

Gordon Petersen:

Voice for the Castle River Wildland

By Vivian Pharis, AWA Board Member



Gord's story is the archetype of environmentalist/conservation stories in Alberta. Years, even decades of hope, long effort, personal sacrifice, deep commitment to the scraps of natural systems that remain after 60 years of relentless resource extraction, clearcutting, urban and transportation sprawl, breaking the sod and cancerous OHV growth – those efforts always thwarted because of the general belief that we can grow and extract forever without consequence.

Gordon Petersen is an Alberta boy who lived away for a while and on his return chose the Pincher Creek area as his roost. Not wanting the city life, Gord and his wife Cathy, a medical doctor, fell under the spell of the alluring southwest Alberta landscape. Undoubtedly Gord's mother influenced their choice of a home too, as she had grown up near Pincher Creek and her tales of colourful horse packing trips into the rugged Castle and Oldman River drainages are part of Gord's memory.



Gord Petersen in the mountains he has defended so well.

Gord's mother had worked for the famous area outfitter Bert Riggall as a summer packer, often packing alongside a young Andy Russell. From his roost and background, Gord became a consistently strong voice arguing for protection of the Castle River region.

Born in Edmonton, raised in Calgary, Gord first studied electronics at SAIT (Southern Alberta Institute of Technology) before taking a degree in electrical engineering at the University of Calgary. His subsequent career with Telus and the oil and gas industry left him feeling unfulfilled and he returned to university in the 1980s to study in the Faculty of Environmental design. His Master's Degree project looked at using satellite remote sensing technology to map ground cover in the winter range of barren-ground caribou. This work brought Gord closer to his childhood fascination with nature. As a young boy scout at Camp Gardner near Bragg Creek, Gord recalls an influential counsellor, Tom Beck, who also happens to be a founding member of the Alberta Wilderness Association. Perhaps an early conservation seed was set.

It was when he and his wife decided to try life in Newfoundland that Gord seriously took up wildlife and landscape photography, a hobby that has evolved into more of a career. For three of the five years they spent on Newfoundland's rocky shores, they lived on remote Fogo Island where Cathy administered to community health needs. By choice and by necessity they lived as the locals did, close to the land, often enjoying feeds of fish, wild berries, and meat from local hunters. Island life depended on winter ice, as all mainland contact was by ferry, which sometimes needed the assistance of an ice breaker. There were periods

of isolation although not like in the past when there were no phones, TV, radio or helicopters for emergencies. The tides and currents constantly provided new interests including seals and the occasional polar bear that drifted in on passing icebergs.

Eventually family beckoned Gord and Cathy back to Alberta and they cast about for a place that felt like home, settling on the small, beautifully situated hamlet of Beaver Mines west of Pincher Creek. Cathy took up a Pincher Creek practice and Gord immersed himself in the bounty of photographic riches all around him. Today Gord sells photographs to publications such as *Canadian Geographic*, *Alberta Views*, and *National Geographic*. His wanderings soon revealed the extent of environmental riches the area had to offer, and their tenuous circumstances. He was soon a defender of these riches.

Starting with the 1993 Natural Resources Conservation Board (NRCB) hearing into the proposal to expand the West Castle ski development, including major condominium developments, Gord became a voice for Castle River wilderness by joining those who formed the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC) some 25 years ago. This group has stood the test of time and endured countless disappointments from successive Progressive Conservative provincial governments that consistently failed to ensure any significant future for Castle River landscapes. Those landscapes were once seen as so ecologically and aesthetically valuable as to be included in Waterton Lakes National Park.

Gord actually sees the 1993 NRCB decision as favourable, in that it recommended a compromise position – it saw ski hill expansion to

be in the public good, but only if the surrounding mountain and foothill landscapes were protected as a park. Following the decision, government, through an Order in Council, allowed ski hill expansion to begin simultaneously with plans for a park. There was excitement all around, things were unfolding as they should. But this didn't last for long. Secretly, three politically well-connected locals who didn't want a park met with Ty Lund, that most Machiavellian of Alberta's long string of pro-development appointments to the Environment Ministry. Lund reversed the entire NRCB decision; he halted the ski resort expansion and the park.

The ski resort was sold and the new developer was able to proceed with piecemeal expansions so as to avoid environmental impact assessment scrutiny or any official reviews. West Castle Development has undergone continuous expansion, mainly as a housing complex, and although the east side of the river is out of bounds as a special wildlife area, it remains the obvious place for further resort sprawl.

The dogged little group held fast to its dream of a park through the 1990s and into the new century. Since the NRCB hearing the CCWC has invested time and energy in several Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) hearings, an Environmental Appeal Board hearing, and actions at the Court of Queen's Bench and the Alberta Court of Appeal. When a flood washed out the road up Lynx Creek, the group attempted to secure this area as roadless wilderness by using the courts to try to enforce the federal *Fisheries Act* and stopping fish-damaging road repairs. The province quickly repaired the road, negating the case. Meanwhile, the growth in OHV numbers and their damage to foothills and mountain landscapes became increasingly evident, with no legal way to curtail it.

