

Linking Nature and Persons with a Disability:

Introducing Coyote Lake Lodge

By Ross W. Wein



If you want to stay informed about the worlds around you today, there is a danger you may become overwhelmed by the negativity of today's local, national, and international news on a wide range of topics. Internationally, wars, threats of wars, human rights violations, and refugee crises compete for your attention. Homelessness, poverty, and discrimination figure prominently in our local and regional news. And certainly, news about the conservation of wilderness and wildlife is not immune from controversy and worry. Some psychologists suggest that depression is likely for some who cannot escape the depressing news.

Here I invite you to set the darkness aside and join me in being more positive and

hopeful. My invitation is shaped by my experience and those of my family. I am a father with a son (Danny), disabled by a motorcycle-truck crash in South America, and with a daughter (Laurie) who, with her husband (David), is based in Jasper. Both Laurie and David are employees of Parks Canada. In my university career I always had an interest in conservation. Now retired, these experiences have led me to contribute time to increase the opportunities for seniors and persons with a disability to benefit from the healing power of nature.

Friends who have lived with a disability for decades tell me that society has changed positively in many ways. Persons with a disability are now much more accepted as valuable citizens. For example, the obvious infrastruc-

ture changes in transportation include everything from more rugged wheelchairs and scooters, to curb cuts, to kneeling buses. But, as important as these gains are, we still have a long way to go before we reach the end of this road. Think for a moment about how challenging air travel can be for people with certain disabilities. Or, from the perspective of experiences in nature, think about how difficult it is for people with disabilities to get outside in our Alberta winters.

The Alberta Abilities Lodges Society was formed to try to contribute positively to the place of people with disabilities in our society. In 2015, the Society purchased an Alberta Government minimum security correctional centre situated on 480 acres located 65 kilometres directly west of Leduc and



Dozens of staff from Alberta Environment and Parks volunteered their time to help maintain the grounds at the Lodge.

the Edmonton International Airport. Coyote Lake Lodge was born when we received Certificates of Title to the property in October 2015. Since then volunteers have contributed 500 to 600 days annually to develop a safe, secure, comfortable retreat in the lower foothills of Alberta. Before describing the Lodge in more detail there are four questions I would like to discuss.

Who are these persons with a disability?

The United Nation defines a “person with a disability” as a person who has a long-term or recurring physical, mental, sensory, psychiatric or learning impairment. Both the lists of disabilities and their underlying causes are very long.

Thousands of on-line sources provide information on the range of conditions experienced by these special citizens. One good, short introduction is on the Rick Hansen Foundation website (<https://www.rickhansen.com>). In Canada nearly 15 percent of our citizens have some form of a disability (see <http://ontario.cmha.ca/news/statistics-canada-releases-more-data-on-canadians-with-disabilities/>). To visualize this number, think of the proportion of your community’s population. More than three million Canadians, or more than one billion disabled people around the world, may be too large to imagine.

People with a disability live with families, in hospitals, in group homes, and the list goes on. Many though live their lives isolated from their fellow citizens. Because so many live in isolation it is possible to go about our everyday life without noticing, let alone visiting or interacting with, one of these “silent” or ignored citizens.

What do these special citizens want?

I seldom hear this question asked today, perhaps because social media and society in general have greater levels of understanding of human medical advances. I think the answer to this question is simple: “I want the same opportunities and everyone else in society.” Often urban centres have better resources and support systems than rural ar-

reas; therefore, persons with a disability often gravitate to cities and greater isolation. When it comes to nature, the barriers to visit wilderness areas are much greater for persons with a disability. These barriers often begin with limited access at the gate and parking lot.

Why is it important to be sensitive to the needs of these special citizens?

We must give credit to all of those who have been advocates for years. Individuals, families, societies, governments, and businesses are increasingly aware of the value of investing in these citizens. Families are great supporters. But not all persons with a disability have such a support network and as a person ages this level of support may not be sustained. Governments should be sensitive to discriminating against 15 percent of their population. Businesses find that these citizens can be valuable employees. Personal contact leads to understanding and appreciation.

What can I do?

