

# Wild Spaces 2020:

## Short-term goals on the long road to protection

By Grace Wark, AWA Conservation Specialist



**A**lberta Wilderness Association (AWA) has officially launched Wild Spaces 2020; this campaign aims to increase support and awareness for Alberta's beautiful and irreplaceable wild spaces, wild waters, and wildlife. Over the next year we'll be highlighting 55 magnificent wild spaces: their trials, the innumerable reasons to celebrate them, and how we can support their conservation.

So, what are wild spaces and why are they so important? Wild spaces, whether under legislated protection or not, are the key areas and ecosystems that serve as strongholds for biodiversity, provide ecosystem services (like clean air and water), and give our province its unique charm. These can be well-known

wilderness destinations like the Castle or Kananaskis Country, or other awe-inspiring regions you may have never heard of like the Caribou Mountains of northern Alberta's boreal, Goose Wallace of the upper foothills, or Wylie Lake of the Canadian Shield.

These wild spaces have inherent value, not only for their habitat and scenic views, but for their contributions to local economy, global ecological cycles, and human health.

Take for example, Alberta's grasslands and their incredible capacity for carbon storage. Grasslands take in considerable amounts of atmospheric carbon dioxide and store it in the soil for long periods of time. This benefits climate change adaptation efforts, air quality, and, subsequently, civic well-being. However, Alberta's prairies are at risk. The gradual

conversion of Alberta's grasslands, only 1.25 percent of which are protected, to agricultural or industrial use can result in the loss of 40 percent of their soil carbon to the atmosphere. Since only seven million hectares of Alberta's Grassland Natural Region remains, this ongoing conversion could have a substantial impact on Alberta's contributions to atmospheric carbon concentrations.

This is where the protection of Wild Spaces – whether grasslands, parklands or your neighbourhood green spaces – draws its human-centric relevance. If we were to protect a larger percentage of Alberta's native grasslands, their ecological services could be retained, their natural splendor could be prolonged for future generations, and they could slow biodiversity decline.



The grasslands of Milk River Ridge PHOTO: © D. OLSON

## **Short-term goals...**

While the protection of Wild Spaces has been part of AWA's vision for more than 50 years, the Wild Spaces 2020 campaign has been inspired by the renewed motivations of the provincial and federal governments to conserve Canadian wilderness. This renewed government conservation impulse is a response to the Aichi targets – the global biodiversity targets developed at the 2010 Convention for Biological Diversity held in Aichi, Japan. Aichi set 2020 as the deadline for reaching its targets, bringing protection and connectivity to unique wilderness areas across the world, and slowing the ever-accelerating decline in biodiversity.

AWA's Wild Spaces campaign focuses on working with governments and other actors to realize the 11th target set at Aichi in 2010. That target is:

*"By 2020, at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscape and seascape."*

Since the federal Conservative government accepted the Aichi Targets in 2010, Canada has largely procrastinated in expanding the country's protected areas network. Canada took five years to develop its own biodiversity strategy (Canada Target 1) and another year to roll out its program to achieve the Target, *Pathway to Canada Target 1*. At the end of 2017, seven years after signing, only 10.5 percent of Canada's terrestrial lands and waters were protected and 7.7 percent of the country's coastal and marine areas.

Because Canada's approach has been piece-meal and unenthusiastic, ecosystems remain vulnerable. Over-development, poor planning, and short-term economic incentives combine to offer very little protection of or thought about sustainable biodiversity. While AWA acknowledges the important conservation accomplishments of many private landowners, Canada's governments

must strengthen their leadership when it comes to public lands. They must give precedence to the biodiversity targets.

Under the federal guidance of *Pathway to Canada Target 1*, Alberta also made a commitment to protect 17 percent of the province. Among Alberta's successes are 73.5 percent protection in the Canadian Shield and 60.2 percent in the Rocky Mountains (Alberta Parks, 2018). However, we remain wary that the history of poor planning and mismanagement has already led to severe biodiversity losses across the province, and that Alberta still has far to go.

## **...the long road to protection**

While the Aichi targets, and their associated regional initiatives, signify a step in the right direction for global conservation, we need to take further strides to achieve long-lasting, representative protection. As part of Wild Spaces 2020, AWA offers the following caveats to the targets, in hope that they may be applied more earnestly and can realize their greatest potential.

