



CELEBRATING STEWARDS — ALBERTA WATERSHED STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVES

By Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist

Citizen-initiated watershed stewardship groups have a key role to play in protecting and restoring Alberta's surface and ground water, and aquatic ecosystem health. Described in the Alberta government's *Water for Life* strategy as "neighbours sharing information and taking action to protect and enhance their local watershed," watershed stewardship groups engage in an amazingly diverse variety of activities. The trio of initiatives profiled here offers a sample of inspiring, creative ways in which citizens are working to address watershed management challenges.

Every spring, volunteers in the Cochrane community gather for a morning of tree planting and creek clean-up along local waterways. Branches and Banks, a spinoff group of the Cochrane Environmental Action Society, is the water stewardship group that has organized this event since 1996. Volunteers of all ages have planted approximately 31,000 native trees so far. Branches and Banks also partners with others in awareness-raising activities, such as wetlands appreciation and the citizen water-testing initiatives promoted by Alberta Water Quality Awareness Day.

In another hands-on project, Branches and Banks worked with a bio-engineering expert in May 2007 to stabilize an eroding bank on Big Hill Creek. Bio-engineering is a simple, effective riverbank-stabilization technique using cuttings of live local native trees such as willows. The cuttings are pounded and pushed into the bank in simple woven or stake structures. The structures provide stability and encourage the tree cuttings to reroot as a natural stabilizer and silt catchment. Fairly labour intensive, with a one- or two-day timespan and inexpensive materials, it's an ideal project choice for volunteer groups. Branches and Banks is very representative of the



Branches and Banks volunteers planting native trees near Cochrane, June 2007.

PHOTO: BANKS AND BRANCHES

many stewardships groups across the province working on stream clean-ups and bioengineering projects for their local river channels.

One of Alberta's newest watershed stewardship groups is the Keepers of the Athabasca Watershed Council. Responding to urgent pressures on the Athabasca watershed, a coalition of groups and individuals formed the Keepers in mid-2007. Its goal is to unite the peoples of the Athabasca River and Lake watershed to secure and protect water and watershed lands for ecological, social, cultural, and community health and well-being.

A particular strength of the Keepers is the strong connections it is forging between First Nations and environmental organizations. Fifteen First Nations reserve-based communities, as well as numerous other indigenous communities, depend on the Athabasca River and Lake watershed. An important demonstration of support for Keepers activities came with a recent resolution by Treaties 6, 7 and 8 Chiefs of Alberta calling for a halt to new tar sands approvals (see sidebar). Keepers supported a rally on March 1, 2008 on the steps of the Alberta

Legislature to raise awareness about the pressing health and environmental concerns of the aboriginal community of Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca.

Also on the political-legal front, Keepers member Peter Cyprien of Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations filed a petition with the federal Auditor General in early January (see *WLA*, Feb. 2008, p. 18). Citing recent public health and ecological research, the petition calls on Fisheries and Oceans Canada to investigate *Fisheries Act* violations from contamination of the Athabasca River below Fort McMurray and throughout Lake Athabasca. The petition also demands that Health Canada research human exposure to contaminants from drinking surface water or consuming fish and wildlife in the Lake Athabasca and lower Athabasca River region. The Auditor General's Office has indicated that the petition meets the criteria for an environmental petition, and the two federal departments have 120 days to give substantive responses to the petition.

The Keepers are in the process of compiling a Citizens' State of the Watershed report for the Athabasca. According to Crooked Creek



Stream bank stabilization using bioengineering – the Elbow River Watershed Partnership's McLean Creek project west of Calgary, May 2007. Author is in second row, second from left. PHOTO: ELBOW RIVER WATERSHED PARTNERSHIP

Conservancy Society Director and Keepers Co-chair Harvey Scott, it is simply unacceptable to wait for provincial authorities to set up an official Athabasca Watershed Planning and Advisory Council (or WPAC). Alberta's *Water for Life* strategy describes WPACs as the "multi-stakeholder councils that work with government in an adaptive management cycle of basin planning and evaluation." It could take years for a WPAC to produce a baseline report, Scott points out, while river water quantity and quality decline and health risks multiply.

On behalf of the Keepers, a professional scientist is compiling previous northern river basin studies dating back to the 1990s, along with recent Alberta Environment water data. They would appreciate more volunteer expertise. "Having a few more water scientists with volunteer time to pull together the statistics and analysis would greatly assist us," Scott says. The report will help to highlight the cumulative effects of mining, forestry, and other industrial projects in the Athabasca River watershed.

The Keepers are also organizing a summer 2008 river tour, starting from the source Athabasca Glacier and ending at Fond du Lac at the east end of Athabasca Lake. A watershed community tour crew of three or four members will be assisted by various groups and individuals in watershed communities along the

way. They will hold Keepers Days in several watershed communities, likely including Hinton, Whitecourt, Athabasca, Fort Assiniboine, Lac La Biche, Fort McMurray, Fort McKay, and Poplar Point on the Saskatchewan portion of Lake Athabasca. The tour expects to conclude with a large Keepers gathering in Fort Chipewyan in August. Keepers Day will include water-monitoring workshops and video documentation of Citizens and Elders Forums where participants will share stories, concerns, and traditional

ecological knowledge about the river, the tributaries, and the watershed lands.

