

# Becoming Better Neighbours – Coexistence with Wildlife and Wild Spaces

By Nathaniel Schmidt, AWA Director



The places humans live aren't often top of mind when we think about protecting wild spaces and wildlife. For centuries, our Western European culture has seen nature as somewhere "out there," separate from our own "civilised" habits. Nature was something to be controlled, harnessed, resisted and sometimes even feared. It was not to be welcomed into our communities. This mentality has been reflected in the European cultures of past centuries, where the natural world was a source of aesthetic beauty, but quickly disposed of when it got in the way of what we see as progress.

When European settlers started to flood into Western Canada, they brought this philosophy along with them.

They came to "tame the land," which was seen as a wild, chaotic place with little inherent value. This new frontier existed solely as a source of opportunity for those staking their claim, and for the Canadian government, it was an opportunity to assert their sovereignty from coast to coast and provide a stable source of food for the growing urban centres in Eastern Canada.

The effects of this human-centric philosophy can be seen in what remains of Alberta's wilderness today. Aspen parkland and prairie grassland have largely disappeared to make way for urban and rural development across much of Alberta's "white areas."

This influenced the way we built our cities, towns, and rural communities, which are slowly becoming ecological deserts, worn down so that only the hardiest of native species survive amidst pockets of manicured lawns,

mazes of asphalt, and an endless sea of monocrops. It will come as no surprise to anyone to say that humans have left big environmental footprints. Catastrophic climate change and biodiversity collapse are now a daily reality, a result which can, in part, be traced back and attributed to this oppositional relationship with nature.

Luckily, things are starting to change. Cracks are slowly starting to form in the foundation of our adversarial relationship with nature as we grapple with these problems and reimagine the place of our human communities within our shared environment; changing our perspective from seeing the land around us as an obstacle that must be overcome and instead welcoming it back into our communities as a neighbour.

## Coexistence, Adaptation, and Learning how to Live Without Resistance

There are many ways this shift is happening, but at its core are the ideas of coexistence and human adaptation to nature. Both represent a reversal from our historical tendency to force nature to coexist with us and adapt to our preferences.

A compelling description of this shift comes from a group of urban ecologists and biologists in their article *The Seven Lamps of Planning for Biodiversity in the City* which adopts the principle of "Lamps" from an essay on architecture and city planning. In their original form, these Lamps were intended as directions to achieve the standards of good architecture. Here, the authors repurpose this idea and create their

own directions to achieve the standards of good ecology. Their intention is to shift our focus on community building from human-centric to ecocentric. Basically, a Copernican Revolution for human development. They present seven principles or "Lamps" meant to encourage ecologically minded communities:

1. Protect and prioritise remaining ecological assets and habitats.
2. Create connectivity between biological populations and habitats.
3. Construct diverse and complex habitats to attract or retain biodiversity where needed.
4. Build ecological cycles that mimic natural flows of things like water and organic matter.
5. Encourage interactions within and between ecosystem elements.
6. Prioritise benevolent infrastructure to reduce negative impacts on biodiversity.
7. Realise the potential of novel ecosystems and ecological communities.

In a nutshell, applying these lamps welcomes the environment back into our human communities by embracing biodiversity instead of resisting it. Applied effectively, they prioritise coexistence with our environment and encourage adaptation to natural systems. Although the authors applied these Lamps in an urban context, they are universal to all types of human activity that has the potential to alter the environment.

In every region of Alberta, a person can find Indigenous groups, organisations,



Volunteers with the Piper Creek Restoration Agriculture Project hard at work restoring vegetation around the creek as part of their efforts to revitalise the area. Photo © Rene Michalak

volunteers, and people in their own backyards putting principles like these into action. Each activity is unique and reflects the diversity of Alberta's ecosystems and the people who care about them. Many of these local and regional entities operate independently within their own communities but are collectively responsible for improving the ecological health of our province and the ecological awareness of all of us who call it home.

The active projects across Alberta embodying these principles are too numerous to name and would need an entire issue of the Advocate - or more - to showcase. However, a few examples show how valuable this way of living can be.

Take for instance the Piper Creek Restoration Agriculture Project, a

collaboration between nearly 20 community groups, environmental organisations, businesses, and government entities. This project has completely transformed an area of Piper Creek, just south of the Red Deer landfill and formerly lost to human activity, back to a healthy riparian ecosystem.

Piper Creek went beyond restoration, and its stated purpose was to "repair and improve the historical impacts on an important riparian and agricultural area in the Red Deer River watershed by regenerating and enhancing Red Deerians' understanding of, and relation with, the natural world."

This approach prioritises healthy ecosystems while recognising their important place within the surrounding human community. Emphasising the important role of Red Deerians ensures

Piper Creek becomes part of the fabric of the community and breaks down the barriers between humans and their environment. People are welcomed to experience and take part in this place, learn about what it has to offer, and form a connection with its health and survival. Investment in the creek becomes investment in the community.

