

Redemption in Kananaskis



By Ruth McKeeman

Within the large expanse of emotions a young child feels, the overwhelming one I grew up with in Alberta was fear.

Being raised by an angry, volatile, emotionally and physically abusive father cast a dark shadow over my everyday life. As an extremely passionate, fundamentalist, evangelical hellfire-and-brimstone preacher, my dad knew precisely how to instill fear, guilt, and anguish in his audience. I had no reason to question the belief system and values, as we lived in a strict religious community where systemic abuse of all shades was normalized. Because of my terror of eternal torture in hell – where I was sure I was going – I used to pray fervently, daily, that I could somehow be ‘unborn’ to escape this horrific ending to my life story.

Something saved this child, in a deep and visceral way, and that was my dad’s love of wilderness. Every possible chance we got – six people, the canvas tent, bacon, potatoes, bread and jam, wool sleeping bags, binoculars and bug spray – were loaded into the old Chevy, and off we went.

Bleriot ferry campground was a favourite destination, where we roamed on our own in the badlands. No one worried about where we were, and we came back to the campsite when we pleased. We went to many provincial parks and recreation areas. But the best destination was the Kananaskis area, long before the creation of the parks. We would follow the narrow gravel road in, random camp somewhere, and always have a fire to greet the night. We climbed the ridges, lost ourselves in

the trees, learned to read the forest floor and the flowing water. We collected special rocks and learned to identify them. Birds, insects, and small creatures around us also challenged our identification skills. We were unafraid of the larger mammals. We watched foxes and talked quietly to bears and moose. I even saw a wolverine. We listened to the loons, the coyote, the pikas. We tried not to startle the deer.

For this child, these wilderness areas were truly magical places and the time spent in them was life-saving as well as life-giving. There my dad became a completely different person. He was joyful, relaxed, peaceful. He laughed and sang. The threats and punishments vanished. I wasn’t afraid – not of him, nor of hell. I experienced redemption. I was able to believe kindness and love really existed.

According to the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, the Kenney government will either partially close or remove nearly 40 parks sites in Kananaskis Country from the provincial parks system.

As the Kananaskis developed, all of us continued to go there as often as possible. We enjoyed the established trail system, the campgrounds. We paddled the waters. For a few years we enjoyed the privilege of a cabin on the Lower Lake. I taught my parents to cross-country ski there, when they were in their 70s. They both continued to ski those trails well into their 80s. The groomed trails from Pocaterra and

from William Watson Lodge hold countless happy memories for me. Some are of my very excited dad, eyes shining, ear to ear grin, skiing like a bat out of hell. There are memories too of a much more cautious and sedate mum, skiing slowly and happily after two hip replacements. Pulling my own children there in the sled is another wonderful set of memories, as is remembering teaching them to ski on the tracks right outside Pocaterra lodge. I fondly remember teaching ski lessons there for years with my husband, and teaching the students about the value of that whole area.

As I have unpacked my own history as an adult, I am grateful most of all for how the wilderness areas around me literally saved my soul. As a child, I realized my dad was more than hurtfulness. I saw the joy that wild spaces sparked in him. Experiencing this gave me the wondrous gift of hope – hope that life is good and that there is no need for fear.

My children were raised with very frequent extended stays in Kananaskis country as a whole. They have retained, as adults, the values they learned there. All of my dad’s grandchildren have held on to this love of wild landscapes and all are backcountry people.

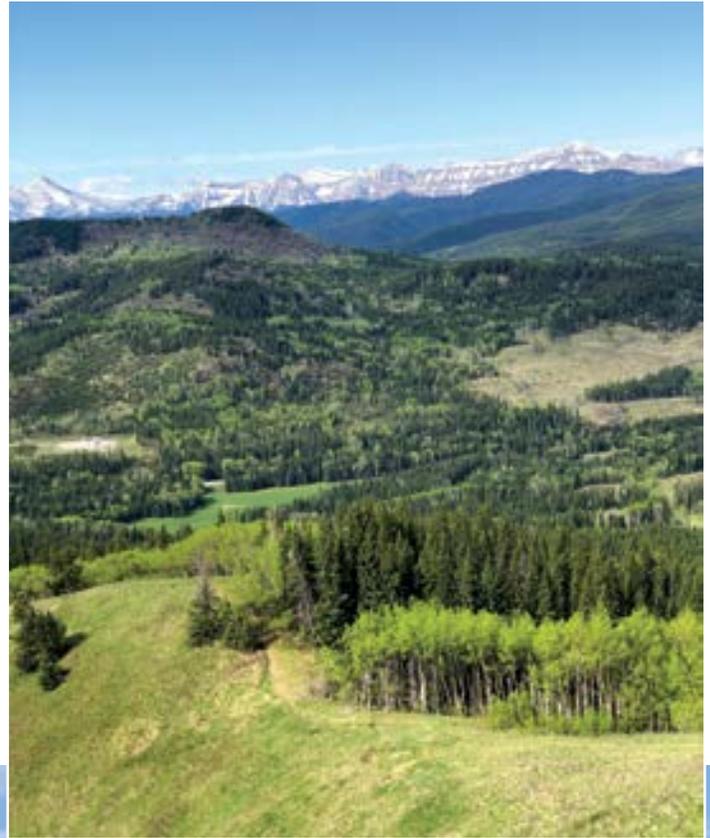
I have brought many visitors to these places that are so meaningful to me. We first do the obligatory Banff and Lake Louise trip, as that is what was promoted to them. Then, we go to the Kananaskis, to many of the places that the government is cutting from the parks system. My visitors are always enchanted, whether by the

adrenaline rush from seeing a mama grizzly and cubs or by the cuteness of the pikas and chipmunks. The water, the landscape, the flowers, the quiet – these are the treasures the government is robbing from Albertans and visitors alike. Our visitors go home to Europe, to Australia, America, and eastern Canada and speak of how grateful they were to experience our provincial parks and recreation areas...and how crowded and over rated Banff and Lake Louise were! And then, they come back.

This stripping of protected status from our provincial wild spaces, so-called ‘under-utilized’ areas, is unprecedented and unconscionable. To pull an old but appropriate word up from my dad’s vocabulary, it is evil. Let’s find our hopeful courage to fight this. 🍓

Ruth has loved the Alberta wilderness for decades and is passionate about preserving and defending it.

*Sunny times, for now, in Kananaskis Country’s Mesa Butte Provincial Recreation Area. Mesa Butte will be removed from the provincial parks system.
PHOTO: © J. WARK*



The gateway to the Gorge Creek Trail in Kananaskis Country’s Sheep River Provincial Park. PHOTO: © J. WARK