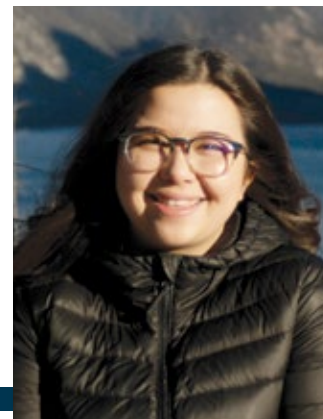


Missed Connections:

A mutual love for wilderness lost in the political jungle

By Grace Wark, AWA Conservation Specialist



You: Love the outdoors, the re-imagined Great Frontier, and spending starlit weekend nights by the campfire.

Me: Fond of quiet, misty mornings, amateur outdoor photography, and fall hikes across the foothills.

Personals>Missed Connections:
“A mutual love for wilderness lost in the political jungle”



With quite a bit in common, you would think that we would be fast friends, inextricably tied by our mutual love for fresh mountain air, big skies, and wide open spaces. However, it isn't quite so clear cut.

Our shared affinity for nature isn't uncommon; many of us have similar childhood memories of piling into the backseat of the family car and being whisked away to some far off dirt road, backpacks full of granola bars, extra socks and juice boxes. This is where our shared love story begins: camping under the stars, kayaking on a still lake, or enjoying a spectacular view on a mountain hike.

Love for wild spaces is common ground for many Albertans. The Government of Alberta's 2013 Recreation survey noted the importance of physical and outdoor activities to Albertans. Parks and outdoor spaces were the locations most of the participants preferred as the setting for their recreation. So many of us take pride in our Eastern Slopes, our rolling foothills, and our vast prairies. These landscapes are a part of our heritage; our affection for them helps to define who

we are; we boast about them to our out-of-town family and friends, and rush to greet them on the long weekends.

Where differences start to emerge is when we turn to how to manage those spaces. Our mutual love of wilderness begins to disintegrate when we put that perspective in the context of varying political, cultural, or economic priorities. While we all seem to share the common thread of love for wilderness, the priorities we assign to these other dimensions of our lives lead us down different pathways.

What do you mean “wilderness”?

Scholars Bruce Braun and Noel Castree have explored the idea that nature or wilderness can be interpreted in many ways; those interpretations will impact our human-nature interactions differently. In their book *Remaking Reality* (2005), they posit that while nature is a physical space for interaction, we create social structures around it based on our personal values, socio-economic imperatives, and cultural backgrounds. In environmentally uncertain

and politically divisive times like these, understanding these social structures can help us to understand where we diverge on the political spectrum and to discover where we share common ground when it comes to wilderness conservation.

In the context of Alberta, I've found there are a few dominant camps in how we approach wilderness; they vary in how much intrusiveness they accept with respect to human interaction with the landscape. Starting in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the North American wilderness paradigm underwent a dramatic shift. Where wilderness spaces were historically seen as vast, barren wastelands to be tamed and conquered, they were suddenly being depicted as unspoiled, almost-holy places for exploration and refuge. From the reflections of great naturalists like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir to the creation of National Parks, the twentieth century popularized a more romantic notion of wilderness as being powerful, pristine, and often people-free.

This wilderness legacy still animates modern-day conservation, often expressed as a call for the complete vacancy of public lands and protected areas to sustain sensitive ecosystems. However, contrary to popular belief, this aspiration seldom, if ever, has been realized. While conservation has a complex history of human expulsion from protected areas, people have always been and will continue to be part of the landscape. Modern day initiatives align more with scaling back harmful activities while giving greater consideration to individual and community interactions with wilderness spaces.



Our cultural footprint on the landscape is undeniable. After a two-hour hike into the Crownsnest Pass, I stopped to enjoy a cloud cresting over a mountain peak. What felt like a moment of reflection in a far-distant, unoccupied wild space, was actually not so far removed from humanity. Not shown in the image are the hiking trails on the mountainside, the cutblocks on the parallel slope or the network of roads that allowed us access to the area. PHOTO: © G. WARK

More than before, conservation initiatives are exploring the relationship between nature and culture. Questions like the following are more likely to be posed today than they would have been a generation or more ago: What degree of recreation should be allowed on the landscape to help garner public support for protected areas? What role do protected areas play in enabling treaty rights and traditional land uses? And which cultural elements or practices can the landscape sustain? These questions in turn generate larger curiosities about the role we play in our wilderness and the degree to which fostering love for wilderness is a cultural experience.

At this point in time, certain social and cultural activities have become so embedded into Alberta's landscapes that we now associate them with particular spaces. To focus on recreational groups, there are many well-known sites and trails either steward-ed or associated with particular activities.

We have groups like the Great Divide Trail Association (GDTA), long-time stewards of 1,100 kilometres of hiking trails, straddling the Alberta-British Columbia border. The members of this association frequently take to the trails to remove trees, install signs, and ensure maps are up-to-date; they provide an important voluntary service to facilitate a shared wilderness experience. At the same time, other regions have become well-known hotspots for motorized recreation. Off-road culture has become hugely popular in Alberta. In recent years, areas like McLean Creek or Waiparous have become footholds for off highway vehicle users, connecting through community meetups, rallies and backcountry camping.

