



*“Pioneers living today recall when Alberta was largely a wild land, a wonderfully varied land, with the west’s rugged mountains folding into foothills, wildlife-rich aspen parklands, boreal forests rolling endlessly across the north and, to the south, seas of waving prairie grasses carved through by ancient meandering rivers. But, within the span of a hundred years, the wilderness of Alberta has given way, at first slowly to gentle ranch lands, then with dizzying pace to agriculture, urban development and industrialization. This rich province so recently a natural frontier is now largely cultivated, industrialized and urbanized. The wild places of our near past have become our fastest diminishing resource - a resource for which there is no substitute. What wilderness we have now is all we shall ever have.”*

- Introduction to 1980’s version of AWA’s History and Philosophy

AWA began as a relationship. A group of back-country enthusiasts around a kitchen table in 1965 realized that the official “multiple-use” land policy was destroying, not preserving, the province’s public land wild spaces, and it was time to take action. Floyd and Karen Stromstedt, Marian and Bill Michalsky, and Steve and Helen Dixon started speaking out, gaining support from local farmers, teachers and community leaders who were interested in conserving Alberta’s wildlife and its habitat. At a 1968 meeting in Lundbreck, 34 of them came together to officially form the Alberta Wilderness Association, electing local outfitter and rancher William (Willie) Michalsky as their first president. The presidency and board of directors was then, as it is now - voluntary. In 1969 AWA incorporated and began seeking new, broader ways to raise awareness about the state of Alberta’s wilderness, and to spread a message through the media and its own publications and through participation in community and government meetings and programs. AWA’s goals are today what they were in 1965: protection of Alberta’s wild lands, wildlife and watersheds. Its work is to communicate these goals with the public, sister conservation groups, government and industry, as well as through education programs that connect Albertans to wild spaces and encourage increasing numbers of people to speak out in their defence. Passion, integrity and participation are seen as key to this advocacy work.

Relationships allow AWA to assume what may be ambitious projects requiring local support, partnership cooperation and a committed volunteer base for success. The organization’s first major challenge was to prepare for the Eastern Slopes hearings that would set a framework to conserve the Rockies and their foothills. Work began in 1970 – volunteers talked directly with community members in order to learn what people thought best for the future of the Slopes. AWA found the means to hire a writer to consolidate people’s collected ideas into two books to present at the formal Eastern Slopes hearings in 1973. The hearings were well attended, and their recommendations strongly favoured conservation of wildlife habitats, watersheds and aesthetic values. They led to many areas being zoned for protection in the ensuing 1977 Eastern Slopes Policy, based on the public’s views and values. The hearings resulted in a significant success for a fledgling organization’s first undertaking. AWA’s forward thinking approach based on vision, communication, sound science and determination, became the organization’s modus operandi since proving its worth in this first major public undertaking.

The second major project undertaken by the AWA was the protection of Willmore Wilderness Park in the later 1970s, including publication of a book on the area in 1973. This large wild area north of Jasper was designated a wilderness park in 1959 and later named commemoratively for Norman Willmore, a conservation-minded Minister of Forests. AWA worked together with the Alberta Fish and Game Association to gather 40,000 signatures on a petition against road and tourist development in the area,





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resulting in development proposals being withdrawn. Through the 1980's, tourism proposals kept coming forward for the Willmore that had to be publicized and advocated against until the area's Act was finally strengthened in 1995.

These two undertakings opened doors to a variety of new initiatives for the AWA. Through the later 1970s, AWA helped to stop a major new ski hill development at Lake Louise by opposing it as a site for Olympic winter games. It researched and published books published a regular newsletter informative of conservation efforts and spearheaded campaigns to protect Alberta's wild rivers and to curtail resort development on the globally unique Sunshine Meadows.

If the 1970's had proven a lively decade for a growing and increasingly enlightened AWA, the 1980's proved to be more the eye of a hurricane. Projects, campaigns and new environmental catastrophes were being hurled from every direction. Environmental degradation accelerated as Alberta moved from an agricultural province to an energy producer.

