

# Taking Action for the Ghost



By Sharon MacDonald

*Once upon a time, a community came together to do what it could for the landscape it loved. We are the Ghost Valley community and this is our story.*

**T**he Ghost Valley is a critical watershed for Calgary's 1.6 million people, providing water to the over-allocated Bow River. Just 45 kilometres northwest of Calgary, the Ghost Valley includes lush wetlands, forested foothills and the Rocky mountains. Despite its beauty, all is not well in the Ghost Valley.

## And so it begins...

In spring 2014, the small Ghost Valley community was recovering from the flood.

A dozen homes were destroyed or severely damaged. Trucks hauling aggregate for a protective berm created 36 massive potholes on Highway 40. Residents felt unsafe and on edge. Rumours swirled. "I hear they're building a dry dam in the Ghost." "Did you know they're fracking 20 wells?" "Did you see the logging they did by Waiparous? Where are they going next?"

On March 19, 2014, 60 concerned citizens gathered at the community hall, joking that we could come home after work

to find the forest cut, a dry dam built, and fracking underway. In truth, residents were often the last to know about land use decisions. We were determined to change this, believing people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives.

The Ghost Valley is part of Spray Lake Sawmill's (SLS) Forest Management Agreement and adjacent quota areas. SLS's maps seemed to indicate that the South B9 Quota along Richards and Jamieson Roads in the Municipal District of Bighorn would be harvested over 20 years, something the community felt it could live with.

In April 2014, MD of Bighorn hosted a meeting regarding SLS's proposed log haul routes. Residents questioned why so many truckloads in a short timeframe. The answer: the harvest we thought would occur over twenty years had been compressed into three.

## Stop Ghost Clearcut

Shock ran through the community. Vast clearcuts approaching 285ha (700 acres) would open between legacy properties. Trucks would haul more than 5,300 loads of timber over narrow, winding residential roads. Clearcuts would alter wildlife habitat. Highly visible clearcuts and cutover trails would devastate the local tourism industry. The speed and scale of the proposed harvest would endanger water resources and reduce the flood mitigation capacity of this critical watershed above Calgary. And clearcut harvest would impact this Tradi-



Supporters of an ecologically-healthy Ghost River Valley gathered at the junctions of Hwy 40 and Hwy 1A. PHOTO: © M. GLASER

tional Land Use area for our Stoney Nakoda neighbours.

Spatial Harvest Sequence, an Alberta forest planning standard, exists to ensure that forest health, ecological services, and socioeconomic values of the surrounding community are preserved. Spatial Harvest Sequence refers to the way in which timber harvest is scheduled to take place in five-year quadrants over a 20-year period. To compress this harvest into three years was too much, too fast, for the community to accept. Nothing made sense until a government spokesperson revealed that favourable timber prices were a deciding factor.

Overnight a group of neighbours came together to contribute their skills in hydrology, geology, technical writing, graphic design, photography, environmental management, and knowledge of the landscape. The group chose the name Stop Ghost Clearcut to indicate opposition to clearcut forestry in this critical watershed. Stop Ghost Clearcut provides information and raises awareness through its website and Facebook page. The group also researches ways to advocate for this landscape. The Stop Ghost Clearcut team's value to the broader community is well recognized, even by those who find its name "too radical."

## Intentional community

Our community is made up of country residential dwellers who have chosen this landscape for a permanent home; ranchers and legacy owners whose families have stewarded the land for a century; and First Nations whose families have been sustained by this landscape for generations. We each possess a deep love for this land. We come and go, but the land remains.

Land and people are inextricably linked. We are neighbours on a shared landscape, and what we do on the landscape matters. "Land use planning" involves decisions about people and their way of life. Throughout history, land use decisions have caused conflict and suffering. Other communities affected by clearcut logging warned us that the stress of dealing with entrenched government and corporate



*In December we joined with elders from the Stoney Nakoda Nation in a future Spray Lakes "Sawmills" cutblock for a ceremony for the land and its creatures. PHOTO: © S. MACDONALD*

cultures can play havoc with one's physical and emotional health and can divide a community. From the start, we strategized how we would take care of each other on this journey by building community.

## The road ahead

At first, we hoped for a simple solution: Y2Y would help us; AWA would take up our cause; some resident could have quiet words with government or with mill managers. We soon realized we had to do this for ourselves. We had to shed passivity to see ourselves as actors, change makers, and way finders.

With clearcutting scheduled for November 2014, urgency propelled us. Once in motion, we grasped the scope of the problem and identified necessary tasks. Each action generated other possibilities. To use a Chinese metaphor, we were crossing the river by feeling for stones.

The Ghost Valley's reputation for strong opinions and strong emotions led some to doubt we could work together long enough to achieve anything. And yet from day one, we experienced surprising synergy. We constantly reminded ourselves of our identity and purpose: "Together we are the Ghost Valley community and we are trying

to be good neighbours to one another. We are simply asking industries that operate in the Ghost Valley to also be good neighbours, showing respect for people and for the land."

Community meetings became a tool for building trust and understanding. Sitting in a circle, we shared where we lived and why we cared. As legacy property owners shared, their impressive history and understanding of the landscape inspired newer arrivals. As the newer arrivals shared, their deep commitment to their new home gained the trust of legacy owners.

Soon community members were getting together between meetings to gather information, walk the land, and engage in projects they designed. Reported back to the original working group, this information was conveyed to the community, generating new activities and connections. Over time, new pockets in the community became aware of the clearcutting and joined in, contributing fresh ideas and fresh energy. Approximately 400 of the Valley's 500 residents indicated their support for the Ghost Valley community's actions.