While Keepers of the Athabasca members range over a massive watershed system, the Oneway River Valley Conservation Association (ORVCA) operates in the much smaller Sturgeon River watershed. Its members focus on the risk to water quality and quantity from cumulative effects of surface and subsurface disturbances. Over the years, this group has become an important local resource for others concerned about ground and surface water protection in the North Saskatchewan watershed.

ORVCA was started in 2001 by residents of three counties west of Edmonton in the Sturgeon River watershed (a sub-basin of the North Saskatchewan watershed). The group's name comes from an underground pre-glacial river valley known as the Oneway River channel, and the group is dedicated to the aquifer's sustainability. They have been vigilant in drawing attention to unsustainable cumulative diversions, unlawful diversions, and mining practices that risk groundwater contamination.

The group has developed a particular expertise in gravel mining issues. As local landowners dependent on groundwater wells for their own domestic use, group members have observed neighbouring gravel mines and questioned them on practices such as containment reservoir locations, fuel/chemical spill control, and pumping volume license authorizations.



The people of Fort Chipewyan rally on the steps of the Legislature to bring attention to the health and environmental concerns of their community (March 1, 2008).

PHOTO: C. BRESNAHAN



An unlawful operation identified by ORVCA in May 2001, which has since been rectified. As part of a gravel mining operation, a generator engine for pumping water stands at the edge of an exposed aquifer reservoir. The blue canvas catches raw petroleum products leaking from the engine. Neither the engine nor the nearby 4,000-litre diesel fuel tank had any containment structures in case of a fuel spill.

PHOTO: I. SKINNER

When Alberta Environment's responses to their concerns have been insufficient, they have launched Environmental Appeal Board actions. In the process, they delved into the intricacies of the province's *Public Lands Act* and *Municipal Government Act*.

Through their experience in tackling local concerns, ORVCA members Mike Northcott and Ian Skinner became convinced that existing Alberta laws provide municipalities and provincial authorities with the regulatory tools needed to protect land, water, and air. The problem they see is that these laws are not responsibly administered or enforced. To raise awareness of this situation, in late 2007 they drafted a two-page primer, "Environmental Regulations and Management of Water Bodies," which they have circulated to other water stewardship groups.

In 2008 ORVCA has been responding to requests for help from other groups who want to take action on watershed protection issues. For example, residents of Sandy Lake, which is also in the Sturgeon River watershed, are concerned about a proposed gravel mine within two km of the lakeshore. According to Mike Northcott, they cannot get a definite answer from project proponents that the mining will not interfere with the groundwater they depend on for their domestic wells. The residents are urging that the precautionary principle be followed to prevent quantity impacts

or contamination. In early March the project was put on hold because of gravel haul road issues; ORVCA will continue to support Sandy Lake residents in highlighting groundwater concerns if the project resumes.

Farther afield, ORVCA members are in touch with citizens' groups concerned about the huge Dodds-Roundhill surface coal mine project proposed southeast of Edmonton. Another issue they are investigating is cross-contamination between aquifers and natural gas in

drilling operations. ORVCA's history illustrates how citizens who persist in environmental advocacy can become a valuable knowledge resource for others.

The energy and commitment of the volunteer watershed stewardship groups is undisputed. For many groups, an ongoing concern is to secure resources for their activities. The Alberta Stewardship Network, established in 2004, has helped meet this need by facilitating information exchange and capacity-building for these groups, and by administering a Watershed Stewardship Grant program funded by the Alberta government. Capacity issues of watershed stewardship groups remain a concern and are one element of the Alberta Water Council's project on Shared Governance and Watershed Management Planning Framework.

Whether it's joining a water monitoring workshop along the Athabasca or initiating a local water stewardship group, more and more Albertans are reaching out and forming alliances to address their local water and watershed protection concerns. The Alberta Stewardship Network website (www.ab.stewardshipcanada.ca) has a directory of more than 100 Alberta watershed stewardship groups. With summer just around the corner, why not check out the opportunities to get involved in your community?

Treaty Chiefs Call for No New Tar Sands Project Approvals

On February 22, 2008, Treaty Chiefs representing the Treaties 6, 7 and 8 nations of Alberta passed a unanimous resolution calling for no new oil sands project approvals until Treaty First Nations have approved a comprehensive watershed management plan and resource development plan for the region. Chief Allan Adam of the Athabasca Chipewyan Dene First Nation and member of the Keepers of the Athabasca brought the resolution forward at the Chiefs' meeting. After the resolution passed, Chief Adam commented that "thresholds have to be put in place that will protect ecosystem and human health along with the well-being of our land." Lawyer Vivienne Beisel, another

Keepers of the Athabasca member, noted, "The cumulative impacts of oil sands development have all but destroyed the traditional livelihood of First Nations in the northern Athabasca watershed.

The province has continued to issue approvals for new developments without obtaining their consent or consulting with First Nations in a meaningful and substantial way. This is in direct breach of Treaty 8 First Nations' treaty-protected Aboriginal rights to livelihood, and thus a violation of s.35(1) of the Constitution and Articles 26 and 27 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, an international agreement which Canada, along with three other nations, has refused to sign."