By 1980, Alberta's ecologically sound wildlife and land management program that had been a global model was forfeited. A shift in policy saw wildlife as a public burden that must now "pay its way". Wildlife management shifted from a more nurturing, scientific role to a commercial one. Native deer species were allowed to be captured to serve new private game farms. Working with the Alberta Fish and Game Association (AF&GA), AWA vigorously opposed domestication of wildlife, using sound science arguments. Each negative point the two organizations raised was later realized, costing Canadian taxpayers hundreds of \$millions in recovery, as well as the permanent pollution of wild deer with deadly chronic wasting disease. The involvement of many Alberta politicians and their friends in the lucrative bottom of the game farming pyramid (supplying expensive breeding stock) meant the battle to stop wildlife domestication would be lost. A struggling game farm "industry" remains to this day.

More positively, the early 1980's presented AWA and the AF&GA with the opportunity to partner in land planning and to work within a cooperative government, industry and NGO arrangement. Integrated Resource Planning was an ambitious undertaking to implement the Eastern Slopes Policy and began with all the vigour and good intentions that had been engendered during the heady days of the hearings. AWA and AF&GA were appointed the two public interest consultants for the process which meant a large mustering of volunteers to attend meetings and participate actively in plan development. All went well for several years, until new government direction towards industry accommodation meant abandonment of the process. This necessitated AWA's continued advocacy for protection of Eastern Slopes watersheds and wildlife habitat.

Simultaneously with IRP work and the campaign to stop commercial exploitation of wildlife, was a third major undertaking, again the result of ill-conceived government policy. This time the proposal was to rid government of the burdensome problem of administering public lands held under grazing lease by selling them to the select group of farmers/ranchers who held the leases. Again, AWA and AF&GA teamed up and organized in opposition. The groups were soon joined by hundreds of citizens irate about the possibility of being cheated of a jointly held heritage and by the sweet deal proposed for a select group. AWA and AF&GA played key roles as speakers at many public meetings called to oppose the sales and to develop a public lands policy. The sales were halted. To date, there is still no





conservation-based public lands policy. “Potato-gate” in 2010 showed the government is still prepared to cut secret deals to rid itself of public lands. Again, AWA exposed the 2010 deal, raised its profile and the sale was withdrawn.

Through its then president Dick Pharis, AWA was involved in developing Alberta’s 1976 Coal Policy, once considered one of Canada’s most progressive pieces of environmental legislation. It divided the Eastern Slopes into categories for coal development, with Category 1 being off-limits for wildlife habitat and aesthetic reasons. But with the swing towards development in the early 1980’s, downgrading changes to this policy were quietly introduced at an Integrated Planning Advisory Council multistakeholder committee meeting that was openly considering changes to the Eastern Slopes Policy. AWA’s committee representative saw the proposed changes to be substantial and insisted they be taken to an AWA board meeting for consideration. A delay ensued in which the draft changes were leaked to the media resulting in such a furor that they were dropped and the protective Coal Policy remains in place to this day.

Unfortunately the Eastern Slopes Policy was unable to be similarly rescued. Less than 10 years after its adoption this policy, also called The People’s Policy, was being significantly altered to accommodate resource development by increasing ministerial discretion and weakening its two most protective zones. AWA received a leaked copy of proposed revisions in time to publish a full document showing how the 1984 version differed from the 1977 one, significantly downgrading its protective aspects. The cover of AWA’s document was the government’s cover, but stamped across with the word “rejected”. Despite major public outcry, the Don Getty Government forced through changes that opened much of the Eastern Slopes to development that the public wanted protected in 1973. More drilling, mineral exploration, logging and motorized recreation was now allowed in higher elevation lands and critical wildlife habitats.

The 1980’s witnessed AWA’s initiation to the formal Energy Resources Conservation Board and its hearing process, a Board and process with which it was destined to have a long and rocky relationship. Initial AWA opposition to petroleum drilling in inappropriate places (usually Zone 1 of the Eastern Slopes Policy – the Prime Protection Zone where industry was supposed to be excluded) went favourably. Without AWA’s knowledge, in 1983 Shell Canada built a road and wellsite in the Zone 1 lands of the Panther Corners. AWA made formal opposition through the ERCB and prepared for its first hearing. Shell withdrew from the area just days prior to the hearing, citing geological reasons. Again, Shell proposed drilling on Zone 1 lands at Jutland Mountain in the South Castle River headwaters but when AWA raised opposition with key Shell shareholders, the application was withdrawn. Then in 1989 Shell Canada applied to drill on top of Corner Mountain, on lands that were Zone 1 and once part of Waterton Lakes National Park.

