

Banned in Alberta and Other Tales from the Conservation Trenches:

Sid Marty's 2015 Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture

By Ian Urquhart

Brilliant, inspiring artists are one of the blessings found on Alberta's landscapes. It was AWA's privilege this past November to recognize Sid Marty, one of this province's musical and literary treasures, and Gordon Petersen with Wilderness Defenders awards. During the November 20th award ceremony Sid delivered the Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture to members and friends of AWA at Hillhurst Cottage School.

Sid's talk focused on the Castle, the area that has been much on our minds since the Minister of Environment and Parks promised to "fully protect" the area in September 2015. He took his audience back nearly three years to the winter of 2012. In a speech laced with wit and irony he reflected on his experience as one of eight protesters who raised their voices against government-sanctioned clear-cut logging in the Castle. These protesters had a special quality. Their specialness rested in how the state rewarded them for taking their protests against clear-cutting in the Castle to ground zero, the cut block where Spray Lakes Sawmills would start to mow down trees. Their protests were rewarded either with their arrest or with a medieval-like ban. Sid, Diana Calder, Tim Grier, and Gordon Petersen, as well as those notorious radicals "John Doe," "Jane Doe," and "Persons Unknown," were banned from setting foot on any public lands anywhere in Alberta unless they had received "authorization," whatever that term meant. Rick Collier, Mike Judd, Jim Palmer, and Reynold Reimer were arrested and taken to jail in Pincher Creek.

Inspiring

Sid's lecture was uplifting. Inspiration rested in his words about the actions of the protesters and the more than 150 people who joined them for a rally near the proposed logging site. My inner Howard Beale nodded approvingly in learning about the dedication and commitment of the protesters. Only people who care profoundly about nature, and are voiceless in conventional politics and natural resources decision-making, would go the extraordinary length of setting up a protest camp when the mercury dipped to -35. For more than three weeks they frustrated the timber beasts and their feller bunchers.

What I also find uplifting about the story is the fact the protesters, the "point of the spear" as Sid described them in the lecture, reflected what the majority of people in the Castle region wanted. The people behind

the "Stop the Castle Logging" campaign weren't trying to impose their will on their neighbours. Instead, they spoke out on behalf of their neighbours, of the silent majority in the area; seventy-seven percent of respondents to a 2011 Praxis Group public opinion survey opposed commercial logging in the Castle. That Premier Redford received thousands of emails and letters opposing commercial logging in this special place testified to the widespread public opposition in the region to the future for the foothills forests imagined by Spray Lakes Sawmills and provincial forestry officials.

In this respect the protests of 2012 may have sprung from a growing ecological literacy in the public. This too may be an encouraging aspect of the struggle to stop commercial logging in the Castle. The overwhelming majority opposed to commercial logging in the area likely already believe or



AWA President Richard Secord introduces Wilderness Defenders Award winner Sid Marty to deliver AWA's annual Martha Kostuch lecture PHOTO: © K. MIHALCHEON

are sympathetic to a new vision of forest management in Alberta. That vision would be one that includes the incalculable value of intact, healthy watersheds.

In this vein Marty suggested that, the government's legal right to let companies clear-cut forests aside, the public may be increasingly reluctant to give companies a "social license to operate." This phrase was coined in 1997 to describe the need for governments and companies to secure the consent of local residents for the exploitation resource companies carry out in and around their communities. "You cannot support a

forestry department," he said, "that will not give you the right to all that the forest offers us in terms of recreation, watershed protection, and wildlife habitat."

Finally, inspiration may be found in Sid's observation that, after hundreds of people protested in the bitter cold and thousands said commercial logging shouldn't have a home in the Castle, a new government listened to them. Commercial logging is banned in the Castle parks. This is the one, concrete decision regarding the Castle the provincial government has so far made that merits some applause.

Troubling

Some of what Sid Marty said in the 2015 Martha Kostuch lecture also was troubling to my ears. The Castle was described above as a "special place." Nearly a generation ago now, in 1998, the Alberta government identified the Castle as such. The Castle was a special place that should be included in a "network of protected areas," that should be "a major milestone in the preservation of Alberta's natural heritage for future generations." We knew then that the area was "critical wildlife habitat" for grizzly bears and that we were managing those lands in



Gordon Petersen, dedicated defender of the Castle Wilderness, received the second Wilderness Defenders Award last fall. PHOTO: © K. MIHALCHEON

a way that turned upside down the idea of what the term should demand. It was a mortality sink, terminal wildlife habitat, for grizzlies. It was a place where, as Sid said, “Montana bears come to die.”