Knowledge is power and the Ghost Valley community was steadily acquiring both. During most weeks more than 30 people



dedicated many hours gathering information, writing letters, taking pictures, making videos, managing social media, monitoring maps, walking cutblocks, spreading the word, and meeting with decision makers. This “just happened” as people stepped forward to offer what they could. Each of us had a unique contribution to make, ensuring our role as a valued member of the Ghost Valley community. Later we discovered that this method of social change is called a community-organizing approach.

## Milestones

Public pressure led the MD of Bighorn to postpone road access for a full year. We used the time to educate ourselves, raise awareness, build partnerships, and press our concerns on the government.

- **December 2014:** A press release re: trumpeter swans, species of special concern, led to a chain of events in which 150 directly-involved people (100 of them grade four students) secured buffers for Kangienos Lake, the swans’ nesting site.
- **January-October 2015:** With the help

of speakers Robert Sandford, Kevin Van Tighem, and Karsten Heuer, Calgarians and Cochranites became involved supporters.

- **May 2015:** Miraculously an NDP government was elected. We hoped timber harvest plans would be reconsidered.
- **September 2015:** Knowing Saddle Peak Trail Rides may not survive clearcut logging, Ghost Valley community members Dave and Jacquie Richards offered trail rides and roast beef dinner to neighbours. We gathered to enjoy this beautiful intact landscape one last time.
- **July-October 2015:** We advocated tirelessly with our new government and hosted a town hall with our new MLA Cam Westhead. We submitted our petition with the names of 1,363 Albertans calling for a reconsideration of timber harvest plans.

## Giving up the Ghost

On Tuesday, October 20, three of us met Minister of Forestry Oniel Carlier, urging him to reconsider timber harvests approved

by the previous PC government. The Minister seemed dismissive, telling us to take future concerns to Forestry staff.

Simultaneously in the Ghost Valley, outfitter Dave Richards and conservationist Kevin Van Tighem headed out to ride Lesueur Ridge. They were shocked to find the area being clearcut, the recreational trail up the ridge impassable. Kevin documented this experience in a Facebook post which went viral. Media broadcast the story throughout western Canada.

The Minister’s apparent lack of interest coupled with the clearcut harvest of the area’s most scenic viewpoint were huge blows to the community. On October 31, 75 Ghost Valley community members and supporters rallied against the government’s decision to give up the Ghost. One year earlier, we could not have imagined ourselves as activists. Now there seemed no other choice.

## More bad news

November 10, 2015 dealt the Ghost another blow. Under great pressure, the Council of MD of Bighorn offered SLS a Road Use

Agreement for Jamieson Road. Residents believe logging trucks on this narrow, winding residential road endanger public safety. Rallies on November 14 and 21 again saw people waving signs. Public pressure has impressed government and industry with the need to find another haul option. Residents remain hopeful that an eleventh hour deal with a private landowner might transpire, providing a safer situation for residents of Jamieson Road.

## Not afraid of the dark

As clearcutting begins, the Ghost Valley community is filled with sadness and anger. These troubling emotions come from our sense of connection to the land. We do not apologize for our passion or our grief. Grief is the price of love and there is nothing wrong with love.

One year ago, we wrote: “We go into this with our eyes open, knowing we are not likely to save that which we love. But that will not stop us from trying. We will look our children and our grandchildren in the eyes, and say, ‘We tried our very best.’” As Evelyn, a character in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, said: “The only real failure is the failure to try. And the measure of success is how we cope with disappointment... We came here, and we tried. All of us, in our different ways... We get up every morning, we do our best. Nothing else matters.”

We know what it is to pour ourselves into something when success is not guaranteed. Since we did not save the trees, what did we actually achieve? Most certainly, meetings with Forestry and with Spray Lake Sawmills would not have happened without the community's efforts. Public pressure has led to redesign of some cut blocks. We have mitigated harm along the road to headwaters conservation management.

Failing to get the government to order a pause in logging the Ghost while it considers new information (a Compartment Assessment) was a huge blow, but our fight for headwaters conservation management is just getting started. The Ghost Valley community has shown government and industry that doing things the same way they've



*Assessing the future...or the past of logging in the Ghost?*

always been done is no longer good enough. Today's citizens expect decision making to reflect the public's values. Citizens are finding their voice and co-creating their future together in a nonlinear process. The impacts of these shifts have not yet been fully felt. Anything is possible!

## We are not alone

While things have not worked out yet as we hoped, today we ended up knowing each other better and with the sense that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We proved that when the right people come together in constructive ways with good information, they find strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the community, working together to magnify their individual efforts a hundredfold. Our community will now be the medicine for disappointment, grief and anger.

We continue to care for one another. On Sunday, November 29, as the South B9 timber harvest began, we came together to grieve and to offer our support to one another. And on Friday, December 4, we gathered on the land with our Stoney Nakoda neighbours who offered ceremonial blessings for the creatures who have no voice. It was an

honour to stand beside our neighbours as they shared their traditions for making peace with what for many of us are heartbreaking circumstances.

We know that preserving this landscape depends upon a strong community, working together for the common good. As a caring community, as a community of people that care – for one another, for our shared landscape – we can find joy and purpose in uncertain times. We are not alone. We are grounded in the landscape and in each other. We are home.

Please visit [www.stopghostclearcut.com](http://www.stopghostclearcut.com) for more information. 🐾

*Sharon MacDonald, RSW, M.A. Counselling, moved to the Ghost Valley in 2009, recovering from cancer treatment and adjusting to the long-term effects of treatment. She believes this life-giving landscape and the compassion of its people enabled her to heal. She is grateful for the steadfast support and kindness of neighbours, making it possible for her to undertake this leadership role, a first for her since cancer.*