These are examples of the social activities and practices that we've built around and into our wilderness spaces, and from those social aspects we can begin to make inferences about wilderness priorities.

The politics of wilderness

In the wake of the Bighorn Country proposal, the relationship between politics and wilderness conservation has been at the top of my mind. I've noticed that those voicing their opinion on the proposal often share values with their oppositional counterparts. What most want for the area are safe spaces to recreate, robust trail networks, useable facilities, and conservation officers to ensure illegal activities don't take place. While these are likely outcomes of the proposal, emotion and politics have taken hold in such a way that the Bighorn has become a provincial battleground, rife with misinformation and misunderstanding.

A set of common concerns often accompany proposals to protect landscapes and limit what we can do on those landscapes. One comes from traditional understandings of the "good economy" – a fear that well-es-

tablished industries such as forestry or oil/gas will be driven off the land. This fear was prevalent in the Bighorn debate despite the fact that established industries wouldn't be affected. Misinformation about the Bighorn proposal's impact on industry was used politically to create the perception of economic loss, to create anxiety among locals.

Another concern is about recreation. How will land management decisions impact the what, where, and how associated with my time in nature? Naturally, communities establish connections with their local wilderness spaces and often assume ownership over their favourite mountain meadows and secret camping spots. These are the spaces that make our wilderness adventures special, and it can be frightening when we feel the activities we associate with those spaces, instilled with memories and emotions, are threatened by change.

For example, when I was growing up my parents often took us to Nose Hill Park. There, I had a favourite glacial erratic on the east side of the park. I knew every line and foothold of that lumpy, grey rock; I could tell you which graffiti tags were new and where the ideal spot was to sit if you wanted a view of the city skyline. While city parks are seen as more developed spaces than your public lands and provincial parks, we still had conflicting feelings when a paved trail network was proposed for the park. Would the pathway go near *our* favourite spot? Would it help erode what made that erratic so special? I didn't like having to wait when another party of people arrived at the erratic first, making us circle back for our turn to climb, so the thought of a paved trail network bringing in more traffic definitely wasn't welcome. At the same time, this place wasn't ours alone. Could these paths make the park more accessible? Would they help reduce the erosion of our other favourite footpaths? It became difficult to discern the benefits a paved pathway within the park might offer because we had created a personal connection with the space. It was difficult not to react emotionally.

This is where better combinations of knowledge and process may improve our

understanding. While the above concerns are often addressed within proposals using mechanisms like transition periods, diversified economies or alternative areas to sustain recreation, breaching the emotional barrier isn't easy. When government decisions become personal, it's hard not to let emotion colour how we process information. And this difficulty may be used by those, on all sides of an issue, in order to try to establish the political support and legitimacy they seek. The challenge is for governments to marry sound science and accurate information with processes that provide sufficient time for consultation and try to establish consensus. This seems to be required if governments want to quell fears in some quarters over protecting wild spaces.

This challenge isn't made easier given the lack of accountability in the often fast-paced and sensationalized world of digital media today. We've come to rely on social media platforms as our primary sources of information. Where information sharing was previously carried out through news sources and word of mouth, information has now become as instant as it is disposable. I myself am guilty of skimming across headlines during my morning coffee; quick to react before I've had time to digest, or question/interrogate, what I've read. On our respective social media platforms, we also tend to surround ourselves with similar people, leaving fewer opportunities to think critically about the information sources we're seeing on our feeds. We'll naturally follow news sources that report on our areas of interest, align with our political views and side with our perspective on issues, skewing how information is presented and adding an additional layer of bias. "Group think" isn't a new phenomenon but the way many use social media may be increasing its presence.

Challenges and opportunities

If we hope to generate a broader consensus on the need to protect landscapes, we need to remind ourselves what we have in common with our "opponents" and what are the challenges and opportunities in managing our wilderness spaces.

Overall I'm positive that the opportunities are still abundant. Our government is arguably more open than it has ever been before, taking strides to become more transparent and engaging a variety of groups in land-use decisions. There is still progress to be made, but compared to a generation ago there's a far greater expectation for transparent and accountable governments and they're slowly moving to improve on those fronts.

The greatest opportunity lies in trying to find the missing link in public acceptance for our wild spaces. Rather than playing to a particular group of people, governments should seek to distill the passion that we see among many user groups to achieve progress in managing our wild spaces. This may seem like a daunting task. It likely is and I certainly don't have all the answers to how we perform it well. But, I think we could do far worse than follow the advice offered by William Cronon, one of my favourite environmental historians. Cronon suggests that we take time to remember our position, as people, in wilderness, and by doing so circle back to our shared respect and admiration for the spaces we love.

"Learning to honor the wild—learning to remember and acknowledge the autonomy of the other—means striving for critical self-consciousness in all of our actions. It means the deep reflection and respect must accompany each act of use, and means too that we must always consider the possibility of non-use."

— William Cronon, 1995

The first step is to admit that we have more in common than we often care to admit, followed thereafter by reassessing how much we really know about each other and our relationship with wilderness spaces. In this way we can maybe make a few more connections as we work towards our mutual goal of *having* a wilderness to love. 🌲