Again, AWA formally opposed through the ERCB and a hearing ensued. It undoubtedly marked the end of AWA innocence regarding government and quasi-governmental processes enabling real public participation in land management. The formal ERCB process which is funded by taxpayers and industry, fails to recognize public interest organizations as “affected parties” denying them opportunity to tap the pool of funds available to “affected parties”(industry players and landowners), to hire expert witnesses or to gain legal representation. Unfortunately for AWA, its key volunteer witness - a world expert in





petroleum reservoirs who was knowledgeable about the new technology of directional drilling, was out of the country. The ERCB refused to change the hearing date by three days so that he could testify. His written comments were dismissed and the hearing ended in Shell's favour. Development on the steep, aesthetically outstanding mountain was delayed six days as AWA members and university students stood together against the bulldozers. Eventually the protesters were removed through a broad legal injunction, AWA's president was slapped with a Statement of Claim for \$100,000 and the development proceeded. Though this battle was lost, AWA did eventually win the war. Shell later apologized, stating that had they listened to AWA they could have saved \$millions by drilling directionally from the mountain's base.

AWA's creative approach for the Milk River area in the province's southern grasslands, spearheaded by Ray Sloan and Cliff Wallis moved conservation efforts forward significantly. The two organized and bused in supporters to a Lethbridge meeting and finally managed to move forward working with the local community to agree upon a protected area; got government to legislate it as a protected area; and Cliff has continued working with them to this day on managing the site, with one of the longest running biodiversity monitoring projects in Alberta's grasslands. AWA has been one of the few organizations at a provincial level to continuously work in the grassland and parkland regions and secure protected areas like Wainwright Dunes, Rumsey and Milk River/Kennedy Coulee.

In the 1990s, AWA opposed new massive-scale forestry projects throughout the Boreal forest and through the leadership of president Glenda Hanna, co-chaired a large industry, government and NGO initiative to develop an Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy. Three years of province-wide volunteer work led to nothing when the final report was so weakened by government that AWA refused to sign it. AWA worked with industry in the 1990's to gain protection for the Plateau Mountain Ecological Reserve, to prevent further commercial development and open pit mining in Kananaskis Country and on the boundary of Jasper National Park, and upgraded its Wilderness Resource Centre and Library. A new, award-winning publication called "Wild Alberta", mapped and summarized current intact wilderness and wild rivers, setting out for the first time, which areas of the province were critical for protection. AWA also promoted legal cases in defence of wild places and environmental assessment of the proposed Oldman River dam.

In 1990, the Alberta government secretly planned to dam the Oldman River, part of a long-simmering mega plan to divert Alberta's rivers south and sell water into the United States. This could have proved catastrophic for Alberta's aquatic ecology and implied hemispheric ramifications, since the flow of large Canadian rivers into the Arctic ocean affects Arctic ecology and weather patterns. AWA backed the Friends of the Oldman group to campaign against the dam. They organized a folk music benefit concert on the banks of the Oldman River, passing around boxes to the twenty thousand person audience, and gathering donations to support the campaign. After the event, AWA members quietly walked the streets of downtown Calgary to bank \$40,000 bundled into paper grocery bags! But, despite strong community opposition, the dam was built, albeit illegally, as was proven in court. In the end, the development project was never fully completed. Since this time, a dam was built on the Little Bow River but no large dams have been built on any of our large southern rivers, despite proposals to do so. The Oldman Dam project demonstrated that the Alberta government wasn't governing according to its' citizens needs or even the law, and legal challenges up to Canada's Supreme Court resulted in the





ordering of country-wide federal assessments of major projects concerning water, animals, or environmental issues. What could have been a grand environmental failure, actually resulted in wide-scale change for the better.

The new millennium brought many changes to AWA as an organization. The old-style working-member board was replaced by a pared-down, more directed Governance Board as part of a new concentric organization predicated on a new vision and set of priorities. After several years of searching for the ideal Executive Director, board member Christyann Olson was chosen. This position ushered in an organizational era seen as vital for the modernized structure of the organization and the more organized direction it was going. The Executive Director became responsible for ensuring the objectives and goals of the organization remain uncompromised, the budgeting and finances are in good order, the vital network of volunteers is maintained and the organization keeps its transparency. AWA recommitted to preserving Alberta's wild places, wild rivers and wild creatures.