Learn by visiting people with disabilities and developing empathy for their circumstances. Whether you’re on the street or in

a conservation area simply say “Hello” to someone with a walker or a wheelchair. To develop empathy join friends in a useful sensitivity exercise where you attempt to visit your favourite wildland site in a borrowed wheelchair, or with your ears plugged, or with a mask over your eyes. Try to appreciate what people with disabilities will experience before you take the next step of bringing a senior or a person with a disability to your special wilderness area!

If, like me, you want our society to be more inclusive for people with disabilities then join one or more of the many disability societies that exist. Volunteer your time in efforts that will deliver concrete results in a specific time period. Financially support a registered non-profit disability group that you recognize as being effective. Individuals, by pooling their interests and resources, really can make a difference.

What can we offer at Coyote Lake Lodge?

Until we win the lottery Coyote Lake Lodge will be a work in progress. While we opened for guests on Canada Day in 2017 we will be renovating and repurposing for years to come. William Watson Lodge and other international facilities are models for our



An aerial view of the main facilities of Coyote Lake Lodge.

vision. The over-riding goal of Coyote Lake Lodge is to make opportunities for more seniors and persons with a disability to enjoy nature throughout the year. If visitors enjoy nature, there will be a greater interest in exercising on our trails for example. All of us need more exercise and this is even more critical for persons confined to a wheelchair. Check out Facebook for our lodge photo album “Coyote Lake Lodge Alberta”.

What has our society accomplished since late 2015? I think we have accomplished a great deal. Coyote Lodge (the main building) now has four ground- or deck-level entrances. We built three accessible washrooms; one has a wheel-in shower. There are three bedrooms (converted from offices), each with two single beds near the washrooms. While the library and meeting rooms are inviting, the main meeting area is the dining room with its adjacent commercial kitchen. Four cabins each have six beds. Newly completed concrete walkways reach from the main building to two of the cabins. These will be the first two cabins to be upgraded for better accessibility. A recreation centre will be refurbished to become a visitor reception office; it will also be home to a wellness centre with exercise equipment guests may use when the weather restricts outdoor exercise activities.

The Lodge’s three-quarters of a square mile of hills and valleys is half forested and a wildlife haven since it provides a stream and forest corridor from Coyote Lake to the North Saskatchewan River. Elk, moose,



Coyote Lake Lodge was pleased to welcome visitors from the Hong Kong Rehabilitation Society.

deer, and coyote tracks are everywhere. Part of the land has gardens and hay meadows which will support garden/sport/trail therapies. A service centre with a steel-clad shed, double garage, and several other equipment storage buildings, have workshops, equipment and supplies to support the lodge facility and programs.

Adapting equipment to help get seniors and persons with a disability out on the land, water, ice and snow is an important focus of our work. We have four double sea kayaks, three single kayaks, nine canoes, 12 hockey sledges/sit-skis, five TrailRiders, six tandem bicycles, six regular bicycles, as well as 100 pairs of trekking poles and bins of helmets/hard hats, safety vests, ice cleats, and outer wear. This equipment is carried to events on

cargo or canoe trailers pulled by our heavy duty pick-up truck. We encourage people to try out our equipment first. If the person with a disability becomes enthused to get back to nature their support group may rise to the occasion again and possibly provide the necessary equipment to continue to improve their lifestyle.

Guests have ranged from weekend workshop attendees to individuals and families, to a delegation from the Hong Kong Rehabilitation Society, to 40 employees from Alberta Parks who planted trees in wildlife corridors and weeded gardens. We look forward to welcoming individuals, families, professionals, clubs, and business groups as guests to enjoy our facility. We also welcome volunteers to renovate buildings, to build trails, and to cultivate the gardens.

We hope you will see Coyote Lake Lodge as worthy of investment. Ask to be included in our email list, tell your friends about our project, and donate to our charitable society if you can. Every dollar supports the development of this Central Alberta opportunity for seniors and persons with a disability. It’s long past time we brought to central Alberta the 35 years of service provided by William Watson Lodge in Kananaskis. 🍷

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Enjoying the...