



Return Trip: At Home and Away in Wilderness

with Mike McIvor

In recent decades, arguments supporting wilderness protection have shifted from its value for human activities to its role in preserving functioning ecosystems.

In this year's lecture, Mike McIvor raises and addresses some timely and important questions: How can we connect with new generations of potential advocates for whom the natural world is increasingly remote? And how can we export lessons learned from being in wilderness to the larger society, which needs them desperately?





**BIOGRAPHY
MIKE McIVOR**

Mike McIvor is a long-time resident of Banff. He grew up in Victoria, B.C., where he attended the University of Victoria, graduating in 1964 with a B.A.(Honours) in English. His degree was then applied to the handles of snow shovels and lawn-mowers as he spent the next 30 years working with the grounds crew at The Banff Centre. Along with his wife, Diane, he became actively involved with the Bow Valley Naturalists in 1970, serving as president for a number of years, including currently. Intensely interested in natural history and conservation – interests he believes are inseparable – he was president of the Federation of Alberta Naturalists from 1978 to 1980 and a director of the Alberta Wilderness Association from 1981 to 1994. He and Diane pursue an ever-growing fascination with the natural world and continue their conservation activism.



RETURN TRIP – AT HOME AND AWAY IN WILDERNESS

By Mike McIvor

The following is an excerpt from AWA's 2008 Martha Kostuch Wilderness and Wildlife Annual Lecture, November 14, 2008. To hear Mike McIvor's entire lecture, go to the AWA podcasts at www.albertawilderness.ca/AWRC/Podcasts.htm.

Last day of our trip. The trail angles downward. I'm not sure what Diane is thinking but I've banished all trivial thoughts and am plodding along wrestling with a profound question: what do I want most from life: a thick chocolate milkshake or a tall mug of cold beer? We're completing a circuit that probed the eastern edges of the Continental Divide. The scenery was spectacular. We saw stark cliffs, rugged mountains, shimmering glaciers, sparkling streams, larch-fringed meadows, and a mountain goat or two. A few days ago, we were anxious to get started, eager to leave behind the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Now, as we sense the end of the trail, we know we have been away in the wilderness.

A few years ago, it occurred to me that the arguments in favour of protecting wilderness had undergone a significant shift. In the days when Diane and I first became involved almost 40 years ago, wilderness, from the point of view of its protagonists, was primarily a place you went backpacking. With debates over future land use in Alberta heating up, AWA became the most articulate and ardent champion of Wildland Recreation Areas, both as a concept and as specific, proposed sites. Yes, we catalogued various components of the ecosystem, but in many respects the landscape was background, scenic backdrop.

One of AWA's great early publications, "Wildlands for Recreation," begins almost poetically with an attempt to invoke the feelings engendered by wilderness: the deep connections, the welcoming solitude, the sense of timelessness, the liberating sensuality. Have these feelings changed for you? I doubt it. I know they haven't for me. Now imagine a similar publication,



Mike McIvor's entire presentation, generously sprinkled with his characteristic humour, can be heard at albertawilderness.ca/AWRC/Podcasts.htm. PHOTO: C. WEARMOUTH

written today. What would we highlight? Threats to ecological integrity, endangered species, barriers to ecological connectivity or its global converse – invasions by non-native species.

Out of sheer necessity, we have shifted emphasis to the crucial role of wilderness in preserving functioning ecosystems and ecological diversity. I fear, however, that we may have forgotten something valuable in the meantime. These days when I attend presentations about wilderness – and I mean serious presentations, not depictions of self-indulgent adventuring – I encounter a broader flow of information than in the past: more relevant facts and figures about ecological conditions, status of wildlife, land-use trends in surrounding areas; more graphs and tables; more insightful assessments of current political realities. But often something is missing. Driven by a keen determination to convey the seriousness of the situation, wilderness advocates seem less able or less willing to convey a sense of our own excitement about these places.

Perhaps we are deliberately downplaying our self-interest to contrast with the aggressive self-interest displayed by exploiters. Or perhaps we have been persuaded that reason prevails and reason alone must underlie every position. But don't complete human beings come replete with emotions? Why shouldn't

we be celebrating the land as well as protesting pending abuse?

Edward Hoagland wrote that "the jubilation of discovery" is the defining characteristic of wilderness experience. (I might add that it would be a pretty good defining characteristic of our lives.) We should be expressing more of it in our advocacy because the people we hope to motivate will be touched by different things. For some, warnings about the future may be sufficient to provoke engagement; for others, the catalyst may be a response to the nature of the place in question. Sanctuaries are essential for wildlife but they are essential for people too. And the best sanctuaries are wild.

