

IN PRAISE OF SECOND CAREERS: Alison Dinwoodie, Wilderness Defender

BY IAN URQUHART

When Alison was scrambling in the Scottish Highlands on weekends as a young member of the University of Glasgow climbing club the idea of becoming a persistent, thoughtful, defender of wild spaces in Alberta, like the books she had put temporarily aside, was far from her mind. So too was any thought of needing to sign waivers before you joined your mates on excursions into the highlands. Alison's first group climbing experiences were the stuff of which lifelong friendships were made. "The friends that I made on the hills there are friends that have stayed for my life," she says. "When you survive some really not very pleasant conditions and various adventures you get to know these people very well and... I try to keep up with some of them."

Glasgow was where Alison earned her Honors degree in biochemistry. After graduation she began her first career as a clinical biochemist. She accepted a position at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary where she took on another challenge – pursuing a PhD in biochemistry. Her specialty was in working with kidney disease patients.

In 1968 she joined Western Infirmary, a teaching hospital in the west end of Glasgow. She was appointed the Principal Biochemist there. For the next four years she worked on subjects such as "alkaline phosphatase substrate specificity and the separation of alkaline phosphatase isoenzymes on polyacrylamide gels." I didn't ask her what that important work really means to the likes of me.

In 1972, Dr. Keith Walker, a former colleague at Western Infirmary, called a feverish Alison (she was suffering from German measles) early one morning to ask her if she wanted to come to Canada. "I thought I was dreaming," is how Alison recalls that moment. She had been to Saskatoon on a sabbatical in 1965 and I think she viewed the chance to come to Canada as the career equivalent of her hikes in the highlands. She'd come here for a few years and then go back to Great Britain. Fifty years later...she's



Alison at Jarvis Lake in William A. Switzer Provincial Park

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still here. Dr. Dinwoodie left Scotland to pursue her medical biochemistry career in Edmonton that year. Dr. Walker had been appointed as the Head of the Division of Biochemistry in the Department of Laboratory Medicine in the University of Alberta Hospital.

When Alison wasn't practicing her profession at the U of A hospital she spent time discovering Alberta's waterways and mountains. In Scotland she had been an avid sea canoeist. The west coast of Scotland provided a fabulous setting for that sport. Here she joined Edmonton's Northwest Voyageurs canoe club and joined fellow paddlers on many memorable trips on most of Alberta's major rivers. "I always looked for these wild sections," she remembers, "and I managed to get to a lot of them before they became very popular. I think back now and I'm so glad that I did it then."

Her adventures with the Voyageurs were important formative ones in Alison's life. They helped forge her environmental consciousness for she came to believe that these special places wouldn't necessarily be there forever and that we needed to take more interest in how we treat them.

At least as formative were Alison's early encounters with the Rockies. Here, the Edmonton section of the Alpine Club of Canada was her vehicle. It also was the institution through which, in the 1980s,

Alison began to pursue her stewardship concerns in the mountains. The section had a small environmental committee and became involved in the early efforts to establish the Cardinal Divide area (south of Hinton and just east of Jasper National Park) as a candidate natural area. Soon after Alison and other members of the Edmonton section found themselves in the thick of Eastern Slope access management plans and rumours that a gigantic open-pit coal mine, Cheviot, would be proposed by Cardinal River Coals.

Post-1994: Alison's Second Career Takes Off

The campaign against the Cheviot coal mine figures prominently in the second career Alison plunged into after she retired from the University in 1994. As stewards of the Cardinal River Divide area the Alpine Club received intervenor status in the Cheviot hearings. Alison chuckles to note that the Cheviot campaign "became a bit of a full-time job for two or three years."

Alison's second career as a wilderness defender also is distinguished by her role as a founding member of the SAPAA (Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association). Why, I wondered, if Alison was involved in the Alpine Club would she join others in founding another somewhat similar organization? Alison's response that it wasn't a deliberate



Alison at the 2012 Martha Kostuch Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture where she received a Wilderness Defenders Award

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decision suggests that there wasn't one factor behind the decision. Instead, several factors nudged her towards the idea of the Stewards Association.

She wanted to focus more intensely on the conservation agenda than some of her fellow members of the Alpine Club. SAPAA gave her such a vehicle. Provincial parks officials also were very encouraging when it came to establishing non-governmental stewards for natural areas. The Association became an important conduit for information between Stewards and parks officials. But, when the Klein cuts were taking more and more muscle out of the Parks division, the Stewards were essentially left to fend for themselves. Alison is justifiably proud of what this volunteer association has accomplished over the years. They played an important role, for example, in opposing one of the government's more misguided initiatives – the Natural Heritage Act.

That the government's decision to create distance between itself and the Stewards should be seen as ideological as well as financial is suggested by the situation today. The government, in Alison's view, is not willing to appoint stewards for natural areas where there's likely to be controversy. The answer I received when I asked Parks for information about the Stewards program supports Alison's view. I asked why the Stewards list hadn't been updated since 2009 and what progress was being made on developing a Steward site priority list. I was told that the department was focusing on supporting existing Steward activities. Four days after that answer the

2009 list was deleted from the website as was any mention of "developing a project and site priority list."

Today Alison's second career has gone full circle. She's focused once again on Cheviot; her focus this time is on reclamation. Along with the Alberta Native Plant Council, Alison continues to serve as a Steward for the Cardinal Divide area. In her typically modest way she says that she's "just" playing a watchdog role with respect to Cheviot. With the support of the Native Plant Council Alison is pushing Teck Corporation, the current owner of the Cheviot property, to reclaim the Prospect and Cheviot pits in a way that brings native plant species back to the area. They want the company to avoid creating the "sheep farm" that was the product of reclaiming the Luscar and Gregg mines.

Alison isn't confident that the multinational Teck is going to care much about how the sites of the first two pits are reclaimed. She's also concerned that the current approach to recreational access is going to threaten the prospects

for restoring at least some of what the mines have stripped away. Today everyone – hikers, horses, bikers, and... OHVs – is welcome on the west side of Grave Flats road. If OHVs gain access to the lands slated to be reclaimed in approximately three years time on the west side of the road this would seriously threaten the long term viability of the Wildhorse Wildland Park. Alison would like to see Grave Flats road become the boundary between motorized and non-motorized access areas: OHVs to the east, non-motorized access to the west.

Recently Alison has usually been the only stewardship voice heard in discussions about the future of the Cheviot lands. Even the ablest of Alberta's wilderness defenders, people such as Alison, need help if their conservation concerns are to be taken seriously. If you would like to get involved in trying to ensure a healthy future for the lands in and around Whitehorse Wildland Park I know Alison would like to hear from you at adinwoodie@shaw.ca



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