



THE KAKWA, STILL WILD AND FREE

By Chris Wearmouth, AWA Conservation Specialist

Here in Calgary the word “wilderness” usually brings to mind the great peaks to the west – the wildflower meadows and thick forests, the chance encounter with a grizzly, and the sheer rock faces where only the hardiest survive.

But turn your gaze to the bottom of those mountains, to the valleys, canyons, and descending contours, and you find a subtler kind of wilderness – wild rivers. Ribbons of blue that plunge and weave through the landscape, giving life to myriad species and supplying water to the human inhabitants downstream from the rivers’ source waters.

One such wild river is the Kakwa, which emerges from the northern Rocky Mountains. Named after the Cree word for “porcupine,” the Kakwa runs more than 200 km from its source of Lake Kakwa in B.C. to where it joins the Smoky River in Alberta, just east of Highway 40. Along the way it drains an area of 3,475 km². Several waterfalls interrupt the steady flow of the Kakwa and its tributaries, the most impressive being Kakwa Falls near the provincial border, where the river plunges 30 metres over a large cave carved out by the constant spray.

The Kakwa River valley and adjacent uplands are recognized as being provincially significant under Alberta’s Environmental Significant Areas designation for containing critical habitat for grizzly bear and the mountain ecotype of woodland caribou. The river itself is home to bull trout, a species listed as “sensitive” in Alberta. As the river passes through four Natural Subregions – Subalpine, Upper and Lower Foothills, and Central Mixedwood – its uplands support a mixture of southerly species at the northern limit of their range and northern species at the southern limits of their range.

A satellite image of the Kakwa River gives a remote sense of its untamed nature as it snakes east from



MAP: AWACHRIS WEARMOUTH

its headwaters through a blanket of forest and meadows. What is also quickly apparent from such an image is the potential for the loss of the river’s wildness. At the eastern end of the Kakwa, a patchwork of cutblocks and oilfield roads surrounds its confluence with the Smoky River, looking like massing armies ready to march west to invade the large swaths of relatively untouched lands cradling the river.

The fight for protection of this wild waterway and its surrounding basin began at least four decades ago. In 1969 members of the Grande Prairie-based Wild Kakwa Society began lobbying for protection of the Kakwa area. In 1972 they presented the provincial government with a petition signed by more than 10,000 Albertans asking for the Kakwa’s protection. Canadian Wolf Defenders’ president and local artist Robert Guest wrote to Grande Prairie’s *Daily Herald-Tribune*, declaring that the Kakwa Falls “must be one of nature’s most spectacular displays. So much power! So much unchained beauty – still wild and free!”

In 1985, a parcel of the Kakwa area

surrounding the falls was given special designation as a Forest Land-Use Zone. Three years later, B.C. committed to protecting the headwaters of the Kakwa, creating a provincial park that now encompasses more than 1,700 km².

It took the Government of Alberta almost 10 years to provide a counterpart, establishing Kakwa Wildland Park over just 649 km², less than half of the size proposed originally by the Wild Kakwa Society. Downstream, the river and surrounding foothills were left without protection, a serious misstep for a province that has protected a mere 1.29 percent of its Foothills Natural Region.

Over the years, various groups have tried to garner support and recognition for the whole of the Kakwa River. During the Special Places 2000 process, the river was nominated by both Rocky Notnes of Hinton and Alison Dinwoodie, then-President of the Northwest Voyageur Canoe and Kayak Club. In her nomination, Dinwoodie made note of the area’s significant wildlife habitat and the value of the river as a wilderness canoe route. Alberta Wilderness Association

has consistently promoted a much larger protected area than the one that currently exists in Alberta and has worked for protection of the Kakwa's entire length.

In recent years, Greater Kakwa, a group based in Grande Prairie, has been working toward having the river designated under the Canadian Heritage River System (CHRS), a federal program that recognizes the best examples of Canada's river heritage and works to conserve, protect, and promote them.

