

Walking in Willmore:

Ray Rasmussen's Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture

By Ian Urquhart

Ray Rasmussen.
PHOTO: © K. MIHALCHEON



I first met Ray Rasmussen in 1988 nearly 30 years before he gave the annual Martha Kostuch lecture last November. Ray was invited to speak about public participation and environmental decision making in Alberta. Ray spoke plainly and clearly about how values such as trust and respect were crucial prerequisites for effective public participation in Alberta. He also wasn't afraid to say those values were absent from the decisions that the Hon. Ken Kowalski, the keynote speaker, had made as Alberta's environment minister. Some of you will remember the controversy over the construction of the Oldman River dam and the unyielding opposition Dr. Martha Kostuch and others had towards the project. Kowalski was outraged that Martha's Friends of the Oldman River

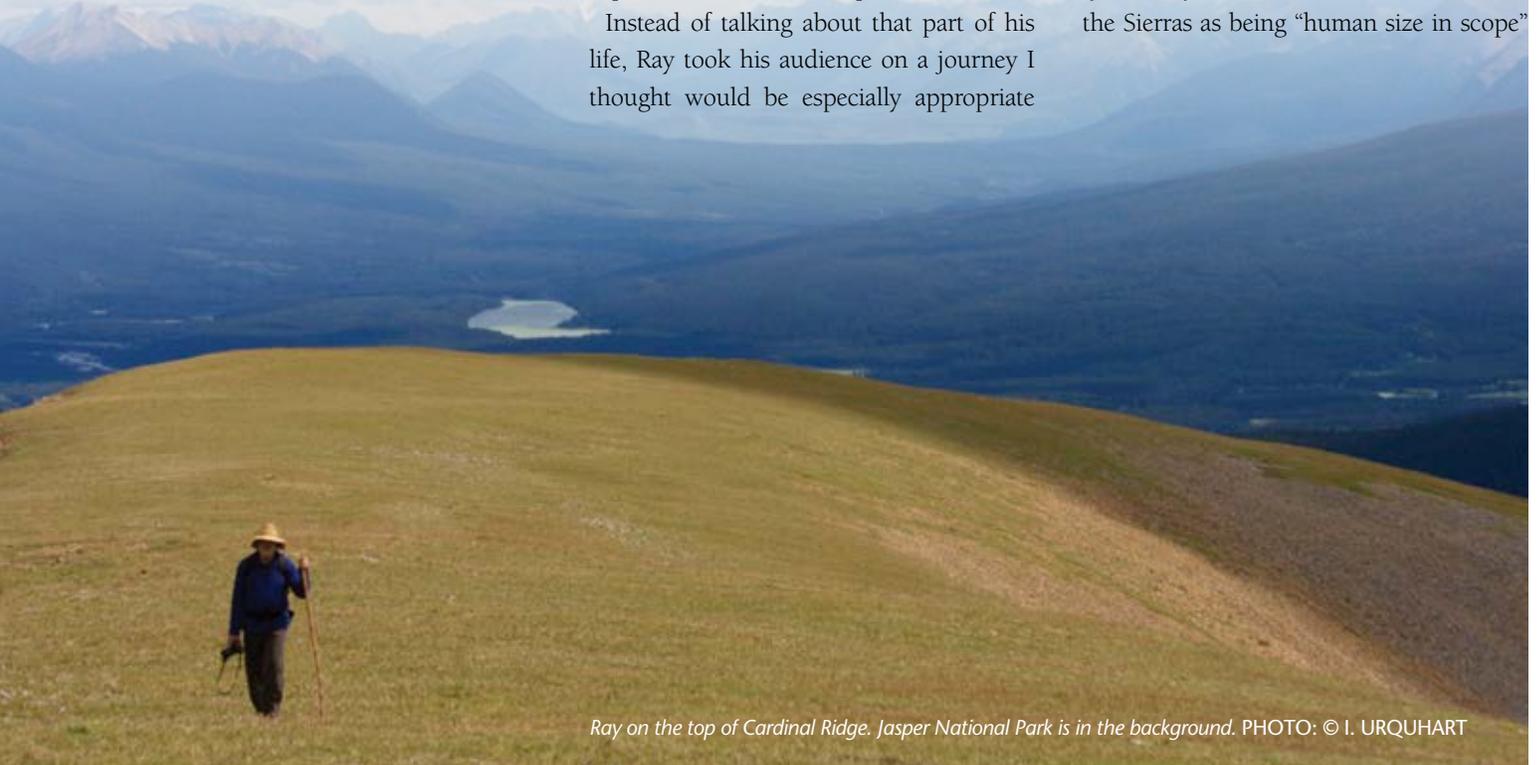
were going to mount a court challenge of his approval of the Dam. That view led the Minister to charge that Martha and her ilk were nothing more than dope smoking social anarchists. The conference was worth attending just to hear Ray tell the Minister how wrongheaded his approach to environmental decision making was.

