conservation-minded outdoorsman. He has canoed the river twice with his family. He says looking at a map of the area first drew him to the South Saskatchewan.

"I've always loved paddling prairie rivers, and when I looked at a map, I saw no roads crossed it for many miles, so it looked like a prime area to paddle," he says. "I'd also read articles about the military base and how it is like a nature preserve, with no one allowed in there and development restricted."

Fredeen has paddled from Medicine Hat to the Saskatchewan border twice, and marvels at the wildlife and wild lands along the valley.

"It's one of the few places you can access a large expanse of prairie wilderness," he says. "Paddling downriver from Medicine Hat, you don't see any people again for 160 km. There are very few places you can do that in Alberta.

"It's backcountry wilderness where no one expects it to be."





Retired Major Dan Davies worked at CFB Suffield for nine years. The base runs along the northeast bank of the river, and in his time working there, he has grown to love the area.

“The river is wild and free, it’s nature as it was meant to be, with no people, no smog, no traffic,” says Davies. “It’s just peaceful solitude with Mother Nature in control instead of mankind.”

Davies says it is very important to leave an area like this for future generations.

“I’ve ridden up and down both sides of the valley on horseback with my daughter. Some day I’d like her to be able to do the same thing with her children.”

Davies is a realist; he says we cannot hold back development and progress indefinitely. But he says we can rethink how we develop the land around us.

“Maybe we can impose a delay until a better measure of ‘progress’ is defined.”

Cliff Wallis, AWA president, sums up the impact this valley has on anyone who spends any time exploring its wonders.

“It is an incredibly diverse and awe-inspiring place,” he says. “The canyon is one of the most spectacular on the Canadian plains.”

“Most importantly, it represents the triumph of conservationists over subsidized unsustainable agriculture. These rare victories should be treasured, honored and communicated widely.”

