

Lorne Fitch: An Extraordinary Advocate for Alberta's Wild Spaces

BY LINDSEY WALLIS



Enjoying the view from his and Cheryl's land near Pincher Creek.
PHOTO: © L. WALLIS

One runs certain risks when having a conversation with AWA's 2012 Wilderness Defender, Lorne Fitch. You will definitely be entertained. You will probably learn something you didn't know. And you may end up laughing out loud – possibly so hard that there are tears streaming down your face and your belly hurts.

Lorne brings his extensive and expansive knowledge, as well as his wonderful sense of humour, to every subject he tackles, whether he is drawing parallels between the dearth of his mother-in-law's strawberry jam in his larder and the economic crisis ("oh Lord give me another boom..."); comparing the lessons learned from a pie-pilfering porcupine to the attitude of the Alberta government ("gluttony is its own reward"); or expounding on Pakistani toilet paper (it's John Wayne t.p. – rough and tough and don't take crap from no one).

It's no accident that Lorne is such a fantastic communicator. He has spent years honing his skills and Alberta's

wild places have reaped the rewards. Whether he is working with ranchers and landowners through the Cows and Fish program, talking to stakeholders about land-use issues or mentoring young professionals, Lorne constantly strives to increase ecological literacy and awareness in Alberta.

"The woods were my Ritalin. Nature calmed me, focused me, and yet excited my senses." Richard Louv

Growing up on a farm near Red Deer, Lorne was lucky to be able to commune with the Alberta wilderness on a regular basis, whether it was through hunting, fishing or playing in the miles of pristine aspen parkland near their house. "I had a rich opportunity to grow up at a time in Central Alberta when there was still wild left," he says. "It was a wonderful place because the wild was all around me."

An interest in hunting and fishing led Lorne to join the local fish and game club. He met one of his early mentors when Elmer Kure spoke about Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* at a Fish and

Game Club meeting. Lorne describes Elmer as a very articulate man who, in part, inspired Lorne to pursue a career in conservation. Now, a mentor himself, he thinks of that moment often. "You never know where and when the spark might happen to motivate people to become interested in the world around them," he says.

"If evolution had a purpose in equipping us with a neck, it was surely for us to stick it out." Arthur Koestler

In 1971, while a student at the University of Calgary, Lorne took a summer position in the Alberta government's Fish and Wildlife department. It turned out to be "nearly a life sentence," as after a few years of contract positions he would go on to work full-time with them in Lethbridge in 1976 and stay until his retirement in 2006. He spent his first ten years as a fisheries researcher and inventory biologist. In his job, Lorne had the opportunity to literally walk from the headwaters to the mouths of most of the

streams of the Eastern Slopes. “It gave me a real appreciation for the landscape, landscape processes and land use issues,” he says. In his early career he says he made the mistake of thinking that “if we counted better and counted more the world would be a better place.”

Eventually, Lorne moved into the Habitat branch of Fish and Wildlife, before it was axed by the government in the early 1990s. One of his success stories from this period is Antelope Creek Ranch – a demonstration ranch in mixed grass prairie near Brooks that is still operating. The project was certainly a learning experience. “It’s one thing to tell people how the land should be managed, another to be actively engaged in its management,” Lorne says. But, during the droughts of the 1980s, he and his team managed to bring the ranch, where a pintail couldn’t find enough vegetation to hide her eggs, back to a productive state for both wildlife and livestock. That ranch and Cows and Fish are two initiatives Lorne feels have met the tests of conservation – continuity and persistence.

Lorne met his wife and fellow Wilderness Defender Cheryl Bradley in 1988 at an Alberta Irrigation Projects Association annual meeting. A botanist, Cheryl’s cautious optimism and righteous indignation complements and balances Lorne’s tenacity and occasional cynicism.

“Resist much, obey little” Walt Whitman

Lorne first became involved with AWA while working on integrated land use management plans, interacting with people like Dianne Pachal and Vivian Pharis. Not that his bosses in the government were thrilled – back in those days (and today perhaps more so) fraternizing with “radical” environmentalists like those at AWA was frowned upon. “For many years my dealings with AWA were clandestine,” he says. “It seemed to me AWA was an ally not an adversary. What I saw in AWA was an organization that had the same philosophy and same desire for outcomes that I did.”

Lorne also butted heads with his bosses on other issues – more and more of them as resource development in Alberta ramped up in the late 1980s. “It dawned on me after a while that even though I thought Fish and Wildlife was the place for people with an ecological conscience,



Lorne and Chip Weber, Forest Supervisor of the Flathead National Forest in Montana, share light-hearted conversation during the 2012 Waterton-Glacier Superintendent’s Hike.