Where the rubber first hits the road for the Aichi Targets is where short-term ambition meets the need for long-term commitment. Conflicting public land uses, existing land-use designations, decades-long land claims and private land disputes are all roadblocks to meeting the 17 percent target by 2020. Many of the processes necessary to protect public lands – such as meaningful consultation – can take longer than the 16 months that remain until the deadline for meeting the targets. It has been shown, time and time again, that realizing conservation goals takes a great deal of time, as we've seen with the decades-long struggles to protect the Castle Wildlands, the Bighorn, or create protected areas for endangered caribou herds. The politics and policy of conservation take time, and with less than two years remaining until the Aichi deadline, I hope 2020 brings both ongoing momentum and a renewed vision for expanding Canada's protected areas network.

Analogous is the need for biodiversity targets to survive changes in government. Both federally and provincially, wilderness conser-

vation has become increasingly politicized. For protection to be effective, the torch has to be passed between governments to ensure that biodiversity commitments are not only achieved, but increase over time. Seventeen percent is merely the beginning of the pathway towards conservation and just a fraction of what nature needs.

The next caveat is that conservation requires well-developed and robust relationships from a broad range of stakeholders. Conservation is frequently put at odds with industry, often polarizing the need for landscape protection against economic growth and material well-being. *If land is being conserved for wilderness values, how can it be leveraged to grow the economy?* This zero-sum assumption is a common misconception. As our grasslands illustrate, economy and environment can not only co-exist, but are in-fact deeply interdependent. The Aichi targets should take into account that relationships between government, industry, local residents, Indigenous communities and environmental stakeholders need to be developed and maintained in order to ensure that the biodiversity targets are realized.

When it comes to these relationships, the federal and provincial governments must continue cultivating their connection with Canada's Indigenous communities; they must put reconciliation at the forefront of conservation processes. Western conservation is a historically exclusionary process; one that has seen Indigenous peoples expelled from their historical territories and traditional land uses discounted. With this in mind, I urge the provincial and federal governments to create space to acknowledge the role of Indigenous communities as creators and stewards of protected areas. The Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) has already proposed the creation of Indigenous Protected and Conserved areas (IPCAs) – regional conservation areas to facilitate a larger network of protected ecosystems and empower Indigenous self-determination [*more on ICE and IPCAs in the next article*]. With a firm proposition for Indigenous-led conservation, in contrast to Canada's dark history of Indigenous exclusion, the provincial and federal

governments must include Indigenous Peoples in ongoing conservation efforts.

The final caveat is a critique of Alberta's failure to consider representativeness when it comes to realizing Aichi Target 11. While Alberta has made some progress towards achieving 17 percent protection (currently at 14.6 percent), that protection is not evenly distributed between Alberta's six Natural Regions (Rocky Mountains, Foothills, Grassland, Parkland, Boreal Forest and Canadian Shield). While Natural Regions like the Rocky Mountains and Canadian Shield enjoy considerable formal protection, the remaining Natural Regions – Grassland, Parkland, Foothills and Boreal – have fared poorly. Protecting only 15.4 percent protection of the Boreal, 1.4 percent of the Foothills, 1.25 percent protection of the Grasslands, and a mere 0.9 percent of the Parkland is grossly insufficient to sustain the unique species and ecosystems found within each of these Natural Regions. Each of Alberta's Natural Regions has a unique role in species protection and

ecological service provision; these unique roles cannot be fulfilled by other regions that may enjoy more protection. The Government of Alberta should consider insisting on regional representativeness in its 17 percent target. Each Natural Region should have at least 17 percent of its landscapes protected. Alberta should aspire to this version of representative protection.

With these caveats, I feel Alberta's pursuit of

the Aichi targets should be seen as one short, but important, step on a longer conservation journey. If history is a useful guide, it's going to be a long and winding journey to establish the protected and connected Wild Spaces that Alberta deserves, but with a lot of love and ongoing support, it's not impossible to achieve. Join AWA as we advocate and celebrate Wild Spaces, to 2020, and beyond. 



PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS



Where the Rockies meet the grasslands PHOTO: © C. OLSON