

# CLEAR WATER LANDCARE BUILDS COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP FOR HEALTHIER HEADWATERS

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**H**ow does support for sustainable water management practices grow deep roots in a region? In the case of Clear Water Landcare, it's through

building relationships and sharing practical information. For years, this group has fostered a widening network of community volunteers who demonstrate how good upland and creekside practices can benefit oneself, one's neighbours and the environment.

Clear Water Landcare operates in Clearwater County in west-central Alberta, though they welcome participants from nearby counties. Its predecessor organization, Rocky Riparian Group, was created in 1999. Since then, dozens of volunteers have planned and promoted events, spoken at meetings, and led tours. The group has received important support from Clearwater County through County Agricultural Services staff who help organize events and supply a link to broader networks and resources. Though Clearwater County staff was at the fore of its earliest days, they now take a background role to volunteers.

Land management practices in Clearwater County are vital; for example, they affect downstream water users in Edmonton, Red Deer, and across the central prairies. The county is situated in the Rocky Mountains and Foothills natural regions; its western border is formed by Jasper and Banff National Parks. Clearwater County lands, like the national parks to their west, accumulate snow and store, purify and

release surface and ground water; these lands contain the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River, the Clearwater River (a large tributary of the North Saskatchewan), and the Red Deer River.

Rocky Riparian Group started as a community-based group to foster discussion about water quality and land use practices. An important early project

Creek's was good and Horseguard Creek's was fair.

Those results built an interest not only in improving the "fair" and the "good" assessments, but for valuing what contributes to "excellent" conditions. More events were organized to learn about possibilities, and to hear or see what various producers were trying and how it was working. In 2008, the group also linked with the Junior Forest Wardens program to provide volunteer support for tree and shrub planting programs designed to stabilize streamside banks. The shared vision was for the agricultural community to be a leader in protecting and preserving this headwaters region.

Glenn Mainland, a board member of Clear Water Landcare, was involved with Rocky Riparian Group from its beginnings. His own story of watershed beneficial practices dates from the mid-1980s; he took early retirement from an energy company and moved from Calgary to land along the North Raven River to try his hand at raising

cattle. The North Raven, renowned for its abundant brown trout, offers one of Alberta's premier fly-fishing opportunities. Glenn's river side lands had been damaged from past practices, as well as from the cattle he was starting to raise. Glenn recalls that "soon after I bought my land, I had Alberta government people on the phone encouraging me to put up a five wire high-tensile fence." Instead he put up a single wire electric fence which was effective at a much lower cost. "There's no question, the way the cattle were moving, it was badly damaging the banks."

Glenn got involved with Rocky Riparian Group after hearing about it through the



*Rocky Riparian Group, now called Clear Water Landcare, partnered with RiverWatch in 2002 to train local residents in water quality sampling. The volunteers collected samples for three years on tributaries of the North Saskatchewan and Red Deer Rivers in Clearwater County.*

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involved residents of several agricultural communities in the eastern part of the county gathering baseline water quality data. County Agricultural Services staff arranged for Alberta's RiverWatch group to train volunteers in concepts and techniques of water quality sampling. From 2002 to 2004, they sampled Horseguard Creek (which flows to the Medicine River and then into the Red Deer River), Cow Creek (a small North Saskatchewan River tributary) and Prairie Creek (a Clearwater River tributary). From that data, an environmental consultant prepared a 2005 report that concluded the overall water quality of Prairie Creek was excellent, Cow

regional forage association that assists producers who manage pasture land and graze livestock on it. “I think the benefit of Rocky Riparian Group and Clear Water Landcare has been to create an awareness of the damage that can be done to soft banks of prairie creeks, and to create support for the need for protection. And I give full marks to Clearwater County councilors and staff for their support.” Glenn has a spot on the river where he crosses his cattle to move from one part of his land to another. Over the years he has placed a lot of rocks at the bottom to create a hard footing, and carried out downstream water quality sampling to be sure about the impacts. Neighbours have helped neighbours with various changes. “Now we have very good protection along the river.”

Rick Anderson worked in range management on a provincial grazing reserve north of Rocky Mountain House in the early 2000s; environmental considerations were a key part of his responsibilities. For Rick, one big impact of Rocky Riparian Group was learning how good riparian management promotes positive water recharge and groundwater movement, which in turn has important uplands benefits. “I was quite interested and supportive, soaking up information, implementing wherever I could, sometimes presenting and setting up demonstration projects.” Rick recalls when he took the step to manage cattle to keep them out of water dugouts. Within the season, there was a noticeable difference in how much cleaner the dugout water was, and how long the water stayed. Other practices took a few years, such as health improvements in stream banks where cattle access was minimized. “The things I did as a land manager had not just an environmental impact, but benefits to me and the business. So there’s a strong business case for good practices.”

Rick now consults on integrated land use issues but it made sense to him to stay involved with Rocky Riparian Group and

continue as it transitioned to Clear Water Landcare. He sees a lot more awareness compared to fifteen years ago of how an individual’s actions affect neighbours and the water, and how people are actively managing for better water quality. “There’s a lot of off-stream watering systems now. There’s more use of portable wind breaks that provide shelter to cattle in uplands areas and prevent one area from being overused. One important approach of the group was that the information presented was always looking at options and implications. Anyone could be involved: you could ease into it or dive into it. A huge part of the success is that there’s quite a bit of peer-to-peer activity, supporting each other in on-the-ground trials and efforts.”



*A demonstration off-site livestock watering system managed by Rocky Riparian Group, now Clear Water Landcare. For five years, this solar-powered system was loaned out to help people discover the technology’s potential.*

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In 2010, Rocky Riparian Group changed its name to Clear Water Landcare. The Landcare name and concept is adopted from very successful groups in Australia that work on a broad spectrum of land care issues with the whole community of rural and urban residents that impact the land. As Clear Water Landcare, the group has sponsored more demonstrations to involve the acreage owner, such as groundwater well care. For years, Rocky Riparian Group’s successful annual spring fair held in Caroline was called “Cows and Creeks, the Best for Both.” In 2010, the event name changed to “Cows, Creeks and Communities” to signal that everyone in the community plays a

role in healthy watersheds, not just those alongside the creeks.

In 2011 Clear Water Landcare elected its first volunteer Board and launched an autumn celebration day to share stories of success from around the region. In 2012 it will be increasing the frequency and breadth of newsletters and meetings. Glenn Mainland says: “We’re still feeling our way. We’ll continue our emphasis on creeks and our groundwater well care, possibly do more water sampling, and look at other ways to stay active and on the ground in the headwaters.”

Gary Lewis, with Clearwater County’s Agricultural Services department, first got involved with the group in 2004. He continues to provide support to Clear Water

Landcare’s activities – his title, which is Landcare Coordinator, underlines the county’s ongoing commitment. For him, the key to success has been working alongside people and building good relationships. “We will continue to emphasize relationships, celebrate success, and let the men and women of the community tell their story of what they’re doing and why.” Board member Rick Anderson looks to the future in this way: “We’ll go beyond the creekside focus to the whole land base and whole community. So there will be more understanding of a whole-watershed approach to think and plan, with water the end impact. It

will be important to keep our grass roots focus and the opportunities for all of us to participate.”

There are many good local watershed initiatives around the province. Clear Water Landcare is to be congratulated for real progress in making healthy headwaters a community “owned” issue, and thus benefitting so many downstream water users. If you are interested in finding out more about them, Clear Water Landcare’s annual fair “Cows, Creeks and Communities” will be held April 26, 2012 in Caroline. Their autumn “Celebrating our Success” event will be in Rocky Mountain House on November 15, 2012. ▲