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it is still an arm of government,” he says. “One could see the conflict growing year by year – the land-use pressures and our fleeting attempt to manage those impacts to protect fish and wildlife and habitat. Our goals (at Fish and Wildlife) were not matched very well with the Alberta government’s goals and that inevitably brings you into conflict.”

Some government initiatives, such as the Oldman Dam and the Whaleback, Lorne felt were “just wrong” and he came out strongly against them. “I found out there were a lot of ways they could punish you – especially when they realize they can’t fire you for doing your job,” he says. From not being invited to meetings, having out-of-province travel requests denied and subscriptions to professional journals cancelled, Lorne built up a lot of scar tissue over the years. When asked how he persevered his answer is: “A fair amount of bloody-mindedness helps.” His colleagues also provided him with enough inspiration to stay and, in true Lorne style, he says he found a perverse sense of pleasure in staying when his bosses wished he would just fade away.

The constraints on government staff haven’t eased since Lorne retired. If anything he thinks they have gotten worse, and the civil service has become more politicized and less transparent. “That doesn’t bode well for ethical, committed Fish and Wildlife staff who want to do the right thing,” he says. In

his Fish and Wildlife retirement speech, Lorne urged his younger co-workers to “wear your letters of reprimand as badges of honour.”

“Unless you can engage the minds, beliefs and the will of others to support your work: then even after you have done all that you can do your work will not live after you; it may not even outlive you.” Unattributed

In the early 1990s Lorne had an epiphany about how to accomplish his environmental goals. It was to work with landowners and communities to instill in them both a desire to see their landscapes healthy and the motivation to change. Part of this philosophy comes from the work of another of Lorne’s heroes, Aldo Leopold, whose writings on land stewardship and wilderness ethics have long been Lorne’s “philosophical touchstone – a place to reaffirm (his) obligations.” His copy of Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* is dog-eared and tattered by many readings.

In pursuit of landowner awareness and ecological literacy, Lorne and co-worker Barry Adams founded Cows and Fish in 1991. The program works with communities and ranchers to foster an understanding of how changes in management of riparian areas can help keep these areas healthy for ranchers, agricultural producers, communities and wildlife. Lorne believes you only have



Lorne's passion for bull trout is familiar to readers of the Advocate.

PHOTO: © L. FITCH

so many bullets in your career and one must choose carefully when using them. The most effective bullets for him were the ones stamped awareness, he says. "It's only with an ecologically literate constituency that we will see resolution to any of the issues we currently face with biodiversity and landscape integrity."

Reviews of the Cows and Fish program have shown that this way of engaging and interacting with people has a tangible legacy because it builds a stewardship ethic. "If you build a foundation of stewardship starting with awareness and working at a community level, that seems to have a much greater persistence than any sort of subsidy," Lorne says.

***"Always do the right thing. It will gratify some folks and astonish the rest."* Mark Twain**

Ensuring a future for wild places in Alberta takes all of us, according to Lorne. "We have to step up to the plate," he says. "As citizens we need to take a role because we can't wait for governments to do it; it's pointless waiting for corporations to do it, because they never will; and the conservation groups are too underfunded and under-resourced." One of the things he would

like to see change is the profusion of nature deficit disorder, not just in children, but in adults. "We have a very poor level of ecological literacy," he says. "People don't have an appreciation of the impacts they're having on their own watershed."

He also hopes the Alberta government will begin to acknowledge cumulative impacts. "Their additive quality will eat us up if we don't pay attention to them," Lorne says. "Without the use of cumulative effects tools we get into a constantly sliding benchmark where we think that we have a full pie worth of resources available to us but the reality is it is only a slice and that slice is getting thinner."

***"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."* Rachel Carson**

Though Lorne "retired" in 2006 he has been far from idle. He continues to keep close ties with the Cows and Fish program, working part time there as well as sitting on the boards of five conservation organizations. He also writes, mentors natural resource professionals, teaches a series of

workshops on communications skills, and spends time on Cheryl's and his land near Pincher Creek (mostly pulling thistles). "I hope that what I've done and continue to do will ensure that my grand nephew and grand niece and other children don't curse me for my lack of involvement, commitment and progress," he says.

The wild spaces in Alberta are certainly richer because of the work Lorne has done, and continues to do on their behalf. He says: "I have had the rich opportunity to stand on the shoulders of giants," referring to his predecessors and co-workers such as Elmer Kure, Carl Hunt, Duane Radford and many more. And we, as future Wilderness Defenders and lovers of wild places, are truly blessed to be able to stand on the wide, sturdy shoulders of Lorne Fitch.

***"To leave your mark you need talent, a unique vision and stubbornness."* Terrance Trout D'Arcy** 🍓

A freelance writer and photographer, Lindsey loves tramping through Alberta's wild spaces, whether on foot, horseback or skis.