In last November's Martha Kostuch lecture Ray didn't spend much time talking about the activism that has figured so prominently in his life. AWA, CPAWS, and Alberta Environmental Network are just some of the environmental organizations to have benefited from Ray's passion for the natural world. So too have provincial and municipal advisory committees tasked with trying to give real meaning to the concept of sustainable development.

Instead of talking about that part of his life, Ray took his audience on a journey I thought would be especially appropriate

to save and tell in an issue of the *Advocate* where celebrating nature is a prominent theme. Most of Ray's talk was dedicated to taking his audience on hikes in Willmore Wilderness Park. Ray has an intimate relationship with the Willmore, an intimacy developed during more than 30 years of travel through its valleys and along its ridge tops. Over the decades Ray has introduced hundreds of hikers to the wonders of this special place.

Ray began by suggesting that through his images of the Willmore he hoped to deliver a spiritual message. As someone lucky enough to have joined Ray on one of his hikes I've received that message first-hand. What may enable many to receive the Willmore's spiritual tonic is its accessibility. For Ray, John Muir's characterization of the Sierras as being "human size in scope"



Ray on the top of Cardinal Ridge. Jasper National Park is in the background. PHOTO: © I. URQUHART

applies just as well to the Willmore. Big, riverine montane valleys bordered by long sub-alpine and alpine ridges that are quite easy to get up onto help to make Willmore so accessible. Much of Ray's hiking over the years has centred on the variety of day hikes you can take from base camps in the Eagles Nest Pass area.

As Ray told us the 22 km hike from Rock Lake to the Eagles Nest Pass area is "the price you pay" for what you will experience in your subsequent days of hiking. The first half of the trip is essentially along an old fire road through the forests. It's quite easy walking but the treasures awaiting you at your destination are very well-hidden here. In fact, the first time Ray went into the Willmore he was so annoyed with the lack of any sign of the mountains after about 10 km of walking this hard road that he almost turned around to go back to Rock Lake.

Throughout the rest of the evening Ray took us on some of his favourite hikes. One of those is what he calls the Cathedral Valley and Ridge hike. When you near the top of the valley you arrive at the boundary between Willmore and Jasper National Park. From there you have about a 250 metre climb up a steep slope to get on to

the ridge. You can walk the ridge for about five or six kilometres and from there you are treated to spectacular 360 degree views of your surroundings. For Ray these views and the experience of this ridge hike are the equal to those on Jasper's Skyline Trail. In fact, he agrees with authorities such as Ben Gadd who suggest that the Cathedral Valley and Ridge hike may be superior. Why? The answer is a single word – "solitude." You almost never meet other hikers on this route and Ray's never met horses on the trip.

For the rest of the evening Ray took his audience on a number of other day hikes that Willmore offers. They included a hike to a lake and headwaters basin that sit hidden across the valley from Ray's favourite campsite and a marvelous walk up and along Wildhay Ridge. Although not as high as Cathedral Ridge the vistas from anywhere along Wildhay Ridge are equally spectacular in their own right.

