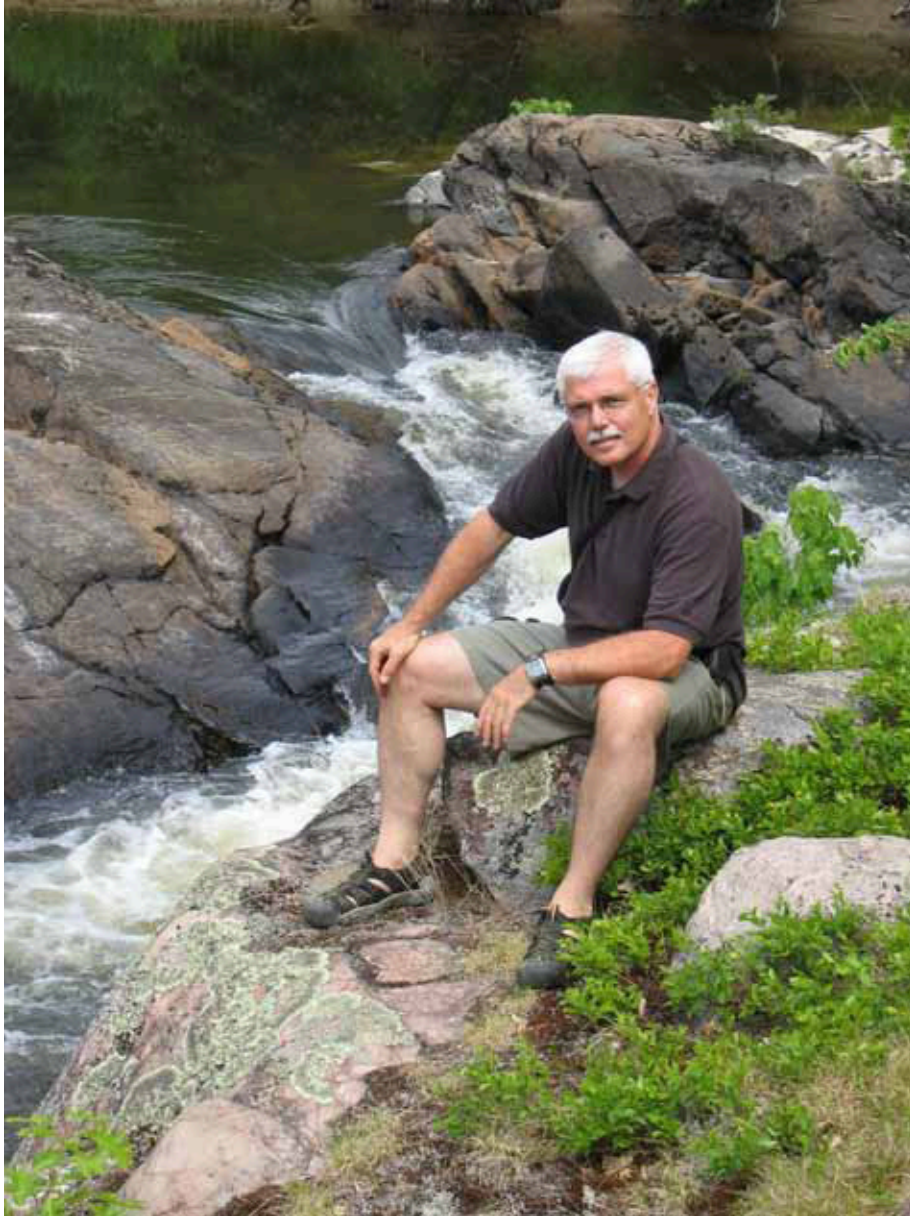




PETER LEE: I KNOW MARTHA WOULD APPROVE

By Ian Urquhart



Having spoken to more than my fair share of pretentious souls in industry, government and the academy over the past 23 years it was a real pleasure to interview Peter Lee. Pretentious is probably the last adjective any sane person would use to describe the conservationist who will deliver this year's Martha Kostuch annual lecture and, with Tom Beck, receive a Wilderness Defenders Award on November 19th.

Peter is the Executive Director of Global Forest Watch Canada, an

organization dedicated to improving the quality of information we have about how we use Canada's forests and what the environmental consequences of our activities are. Like a home-run hitter he has touched all the bases that figure in the debates about environmental issues in Alberta. His career is one that has seen him work with industry, government, and non-governmental organizations. After graduating from Lakehead University with a Bachelor's degree in Geography in the late 1960s Peter, like many a young

man then, came west to work on the rigs. He soon found himself in the offices of Syncrude as part of the team that wrote the company's initial environmental assessment in the early 1970s.

The Love of the Outdoors – the Need for Protected Areas

Peter's love of the outdoors, nature and wildlife came from where he grew up, on the north shore of Lake Superior in the boreal forest of the Canadian Shield. The pulp mill town he grew up in truly was in a wilderness setting; only the railway connected it to Thunder Bay, then known as Fort William and Port Arthur, the major population centre of northwestern Ontario. Family, especially his father who was an avid hunter and fisherman, nurtured this love of nature and also encouraged Peter to get the best education he could.

These interests led Peter, after his stint with Syncrude, to the University of Alberta's Master's program in Biological Sciences. He recounted how his Master's research took him to the "terrestrial, island paradise" of Cypress Hills Provincial Park where he studied the competition between elk and cattle. Even then pressures, from ranching and tourism, were being felt in the Park. "I think because of Cypress Park," he recalled, "I started to connect the extraordinary importance of protected areas to insure that...either naturally beautiful areas or naturally wildlife rich areas were maintained in the longterm."

