

# A VALENTINE'S DAY CALL FOR ACTION

BY SID MARTY

At a Valentine's Day rally against the clear-cut logging in the Castle Mountains of Alberta, I asked the crowd of 150, assembled at the premier's Calgary office, "Do you realize it's against the law for me to stand on this publicly owned land and speak to you today?" I explained how, as a reward for trying to stop the destruction of the Castle Special Place, an executive director with Alberta's oxymoronic Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) ministry had issued a bunch of us, mostly old-timers, with an order to stay off all public land in this province. In 1600 B.C., Emperor Wu of China said: "To protect your rivers, protect your mountains" but that maxim is too avant-garde for the government of Alberta. "If you try to protect Alberta's mountains," I continued, "they will arrest you and forbid you from setting foot upon them. Well, I'm standing on public land. So if you are a law-abiding citizen, do your duty. Call the cops and have me arrested."

Although three of Calgary's finest were standing near, they declined to take us up on the offer.

On January 24, four "obstructors" as SRD styles us—Tim Grier, Dianne Calder, Gordon Petersen and yours truly faced off with an idling bulldozer and feller buncher in the forest reserve near Beaver Mines, for a moment of protest Zen. We stared back at the operators, thinking about the events that had brought us to this point, after three weeks of picketing the site. The dude in the tracked fellerbuncher exercised the machine's giant metal jaws, clacking them open and shut with a noise like a sprung bear trap.

We knew the area had been identified as a special place by the Alberta Government in 1998 as part of a "network of protected areas" as "a major milestone in the preservation of Alberta's natural heritage for future generations." We knew the area is designated "critical wildlife" habitat, yet is part of a mortality sink for grizzly

bears traveling up from Montana, where they are classified as an endangered species. In Alberta, grizzlies are listed as "threatened" but Alberta is where Montana bears come to die. We knew there had been no survey to identify bear dens in the cut block, contrary to SRD's own mandate. We knew that 80 percent of the local population opposed the logging, and we knew that a group of citizens were talking to the Premier that very day in a last ditch effort to get a reprieve for the Castle headwaters. In fact, a group of local people, ourselves included, had been working for years to get the area protected as a wild land park. They had the blessing of a minister of tourism for the project. Eighty thousand people (and counting) had called the premier's office to try and stop the clear cut logging of the Castle, which provides a third of the water input to the Oldman River drainage and the cities of the plains. Surely the government would not allow SRD to clear



*"Radicals" disguise themselves as rather ordinary-looking, middle-aged citizens during this January protest rally in the Castle.*

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cut this vital watershed, when it was so obviously at odds with the Progressive Conservative cabinet's stated position on the Castle? But we also knew that SRD cared little about any of this. We knew that SRD was determined to log half of the 52 square kilometre license including old growth in these woods and turn whatever was not useable as lumber – 40 percent – into garden mulch and fence posts. You see, the more you damage an area, the less likely it is going to be set aside for a park, and the more likely SRD will maintain control of this piece of its turf.

All the above citizens, of course, were not there at that moment. We were the point of the spear. I asked the folks at the rally "What would you have done? Would you have stepped aside, let all those folks down and let the destruction begin? Or would you have fought for what is right, for what is sustainable, for what is best for the people of Alberta, for the wildlife and the watershed?" The shouts of approval sounded a bit tentative, I must admit. Nobody wants to tangle with the legal system.

SRD may have a legal right to clear-cut, but I would argue they no longer enjoy the social license that goes with it. It's 2012, not 1912 and we cannot support a forestry department that will not give equal weight to all that the forest offers us, in terms of recreation, watershed protection and wildlife habitat. Do we really have to quantify water production in the forest, while water levels shrink in our major rivers? High quality raw water is beyond price, of course. But what about its value for industrial applications and agriculture? If the trees are worth one dollar each to the government in stumpage, (say a quarter-million dollars), I want to know what the forest is worth in terms of enhanced water retention, oxygen production, sequestration of carbon and generation of tourism dollars. Is it worth millions to our economy for these and other services it provides, or more likely, is that measured in billions? You would think that the free market geniuses that run this province would at least figure out that trees are worth more to us alive than they are as garden mulch. These are questions we, as activists, will have to answer with hard facts and figures, since SRD is not going to do the studies for us.

And there is another thing we have to do in the future. The people of this province,



**Winner: High School Category Untitled by Jessalyn Rohs and Rebecca Frederick (Henry Wise Wood High School)**

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if they need air to breathe and water to drink, are going to have to recognize that a handful of people, many of them grandmas and grandpas, cannot do at their own expense and at their legal peril what battalions of politicians and bureaucrats are paid very well to do every day, which is protect the environment of Alberta and ensure that projects on our public lands are truly sustainable. We have to turn out at these types of protest actions not by the dozens, but by the thousands, until the current Nexus of Nitwits finally

gets the message that talk-talk-talk while you continue to drill, blast, and clear-cut will no longer fool the majority. Alberta is a spacious and lofty land that deserves the very best from us. It's about time we matched its natural grandeur with some newer and grander ideas. ▲

- Poet and author Sid Marty is a fourth generation Albertan. In 2008, he won the Grant MacEwan Literary Arts Award for his career contributions to the literature of Alberta.