Now let's move to my second area of concern: the constituency for protection of nature in general and wilderness in particular. I think it is fair to say that all of us in the conservation community are frustrated by our inability to mobilize with sufficient force to accomplish our objectives. Too often, lone, heroic voices are heard when a chorus is necessary. I want to poke away at one piece of this puzzle. I am convinced the single biggest obstacle to meaningful change in the direction of more appropriate relationships between humans and the rest of the world is the growing degree to which more and more people are disconnected from that world. An increasingly urbanized – and wired – populace is losing touch with their

origins, their sustenance, their place in the universe.

As more and more of once-natural landscapes are paved over, built on, or, in tiny slivers, converted to homogenous “green space,” the most sensitive observers will undergo what Robert Michael Pyle calls “the extinction of experience” while the newest and youngest among us will fall victim to a silent affliction identified by David Wilcove in *The Condor’s Shadow* as “generational amnesia.” You can’t remember what you didn’t know, and without knowing or remembering, there can be little caring. If we want more caring we must work on the knowing.

In *Earth Alive*, published in 2006, two years after his death, Dr. Stan Rowe insisted that human ecology, the search for a healthy people-planet relationship, should be at the core of education. For him, “the basic goal of a liberating education [is] understanding what it means to be human in a living world.” Being human in a living world demands we overcome the drag of ecological, or nature, illiteracy. It means finding a cure for Nature Deficit Disorder, a malaise pinpointed by Richard Louv in *Last Child in the Woods*. Scientists studying ecosystems often refer to indicator species. Louv offers his own version of “an endangered indicator species: the child in nature.” I believe if we want support for natural landscapes to grow in the future, we need more children in nature now. And adults. Parents and children together, expanding their worlds and feeling connected in visceral ways. I am certain that without exposure to nature, without even tentative connections, there will be no embrace of life other than the self or the purely human.

If we accept that the kind of connecting we hope to see can come only from genuine, intimate contact with nature, we need to think carefully about where. Nature is not generic; it is intensely specific and firmly attached to place: prairie, boreal forest, mountain, stream-side, ridgetop. Human connections must be grounded in the local from the beginning, or context will fade. Will there be as many tears for the tiny remnant herd of mountain caribou in Banff National Park if they disappear as were shed for the baby elephant that died in the Zoo?



Hiker on Loaf Mountain in the Castle, southwest Alberta. AWA has been working for more than 40 years for better protection in this spectacular region. PHOTO: N. DOUGLAS

As we have been dashing from one crisis to another, we have become better at saying where we don’t want people than where we do want them. With our full attention on what we have determined to be the most ecologically valuable, sensitive, and vulnerable landscapes, we have little time to identify areas that might be capable of handling more intensive use – and I am not talking about industry or motorized recreation. If we want others to care more, and to offer their support, they need the opportunity to experience wild, or at least semi-wild, places. Should we be spending some proportion of the time we devote to areas we don’t want trampled to finding areas that could handle, with appropriate management, a certain amount of trampling, a degree of intensive use that will enable more people to contact nature and begin to develop those vital connections? We won’t be able to save the big wild if we don’t have smaller, less wild places that many people can touch. Can we accomplish this without feeling we are creating sacrifice areas, compromising too much? It’s worth a try. But it will require us to define some parameters because any opportunity for contact is wasted if all that is expected is entertainment. So, no toys, no artificial distractions. Just encouragement for preliminary explorations of the fullness and complexity of the natural world.

But the process simply cannot stop here. We need more politically engaged

citizens, more staunch advocates for the wise use of land. We can help by making it abundantly clear that becoming engaged as citizens is a right and a responsibility, and when it involves acting as defenders of the things we love, it can be a joy. The world may be changing in ways we despise, but much that we care about remains. So let’s do battle with smiles on our faces, angry inside perhaps, hurting perhaps, but keeping in mind that wilderness is more enriching, more fulfilling, more lively and beautiful than anything money can buy, and proving that hope is stronger, and way more fun, than despair.

Years later. Same place. Last day of our trip. The trail angles downward. Visions of beer and milkshakes plague me. The scenery has been spectacular. And alive. We’ve seen stark cliffs, rugged mountains, smaller but still shimmering glaciers, sparkling streams, larch-fringed meadows, a mountain goat or two. And we saw butterflies. Dragonflies and damselflies darting around the lower elevation wetlands. Mushrooms of every size, shape, and colour. We heard winter wrens near the canyons and fox sparrows at timberline. Pikas greeting us from scree slopes and hoary marmots whistling their alarms from boulder fields. A few days ago, we were anxious to get started, eager to enter the high mountain valleys. Now, as we sense the end of the trail, we know we have been at home in the wilderness. 🌲