Neil Dobson, co-chair of Greater Kakwa, described the catalyst behind the group's formation: "It was the sudden realization that an area, once considered a wilderness, was being changed as increased human enterprise began to dominate the scene. It was the realization that without action, the quiet serenity of nature which many have enjoyed was likely to disappear" (*WLA* December 2001).

Ironically, it may be the very wildness of the Kakwa that will keep it from making the CHRS list. Under the present criteria for Heritage River status, a river must show outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values. While the Kakwa scored relatively high for its natural character, under the Human History theme, it scored only 3.3 out of 100. Its remoteness has prevented extensive human use of the river in the past as defined by CHRS; it scored points only under the Human History subcomponents of traditional land use by First Nations people and evidence of Métis habitation. Similarly, strong points were given for water quality and recreation values such as sportfishing, but the river scored poorly on access and recreation facilities.

At the time the CHRS was established in 1984 (and one sees evidence that this is still true today), the pervasive mindset was that wilderness had merit only if it accommodated human use. As we are gaining insight into the value of wilderness for the ecological goods and services it provides, as well as for its own sake, it may be time to adjust the CHRS criteria or to develop a different program to recognize rivers such as the Kakwa for what they are – wild rivers where we may occasionally visit but whose worth exists outside our footprints or paddle strokes.

A current issue that could potentially affect the Kakwa River is the outbreak of mountain pine beetle in the area over the last few years. According to a

map produced by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development of the reported impacts of mountain pine beetle in 2007, the Kakwa area has seen a concentration of the beetle within the Wildland Park and beetle damage has been reported throughout its watershed. The loss of live trees in the river's watershed could result in increased water level and flow rate, with resulting impacts to the aquatic ecosystem.



One of the main attractions in the Kakwa Wildland Provincial Park, the spectacular Kakwa Falls plunge 30 metres over the erosion-resistant Cadomin Formation.

PHOTO: C. BRUUN

However, the mountain pine beetle attacks almost exclusively species of pine, leaving other trees and the forest understorey healthy. In essence, the forest remains, although the red needles and the bony grey fingers of the dying and dead trees can be quite shocking. But even the dead pine contribute to the cycle of the forest, offering potential homes to woodland creatures and contributing organic matter back to the soil. In dealing with the mountain pine beetle, it is important that we do not act rashly and, in our attempts to stem the spread of the

beetle (which seem to be primarily for forestry interests), that we do not cause more harm to the forest as a whole than this native "pest" is causing to just one genus.

The effects motorized recreation could be having on the river are a concern. Currently, much of the river's length on the Alberta side is surrounded by unregulated public land open to access by off-highway vehicles (OHVs). Even within the wildland, there are trails for both snowmobiles and OHVs to waterfalls and along the river. AWA's concerns include the possibilities of erosion, siltation, and disturbance to wildlife.

And finally there is the threat that human use of the water itself might become a potential cause for reduction in the river's ability to function. This summer, Alberta Environment issued an approval to Terroco Industries Ltd. to divert up to 40,000 m³ of water for the purpose of oilfield drilling. While the approval states that no more than 10 percent of the instantaneous flow can be diverted, further approvals of this nature could hamper the aquatic ecosystem as water availability becomes more important to the area's expanding petroleum industry.

Many of our greatest rivers, the ones history calls wild, have been dealt serious blows. The Bow is overallocated, the Athabasca possibly poisoned, the Peace regulated. Yet portions of them and their valleys remain wild and there are still rivers that have escaped relatively unscathed as we march firmly on in the name of development. The Kakwa is one that seems to stand on a precipice.

"Rivers and streams are an unfailing source of delight," writes B.C. naturalist E. C. Pielou in her book *Fresh Water*. "But even for those with no specific interest in them, the mere existence of rivers makes the world a more attractive and more interesting place; without them, we should be spiritually as well as materially deprived."

It is time Alberta took a proactive approach to protecting its remaining wild rivers, for the sake of their simple existence as well as for the joy we derive from their untamed waters. 🍂