

Helene Walsh:

2016 AWA Wilderness Defender Award Recipient



By Andrea Johancsik, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

There once was a hidden Alberta forest. Its massive trees and moist, deep green understory and moss gave it a feeling like the forest in *Avatar*. It was an exceptional place, a remote area called the Chinchaga was northwest of Peace River, on Halverson Ridge. It was a forest coveted by Goliath, in the form of the Alberta Forest Service and forest industry, who only saw trees as rich feedstock for a paper mill.

Helene Walsh, recipient of AWA's Wilderness Defenders Award, saved a piece of this forest in the 800 km² Chinchaga Wildland Park in a David and Goliath fight. This Goliath hadn't met the likes of Helene before. Helene treasured these immense forests not for their timber value but for their intrinsic values. She saw teeming life and beauty, nature's strength and fragility, grandeur, wildness.

Persistent. Resolute. Strong. Those words describe Helene Walsh. She discovered this hidden Chinchaga area and concluded it might be a great example of biodiversity and deserved to be saved for all time. So she canoed down the Chinchaga, a winding river that carried her canoe past great horned owls, moose, and beavers, through beautiful riparian forests. Her ambition was as limitless as the forests of the Chinchaga; she set out to create a 5,500 km² wildland park – roughly half the size of Jasper National Park.

Persistent. Resolute. Strong. This also describes the Chinchaga and other vast Alberta forests, but the difference between them is that Helene has a voice whereas the forests do not.

Unlike some prominent conservationists,

Helene's passion didn't come from growing up in an outdoorsy or tree-hugger family. She recalls a grade-10 field trip as the moment she began to realize the extent of knowledge about the biological world. She was surprised to learn people had *named* plants, no less noticed them!

An interest in the natural world led Helene to take biological sciences in university, and she was awarded a Master in Zoology from the University of Alberta. However, Helene's academic ideals were perhaps ahead of her time, as she would be a perfect candidate to enroll in an Environmental Science degree. This rising field differs from biological sciences in that it studies the connections between natural science, humanities, and social sciences. In conversation with her, Helene wisely summarized to me the basic environmen-

tal science principles: the earth's finite resources are coming into conflict with infinite economic growth and the social order, leading to growing inequity and overwhelmed environments.

After university, some time passed before Helene delved into the world of conservation. It took the rise of the internet to connect Helene, then living in northern Alberta, to the active conservation community to the south. Her first big project was accepting a position on the public advisory group of the Daishowa-Marubeni forest company in the Peace River watershed, as the company's focus turned toward ecosystem based management.

Part of the group's role was to find the requirements of what was needed for proper ecological management practices in the forest industry. Helene hadn't been in touch



Helene and Chino

with recent zoology or biology information since her university days, so, a true scientist, she studied what she didn't know. And from those studies, she found that in order for forests to survive they have to be both "pretty darn big" and "very diverse!" It became Helene's goal to help develop a boreal standard for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification scheme that was ethical, transparent, and financially sound.

Helene then worked a decade for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Northern Alberta chapter, where she was the Boreal Campaign Director. Today she's also a board member of the Keepers of the Athabasca, an arm of a grassroots movement borne from an urgent need to protect the Arctic Ocean drainage basin, of which the headwaters derive from the Peace and Athabasca Rivers in Alberta. Self-effacing in conversation, Helene wouldn't let you in on her accomplishments, but her work has boldly alerted governments, industry, and

fellow environmentalists of the dire need to conserve the boreal forest.

After working for years and speaking up on behalf of Canada's dwindling caribou populations, a red flag for boreal biodiversity issues, Helene's indignation was evident. "It's so simple," Helene mused. "All caribou herds are in decline, the government monitors populations, but we don't see a change. Humans don't have a right to curtail diversity. We're just one species." But due to Helene's dogged determination, the new FSC boreal standard changed the trajectory of forestry in a positive direction toward protection.

Helene has used and even pioneered avenues for conservation in Alberta, including market-based mechanisms, serving on government advisory groups, protesting, and media relations. Her unwavering focus, partnered with a rational and diplomatic approach, is an inspiration to conservationists who work against

well-funded opponents.

However deep Helene's frustrations with conservation outcomes are, she sees hope in youth-driven global movements against climate change and other social and environmental problems. "My main hope is that people want to do the right things, and conditions arrive where change has to happen and it happens in the right way."

Helene's Chinchaga Wildland contains Avatar-like old growth forests, woodland caribou, trumpeter swans, hundreds of lakes, wetlands, streams and rivers. Most Albertans care about intact landscapes, free flowing rivers, and wild species. Few act with Helene's passion, persistence, intellect, and energy. We need more Goliath-fighters like Helene to ensure we protect more Chinchagas. Thank you, Helene. 🌲

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