Two other initiatives show another way Albertans are helping each other better understand our relationship with nature. The Edmonton Urban Coyote Project (EUCP) and Lethbridge Rattlesnake Mitigation Program (LRMP) are shifting the narrative on two species that have often been demonised while also giving them the space they need to survive in the midst of population centres. Instead of feeling fear or even hatred towards coyotes and rattlesnakes, these initiatives

encourage people to understand the personalities of both animals and learn how they can live with them instead of in opposition to them.

The EUCP encourages people to report sightings and avoid conflicts, while providing educational resources about coyotes. These strategies empower Edmontonians to take positive action, giving them the tools to avoid negative human-coyote interactions and appreciate their wild neighbours. The same is true of the LRMP, which is run through the City of Lethbridge and the Helen Schuler Nature Centre. Through education and mitigation, the program gives people a healthy respect for the 200-400 rattlesnakes that call Lethbridge home and helps them to avoid potentially dangerous interactions. The LRMP also has the unique distinction of employing its own rattlesnake consultant, Ryan Heavyhead, who comes to the rescue when the snakes find themselves somewhere they might not be welcome. The positive roles coyotes and rattlesnakes can play for nature and humans are also highlighted. For example, coyotes and rattlesnakes both help control rodent populations and therefore help control the spread of disease.

All three of these initiatives are maintaining an ecological asset by changing the way we think about it. In the process, they are reimagining the relationship between humans and our wild neighbours.

## Changing our Minds

Coexisting with and adapting to our environment is key to mitigating the effects of climate change and biodiversity collapse. But it also has the potential to enrich the places we live and give them a meaningful identity through preserving our natural heritage. Projects like Piper Creek, EUCP, LRMP and myriad others in every corner of Alberta preserve our wild spaces and wildlife while changing people's minds about our place in the environment.

Here's a hypothetical scenario to explain. One day you're on a nature walk with a local naturalist learning

about invasive plant species in a river valley and helping to identify them. On the walk, you learn about the characteristics of black-capped chickadees, which are common in the valley, and also how healthy river valleys support them and other animals like American mink, porcupines and countless bird species.

The next day at home, you start paying attention to what's around you for the first time. You notice a group of chickadees trading calls outside your window when you see another bird. It's like a chickadee but not quite the same. You do some research and realise it's a red-breasted nuthatch. What is that? Is it native to your area? How can it survive in the middle of the small city where you live?

You keep reading and learn they're native to a large part of North America and require coniferous forests to survive in Western Canada. Aha! That's why they've made a home in the middle of an urban landscape - there are coniferous trees everywhere. Your reading leads you to discover that many other birds in Alberta survive on Prairie grassland. Outside your window, you look at your yard and your neighbour's yard. You see uniform green grass everywhere, which is much different from the grassland you read about.

You learn that this grass and some of the trees preferred by towns and cities don't do much to support the species from the river valley, which used to be found all over your small city. The next year, you decide to rip up your grass and replace it with native species. This isn't easy, but a few years later your experiment is starting to show some success. Your yard is no longer quiet and calm. It's full of bugs, birds and small rodents. You no longer need to water, and every year it comes back a bit stronger and richer. Where the surrounding environment was once resisted through fertilising, watering and mowing, there is now a rich ecosystem thriving. Without really realising it, you have put the seven Lamps to work in your own backyard.

Rancher Joe Engelhart represents a

real-life story of transformation from resistance to coexistence. AWA told his story in the pages of the Advocate nearly a decade ago but it's worth telling once more. For years, Joe has worked on the Spruce Ranch Cooperative south of Longview and like many other ranchers in North America, he had to cull wolves to protect his cattle.

In 2003, he decided to start doing things differently. With the help of biologist Charles Mamo, he learned about the habits of the wolves around the cooperative. He watched their movements, identified their den sites and managed his cattle to minimise conflict. This isn't easy work, and it requires Joe to maintain a consistent human presence on his land. But the results are impressive. A January 2022 CBC feature on Joe revealed that he shot his last wolf 19 years ago and is now the focus of a University of Wisconsin study on how to manage wolves without killing them. All of this is a result of his desire to find a way to coexist and adapt to the land around him, something that worked out better for him, his cattle and the wolves of the Eastern Slopes.

Now imagine this approach to wildlife and wild spaces on a country-wide scale. By taking time to learn about and understand our wild neighbours, we can completely transform our relationship with them and improve our own lives in the process. Individual stories like Joe's and the collective efforts from dedicated people across Alberta are helping to change the way we live with our wild neighbours. Their stories teach us that the ecological richness we have near so many of the places we call home is worth preserving for the health of our environment, which is also crucial to our quality of life. The better we adapt and coexist with our environment instead of forcing our environment to adapt to us, the better we'll all be for it. 🐾

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