

Finding Wild Spaces in Urban Places

By Norine Ambrose, *Executive Director, Cows and Fish*



Do you ever wake up with this sense of some dream you had, but no matter how hard you try, you can't remember what it was about? You have a sense or feeling, but no concrete understanding. I think that same hard-to-catch feeling is true when we try and pin down the feeling many of us get when we go into wild spaces – a deep sense of joy, or reinvigorating energy, or wonder. But it is hard to pin down why.

When I go to an urban park, I have different expectations from when I go to a national park or public land in the western part of Alberta; but I still hope to gain some of that energy, joy of the outdoors, a sense of being in the right place. Likewise, when I am in rural, settled landscapes, whether farms or acreages, I still want that feeling. And I expect that those using land across Alberta - from urban green spaces around built stormwater ponds to mountain parks - want it too. They are enjoying, while also stewarding, these places to be healthy.

Because of the work I do at Cows and Fish, I know I have a heavy focus on riparian areas; those shores, floodplains and stream banks that surround waterbodies and have moister soils than surrounding lands. It is hard to go for a walk and just blissfully ignore the weeds, bare soil, or lack of deep-rooted willows and cattails that surround popular spots to hike, fish, or skip rocks, including in urban areas. Often, we have built our cities expecting we have to 'give up' expectations of healthy, functioning landscapes, particularly in urban areas. But why? Why can't I get that 'feeling'? Why can't we have urban riparian areas

that filter water, that provide wildlife habitat, that reduce flood and droughts?

Some of our big urban river valleys, from Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River and ravines to Lethbridge's Oldman River valley with its coulees, are expansive and quite natural. Meanwhile, many smaller urban ponds, natural wetlands or streams, squeezed within and between residential and industrial areas, offer an amazing opportunity to recharge and support elements of wilderness and natural ecosystem functions, if we help them do so. Our use of land and water is cumulative, including in urban areas; positive actions are cumulative, as are negative activities that degrade the land and water. Strolling around an urban stormwater pond in my neighbourhood, I am optimistic for the future when I see more than the typical rocks lining its edges. I am encouraged by the cattails and willows, acting as singing perches for red-winged blackbirds, slowing down runoff and trapping pollutants. I still hope to see the lawn mowing around the edges reduced, to give the chance for more filtration, more habitat.

I've learned over 22 years working with Cows and Fish, now in our 30th year, that the same ecologically sustainable principles apply to grazing, to off-highway vehicles, hiking and lakefront and urban residential lots. It is just different practices of use that apply to each. In collaborative work with the Alberta Low Impact Development Partnership a few years ago, we developed joint content to help urban dwellers to understand the connection from Street to Stream (www.Cowsandfish.org/digital-stories/street-to-stream). Supporting healthy rivers and

clean water doesn't start at the riverbank, but in the street, in the yard by trapping water and reducing erosion.

In my own new-to-me urban yard, I'm working hard to implement key principles that have been the cornerstone of my work with Cows and Fish by working to create habitat, to hold and build soil, and planting perennials and native plants. This also includes supporting more plants, balancing intensity of use and adding rest to plants (aka mowing less). I try and shovel the snow onto my lawn, not off the driveway and into the street. By keeping the runoff on site, I take the pressure off our natural waterways that otherwise have to deal with it, not to mention creating moist soils to naturally water the lawn, reducing water demands later. Through my actions, I can contribute to healthy landscapes, adding just a little nature to my own community.

Urban green spaces, combined with our front lawns, backyards and boulevards, all have potential to add ecological function from street to stream, and contribute to lighten our hearts and our steps – bringing that feeling of wild spaces into our urban places. How do you find that feeling in your urban spaces? 🌱

Norine Ambrose is Executive Director of Cows and Fish, also known as the Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society. Cows and Fish works to foster a better understanding of how improvements in grazing and other management of riparian areas can enhance landscape health and productivity, for the benefit of landowners, agricultural producers, communities and others who use and value riparian areas.