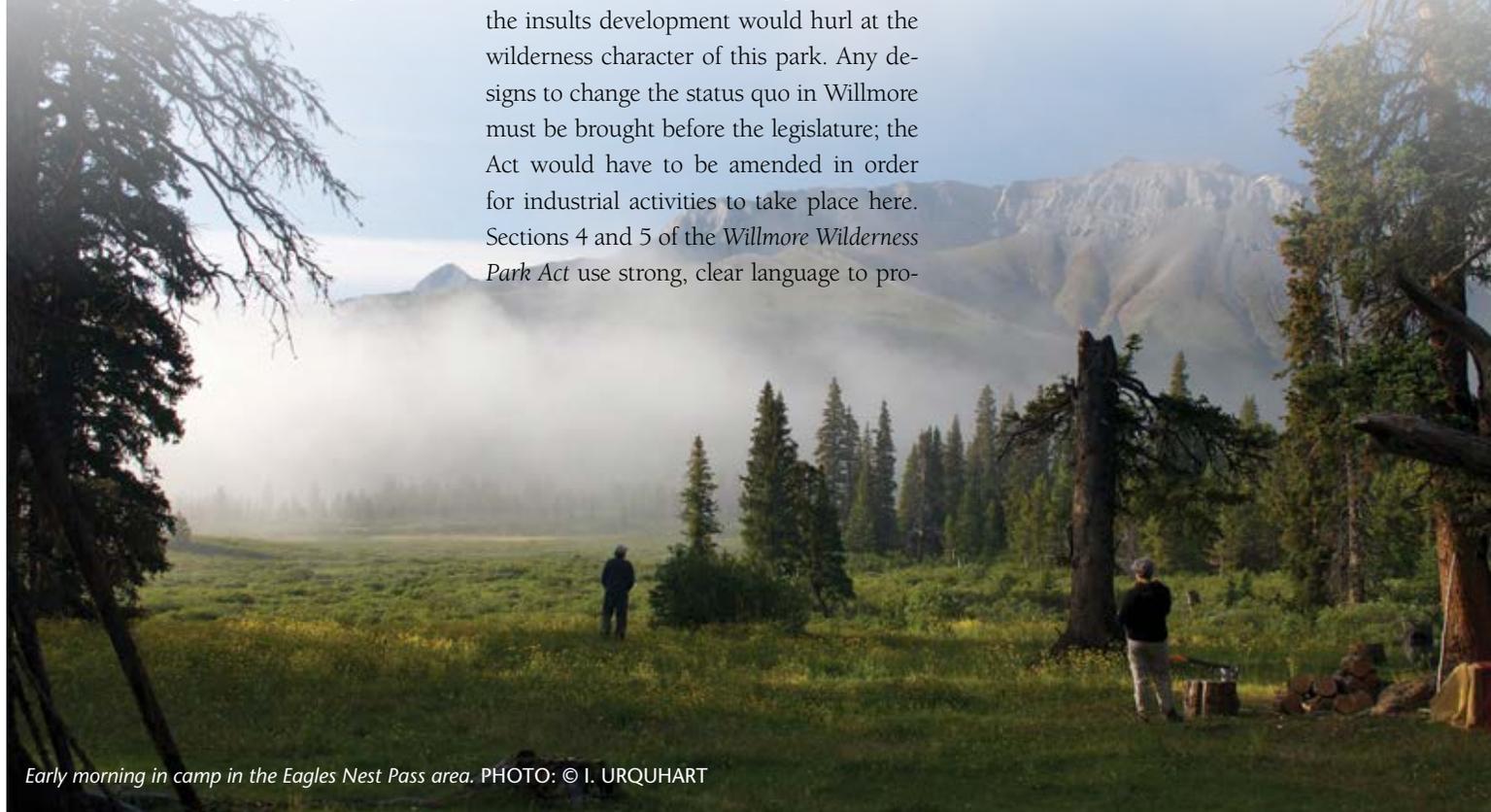
Towards the end of his remarks Ray raised the issue of Willmore's future. No reader will be surprised to hear that this country has attracted the interest of developers of one kind or another. The fact Willmore was established by its own piece of legislation is one factor that has so far spared it from the insults development would hurl at the wilderness character of this park. Any designs to change the status quo in Willmore must be brought before the legislature; the Act would have to be amended in order for industrial activities to take place here. Sections 4 and 5 of the *Willmore Wilderness Park Act* use strong, clear language to pro-

hibit activities that would push this area off of the trajectory established by the Social Credit government in 1959. This is one reason AWA is adamantly opposed to any suggestion that the unique legislative basis of this wilderness park should change.

I cannot help but believe that Ray's audience saw very clearly the spiritual character of the lands he walked them through last November. He underlined that spiritual message when he concluded his talk with an Inuit prayer:

*I think over again my small adventures,
my fears,
Those small ones that seem so big,
For all the vital things I had to get and
reach,
And yet there is only one great thing, the
only thing,
To live and see the great day that dawns
And the light that fills the world.*

Willmore is that great thing, the light that fills the world for Ray. Take a trip into the Willmore yourself and I think you'll see why he feels that way. ▲



Early morning in camp in the Eagles Nest Pass area. PHOTO: © I. URQUHART