What’s troubling here are the extremes reasonable people had to go to in order to be heard and to have government partial-

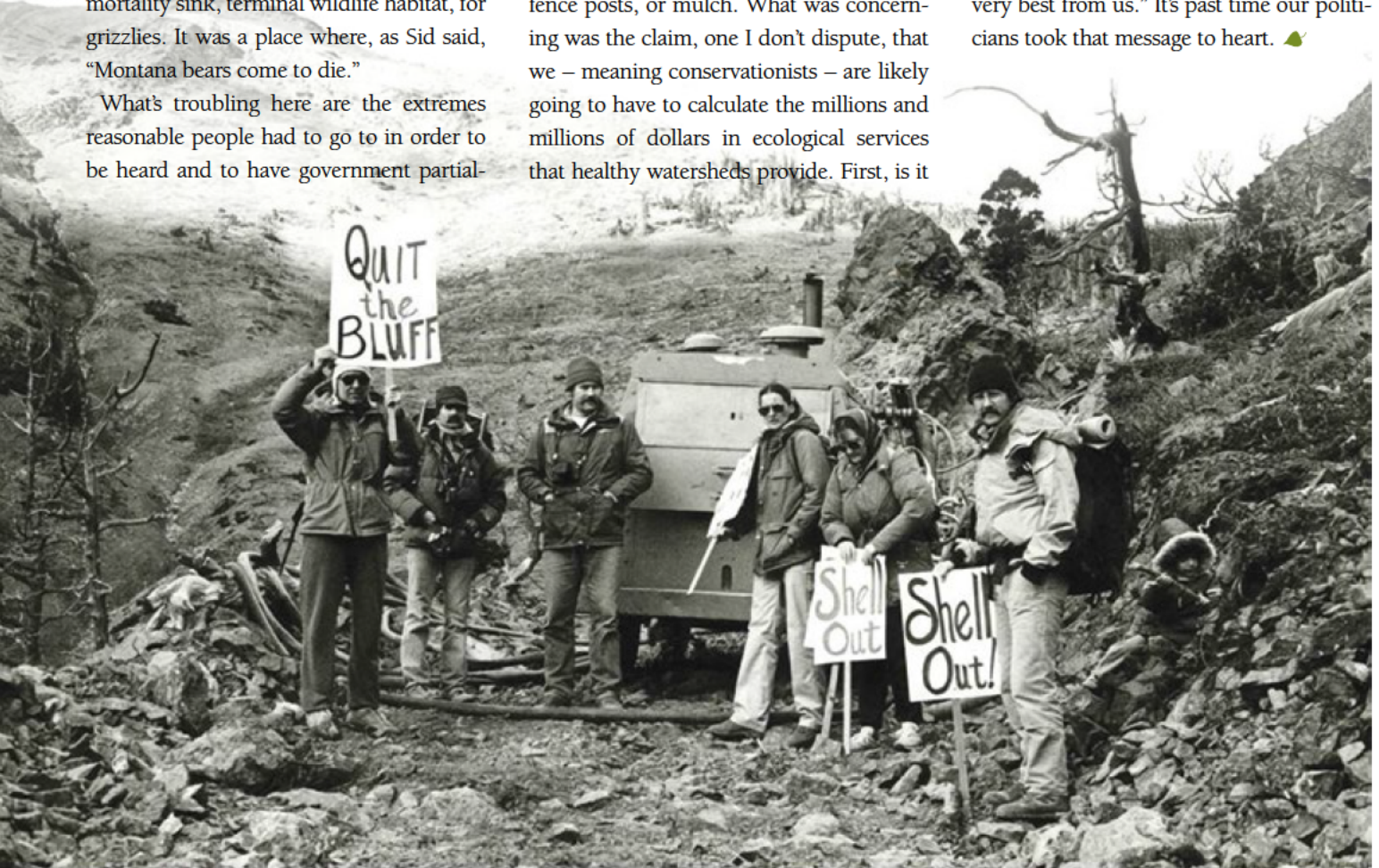
ly acknowledge what everyone knew – the Castle has a special character demanding protection.

It also was very disappointing to hear about the wall of silence that greeted a letter to the Premier, with copies to all members of the legislature. The letter protested the draconian edict ordering Albertans who opposed logging the Castle to stay off all Alberta public lands indefinitely. The only crack in that wall came from Laurie Blake-man, the then-Liberal MLA for Edmonton Centre. She was the only MLA from Alberta’s 83-member legislature who had the courtesy to respond to the letter. No one else from either the governing or the opposition parties could be bothered.

My ears also were troubled by some of what Sid had to say about the value of watersheds. They didn’t burn to hear that our watershed forests have much more value than what their fibre will fetch as lumber, fence posts, or mulch. What was concerning was the claim, one I don’t dispute, that we – meaning conservationists – are likely going to have to calculate the millions and millions of dollars in ecological services that healthy watersheds provide. First, is it

really sane to demand putting a dollar value on these services? Second, if you insist on producing price tags, shouldn’t it be the job of government, as the steward of our forests to produce those numbers? Shouldn’t government calculate and compare the value of intact watersheds versus the dollars generated by cutting them down?

These questions fit well with what Sid recommended we tell the future as he brought his remarks to a close. If this and future generations of Albertans need air to breathe and water to drink, then it’s certainly time to stop relying so much on people like those who protested logging in the Castle to try to ensure that government provides those public goods. Politicians of all political parties need to hear that we won’t send them back to Edmonton if they continue to do little more than talk about their devotion to sustainability. “Alberta,” he said, “is a special and lofty land that deserves the very best from us.” It’s past time our politicians took that message to heart. ▲



Protesters Opposed to Shell’s Prairie Bluff Gas Project in 1987. One of your editor’s first encounters with Sid Marty’s writing and his passion for defending Alberta’s landscapes came through the essay “Headlights at the Grizzly’s Den.” Part of that essay discusses the protests at Prairie Bluff. Your editor would like to imagine this photo might be of a scene described therein. PHOTO: © AWA