The Government Years and Life Thereafter

The nearly 20 years Peter spent working in the Alberta government may have been pre-ordained by the fact that the government, to its credit, helped to fund his Master's research. On the one hand, those years were rich and interesting ones, filled with opportunities to visit and study parts of Alberta few of us get the chance to see; and, then, as now, the public service had very talented biologists who he enjoyed working with. But, with the passage of time the public service environment became increasingly frustrating. Part of that frustration arose from the administrative reorganizations



"The Sun" was created with red clay from Medicine Hat. The clay's textures add dimension to this large piece.

PHOTO: N. DOUGLAS

that, like the changing seasons, regularly took place in the province's renewable resources/environmental bureaus. Those reorganizations diverted staff attention from their substantive mandates. Frustration also arose from the fact that the distance between politicians and public servants, the concept of administrative accountability that existed when Peter began his career, evaporated. As any textbook on public administration will tell you political "interference" at the lower levels of public bureaucracies – whether by Ministers or MLAs – is inappropriate; so too are political appointments at the levels of the administration normally occupied by career public servants. "I was beginning to realize," Peter said, "that my either usefulness or value or even interest in my job in government was waning... I moved on and tried to do some more exciting stuff that really excited me."

World Wildlife Fund Canada first gave Peter that opportunity, an opportunity he now pursues through his work with Global Forest Watch Canada (GFWC). Global Forest Watch (www.globalforestwatch.ca) monitors forest development across Canada with sophisticated technologies such as satellite imagery and Geographical Information System (GIS) software. Given the fact that, in Canada, provinces own the natural resources on their public lands there was very little national data or national analyses of forest resources available. This niche is one that GFWC has filled very well over the past decade.

GFWC is a very fitting destination for Peter to arrive at in light of some comments he made nearly 20 years ago at a community-based boreal forest conference in Athabasca. During part of his presentation on the "boreal wilds" he noted that issue simplification, even public manipulation, was an important,

unfortunate, part of the debate then about the future of Alberta's boreal forest. GFWC's mandate and the information it provides is a vaccine against exaggerated claims – whether made by industry, government, or environmentalists. "I think part of our job... is to get the facts out, the information out... and we don't pretend to be the purveyor of truth... but the pursuit of that is the right thing to do... to make sure your fellow citizens have... the information..."

How to Measure Success?

When you ask Peter to look back over his career and talk about his accomplishments his response is modest and self-deprecating. He is reluctant to say that he has made a difference over the more than 30 years he has been involved in conservation issues or that the "I must make a difference" mindset is really a positive one. In part that comes from his knowledge that today's successes may be short-term. They may vanish (one example of this that immediately came to my mind was what happened to the McClelland Lake wetlands – with a stroke of a pen their protection from tar sands mining was taken away in 2002).

Lee prefers to think of our accomplishments in terms of how we behave, how we interact with others. A successful life then is one where we "act with integrity, try to be a role model, have some fun..." It's that concern with integrity that led Peter and Dr. Kevin Timoney to threaten to launch a defamation lawsuit against a senior Alberta Environment scientist who argued publicly that Lee and Timoney reported data selectively to make their case that oil sands operations pollute the Athabasca River. The scientist apologized.

Never Overestimate the Opposition

Lee's outlook on how to measure success animates and guides his approach to how we should "do" conservation. Conservationists "should always go for the jugular... but you have to do it with integrity... You have to be tough... because there is so much against you. They have all the money; they have all the political support; they have all the cards."

Despite the money and political support industry and politicians enjoy Peter has, what struck me at first as, some surprising advice for advocates: Never overestimate your opponent. Despite the well-known disadvantage

environmentalists face when it comes to political resources Peter sees environmentalists as still possessing an important edge over their opponents because opponents "don't have the commitment or the passion, hardly ever." The failure to recognize the fundamental strength that passion, commitment and the intelligence produced by those two characteristics bestows on advocates too often leads them, mistakenly in Peter's view, to overestimate their opponents. Lacking commitment and passion the opponents of environmentalism are more likely to make mistakes, which in the media age we live in, often means letting themselves become media targets.

Where are We Now? What About the Future?

As I alluded to above I think the first time I saw Peter was at a conference on the boreal forest in the fall of 1991. He made a number of observations then that foreshadowed well the path Alberta was about to take. One of them was that our species was becoming increasingly interested in subduing the boreal, rather than just trying to fit in. So I wanted to ask Peter for his views on what had changed in Alberta since then and what he thought the future held for us.

We both agree that our species has been doing an excellent job of subduing the boreal since then. As Peter noted, "the pace and scale of industrial activities in the boreal forest is jaw-dropping." But, in his view, there is still time to insure that, at least nationally or globally, a significant portion of the boreal may be spared from feeling the footprint of industrialization. If we consider the boreal in those two contexts, not from the local or regional ones, "there is still probably over 50 percent of the boreal still in its historic pristine state. So... it is one of those conservation opportunities that is unparalleled just because of the size and magnitude of what's left even though the pace and scale of development is jaw-dropping."

The formidable nature of the boreal forest is an attribute Peter thinks might, despite our seemingly unstoppable technologies, force us to "fit in" more in the future than we have for the last generation. "It's a formidable environment and historically and maybe even in the future man will just have to learn to fit in and will never conquer the boreal." Amen to that. 🐾