

Moments That Matter:

Wendy Ryan's life of defending the Castle Wilderness

By Vicki Stroich



AWA's 2018 Alberta Wilderness Defender Award recipient Wendy Ryan pauses when I ask her how she developed the fierce and passionate care she has for wilderness. Memories of her childhood on the family farm near Brooks working with her father to care for the horses and the land come flooding back. Reflecting on her father's dedication to cleaning up debris from sloughs around the area touch her deeply. In the life of an outspoken and tireless activist like Ryan, memories of moments shared with her father are the quiet embers that keep her determination to protect areas like the Castle burning.

Ryan moved to the Pincher Creek area in the 1970s and joined a community of activists through her marriage to Mike Judd. "I fit in as a fighter and a watchdog," she recalls. In her time as a community organizer, Ryan has been a vital part of many pivotal moments in the ongoing fight to keep the

Castle wild. She participated in early grass roots organizing with neighbours around kitchen tables in the 1980s, stood with her infant son Matthew on her back in front of heavy equipment to stop drilling in 1985, and picketed logging around Spray Lakes in 2012.

Between those big events are years of quieter moments spent caring for the Castle, an area Ryan describes as her "backyard." As Stewardship Coordinator at Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition, Ryan picks hundreds of bags of invasive weeds, engages with ranchers, motorcyclists, and Park staff to protect the delicate ecosystem from careless use and organizes hikes to help people develop "awareness and compassion" for the region. Eager for a change after 15 years of spending her summers working at hunting camps in the North, Ryan took the position at CCWC 12 years ago. "I was already doing most of the work for free on my own

time anyway," Ryan admits.

Ryan's stories about her work over the years, both the dramatic moments of protest and the quiet moments that come with constant stewardship are peppered with disappointments; fights that weren't won and challenging conversations with industry, government, ranchers, and recreational users. As Ryan says, "The life of an activist is hard." Many weekends she stays away from the area. It is just too heartbreaking to see motorbikes doing donuts on the shale and cows grazing in the basin.

But there are moments of triumph, too. The 2015 announcement of protection for the Castle and the 2017 designation of Castle Provincial Park and the Castle Wildland Provincial Park are long overdue watershed moments in the fight to protect the area. After 40 years of fighting for protection and discouraging false hope from previous governments, Ryan and the CCWC now find



Wendy Ryan has played an important role in the decades-long activism that contributed mightily to the designation of the Castle parks. Twenty-five years apart, these photos detail grassroots protests against drilling on Prairie Bluff and logging in the Castle. © AWA (Left) and © N. DOUGLAS (Right)

themselves engaging with Alberta Parks staff to ensure the area is well managed as a park. Understanding the history of the area is key to its management and Ryan's dream would be a book outlining the Castle's history that Park staff would need to sign after reading.

The Castle region has as storied a life as Wendy Ryan herself, with many catalytic moments that have shaped the environment and the people connected to it. The Castle has a long history as a sacred and ceremonial site for First Nations. Fights over the use of the area by settlers has been going on since the provincial government removed the area's designation as a wilderness preserve in 1954; this departed from the original intent for the area when it was given to the province by the federal government in 1921. Since then there have been many threats to the ecology of the Castle from logging, mining, and drilling with locals protesting the effect of these extractions through protests, picketing, and legal actions.

While these protests may make headlines, the hard work of protecting the area is constant. With each new industrial camp, new roads are built that open the area to use by recreational vehicles. All that access also means ranchers often extend grazing for their stock higher and higher into the basin. The cows wreak havoc on the delicate ecosystem bringing invasive plants and polluting the watershed.

With protection now designated for the Castle region thanks to the countless hours put in by Ryan and her peers, the Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition faces a new challenge: what to do now that they have achieved their goal? For the time being, they plan to focus on stewardship of the park planning for the area. For Ryan, the next challenge is to engage a new generation of activists, "We've lost a lot of our lead hikers who are in their 70s and 80s now. We need new people to take up those programs and volunteer. Young people care about the environment but they have less

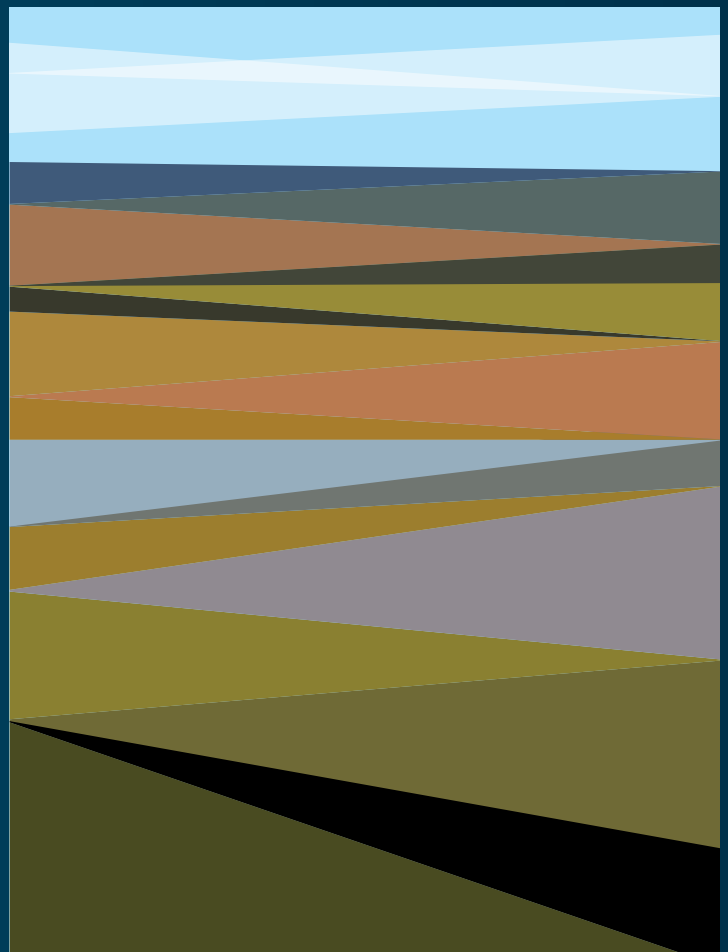
time to volunteer."

By expanding their stewardship events schedule to include shoreline clean ups and interpretive hikes with yoga alongside their beloved moderate to difficult hikes in the area the CCWC are hoping to encourage new people to have the kind of transformative moments that will inspire them to fight to protect the wilderness around them.

After a lifetime of defending the Castle wilderness, Wendy Ryan doesn't plan to stop any time soon. "My new goal is to protect every last bit of grass in the area," she declares with determination. Ryan continues to make every moment count in her life as an activist. We all owe her a debt of gratitude but I am sure a few hours of volunteer work to help protect a wild area in our province would be a fitting tribute to this true wilderness hero in our province. 🌱

Vicki Stroich is a Calgary based theatre artist and facilitator with a love of the environment and Alberta's wild spaces.

Featured Artist John Vickers



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