The Special Places 2000 program began as a focus for the new millennium. This official program, part of a global initiative to implement the UN's goal of protecting 12.5% of ecosystems, put pressure on governments to show results. In Alberta, this should have meant protection for 12.5% of our Grassland, Aspen Parkland, Boreal Forest, Canadian Shield, Foothills and Alpine ecological regions. In 2001, Premier Ralph Klein declared the program complete, but, in reality, it was far from the goals of the UN. In fact, Special Places became a farcical political exercise in labeling landscapes as protected while giving them no or few legal means. The program degenerated into political trade-offs and was so bereft of science that AWA withdrew participation, instead, advocating a scientific approach to land protection from the "outside". Special Places was another lesson in AWA operations - a Terms of Reference was developed that must be met before it will agree to participate in new government or industry-led processes.

Special Places failed to secure the 4000 sq.km Bighorn Wildland that AWA had promoted for protection since the Eastern Slopes Hearings and that was officially dedicated as a park in 1986, only to be withdrawn a few years later when some of its subalpine Prime Protection Zone lands were opened to ATV recreation. Erosion damage was quickly evident and AWA launched an initial 5-year assessment of rules compliance and severity of erosion. Results of this considerable piece of research were regularly released to government and the public.

In the new millennium, AWA participated in an initiative with the University of Calgary's Masters of Teaching program that lasted most of the first decade until the university changed courses. This program benefitted AWA, 16-20 Masters of Teaching students and over 1200 Calgary area school students each year, in learning about Alberta's watersheds and wetlands. The program was a very successful way of promoting an environmental message of fundamental importance to the next generation and of fulfilling AWA's mandate to be educational.

A Grizzly Bear Recovery Team convened in the fall of 2002 in response to a recommendation by the Endangered Species Subcommittee that the grizzly bear be reclassified as "Threatened". The profile and plight of the grizzly had languished until AWA made the bear a priority. A campaign, culminating in a number of award-winning website animations, along with focused public awareness, put the bear on the media agenda. The heat was on the Minister for Sustainable Resource Development and he





announced the suspension of the spring grizzly bear hunt for three years, starting in 2006. This was a major step forward, but still left much to be done, including gaining endangered species status and protection for large tracts of prime habitat. Meager success for the grizzly has not altered the situation for the province's other large iconic species that is quickly moving towards eradication. The woodland caribou is on a direct collision course with energy and timber extraction, and no amount of effort or recommendations from the Caribou Recovery Team, of which AWA is an integral part, has altered this course.

After two decades of work as an integral part of the Hay-Zama Committee in Alberta's NW boreal region, AWA helped with the orderly phase-out of petroleum activity, the re-introduction of bison and the obtaining of Wildland Park status. Committee efforts resulted in the twinning this Ramsar site with another, the Dalai Lake National Nature Reserve in Inner Mongolia in China. Alberta delegates including two AWA members travelled to Mongolia in 2009, where they participated in a tour, hosted a biodiversity workshop and later hosted a return delegation of Mongolian ecologists and politicians.

Today, AWA continues outreach through nature walks and evening talks program, through consulting the public at conferences and farmers markets, and working with ranchers and landowners to develop a common ground for cooperative work. From grade schools to universities, AWA responds to many educational requests. It employs new ideas to get its message across about the state of wild things that often reflects the changing population and demographics. In 2010 it introduced a highly successful program to introduce new immigrants to some of Alberta's wild landscapes. A strong volunteer base is largely self-recruiting because of AWA's reputations for consistent hard work and solid results. While advocacy tactics have changed somewhat over the years, and much of the conservation work is now carried out by trained staff members, the issues that absorb the organization have remained unchanged since a group of friends got together in the 1960s: landscapes continue to be fragmented by development, ecosystems continue to be simplified and more wildlife species approach calamity. Years ago, one of the AWA's founders wisely lamented: "There's always some threat looming - local support is key and if you don't talk to the community someone else will and it may result in something you won't like." Through passion, commitment and dedication to relationships, AWA has set a standard for environmental advocacy in Alberta that it trusts will inspire a future of protection for wild places and wild things.

- *Compiled in 2011 by founding member and Board of Director's member, Vivian Pharis*
- *With the aid of University of Calgary students Sameer Dossa and Melissa Tierney*