Under the Special Places 2000 program, the much-supported Castle River Wilderness was declared a Special Place. A local implementing committee was appointed and again, hopes were raised. The Castle had once again met all official requirements for protection and was amongst the chosen few. However, actual designation required a revision to the area's 1984 Integrated Resource Plan, something that

proved to be unachievable in that political era.

Next came several years of effort into the C5 Management Plan that was supposed to have been a general land planning exercise that incorporated timber cutting, with a range of other values recognized, but ended up being nothing more than a logging plan. Logging began under this plan in 2012 and so did a plucky protest by local citizens – the CCWC offering legal counsel in the wake of the protest, and a still-active court challenge. A mid-winter camp-out protest on a proposed logging site had gone on for three weeks until the Alberta Government took out an injunction on the site and arrested several people including local resident Mike Judd and Calgary professor Richard Collier.

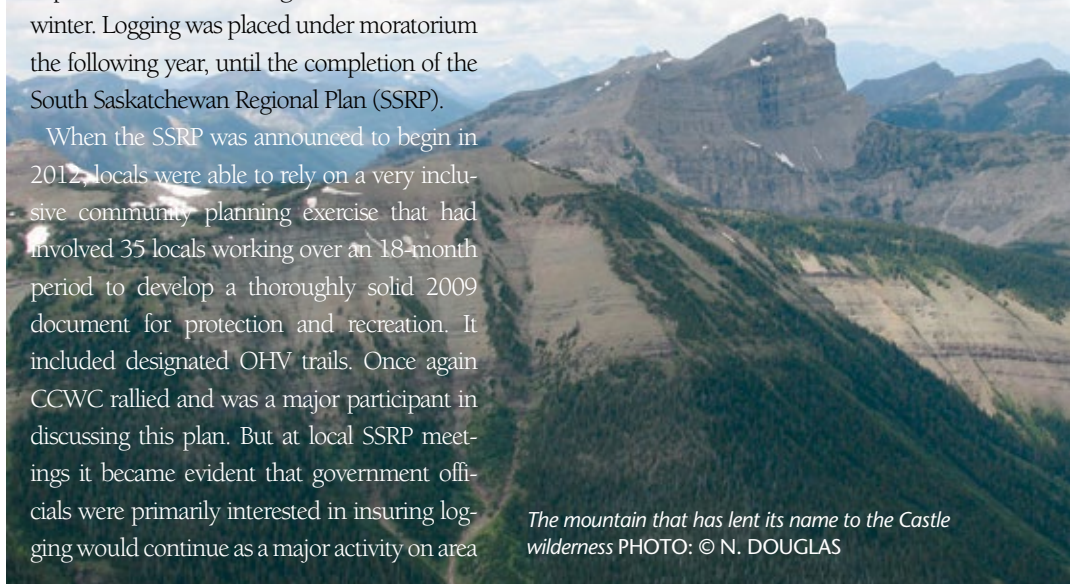
Gord participated throughout that winter of protest, as a liaison person amongst police, Spray Lakes Sawmills, media, and protesters. He describes the day of the arrest as quintessentially Canadian with the arresting constables having allowed prior time to talk to lawyers and, on the appointed day of arrest, arriving with coffee and donuts for all. An 8:00 am deadline had been set for those to step forward who were willing to be arrested. It was a serious but calm, relaxed approach and soon those not arrested, moved about two kilometres down the road to continue protesting, while those arrested disappeared in the paddy wagon. (This event will be elaborated on, November 20, 2015, when Sid Marty presents the AWA's annual Martha Kostuch lecture in Calgary.) Logging began immediately and periodic protests occurred throughout the rest of the winter. Logging was placed under moratorium the following year, until the completion of the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP).

When the SSRP was announced to begin in 2012, locals were able to rely on a very inclusive community planning exercise that had involved 35 locals working over an 18-month period to develop a thoroughly solid 2009 document for protection and recreation. It included designated OHV trails. Once again CCWC rallied and was a major participant in discussing this plan. But at local SSRP meetings it became evident that government officials were primarily interested in insuring logging would continue as a major activity on area

lands. Two draft SSRPs were brought forward for public discussion prior to the final document. Successively, each plan had fewer conservation commitments than the previous one, with the final one being a major disappointment – it committed to protect only the rock and ice portions of the Castle River drainage.

Now, with more than 20 years of effort into the Castle region, Gord's current best hope lies with the new Alberta Government and the NDP's platform promise to finally fully protect the Castle region. In the wake of the government's September decision to protect the Castle Gord should be expected to see this area is seriously managed for conservation. His interests have been stretched by his experiences though, and he now envisions new, more environmentally sound ways of doing forestry along the Eastern Slopes, although he personally feels that forests south of the Bow River are far more valuable for wildlife, water, and wilderness than timber production, and should be left intact for these values. Gord is also buoyed by what he sees as a much more cooperative approach to land issues, by conservation and landholder groups and broader sectors of community involvement. But, he also remembers the world trophy rams that were part of his mother's Castle experiences and knows protection will have to include a huge recovery effort, one that CCWC is well positioned to participate in.

Please join AWA on November 20th when we present Gord with a Wilderness Defenders Award in recognition of his work on behalf of the Castle and a wild Alberta. ▲



The mountain that has lent its name to the Castle wilderness PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS