

Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture - Modern Day Rebels Christyann Olson, Wilderness Defender

By Nigel Douglas

If there is one thing AWA has become known for, it is the agility to respond to a rapidly changing world, and the 2021 Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture was no exception. Unable to host a traditional face-to-face lecture because of Covid regulations, this year's lecture and awards were held online, with AWA supporters in Alberta and beyond joining from the comfort of their own homes.

There have been some incredibly deserving recipients of AWA's Wilderness Defenders award since it was first given in 2001, but none could be considered more worthy than this year's recipient, outgoing AWA Executive Director Christyann Olson. Christyann joined AWA board members and past presidents Cliff Wallis and Vivian Pharis for an informal look back at her long involvement with AWA, which culminated in her appointment as executive director in 2000.

Christyann paid tribute to the early AWA pioneers who set the tone for so much that was to come; characters such as Dick Pharis, William Michalsky, Floyd Stromstedt, and Steve Dixon all preceded her as Wilderness Defenders Award recipients. "They were rebels," said Christyann. "They pulled away from the Alberta Fish and Game Association, because their mandate really didn't include the direct action that was needed."

From these rebellious roots, AWA began. "AWA was feisty," she said. "Those rebels set the stage for 56 years."

AWA's early successes, including protection of the White Goat, Siffleur, South Ghost and Willmore Wilderness, have been followed by many notable achievements under Christyann's tenure, though she clearly struggled a little when asked to narrow it down to just ten highlights of her time with AWA.

1. Hillhurst Cottage School. AWA had been leasing this grand old 1910 school from the City of Calgary since the 1970s, so when in 2012 the City decided to sell the building, AWA's future suddenly looked uncertain. Christyann, of course, looked on this as an opportunity. With the help of board members, she set out to convince the City to sell the building to AWA, and then



A favourite prairie wild space, one Christyann defended and fought for through the years; a battle that was won at least in part because the company proposing to drill went bankrupt! Photo © D. Olson

to raise the considerable funds required to provide AWA with a permanent home. Thanks to more than 500 donors, AWA raised sufficient funds to secure the building's long-term future. "On June 25 2015 we celebrated AWA's fiftieth year with dignitaries including Mayor Nenshi," remembers Christyann. "One of my best memories of that celebration is neighbourhood kids that came with their lemonade stand money and a great big group hug!"

2. Wild Spaces Map. Thanks to a collaborative effort from staff and volunteers, the updated 2002 version of AWA's Wild Spaces map took a big step forward in providing the level of detail and complexity that Alberta's wild spaces deserved. "We needed detail, we needed on-the-ground research and information to know if an area had the potential to be part of our protected areas network," remembered Christyann. That revised 2002 map won an award at the City of Calgary's GIS competition. As the technology improved, the 2019 version of the map included an inter-active online version.

3. Climb for Wilderness. For 25 years, the annual climb at the Calgary Tower was AWA's primary fund-raising and awareness-raising event, involving more than 1000 climbers, and armies of volunteers. It grew to include the annual Run for Wilderness, an environment fair, and more than 100 murals painted by AWA supporters "to help people to learn more about Alberta's wild spaces." When the Calgary Tower was no longer available, the event simply upped and moved

to the Bow Tower (though for Christyann it was by no means simple!).

In 2019, it became apparent the Bow Tower would no longer be offered as a venue, AWA once again showed its nimbleness and moved to develop the Adventures for Wilderness program. Following an established tradition, the program "depends on volunteers, on being out there enjoying wild spaces," said Christyann, though now it is "far away from staircases inside buildings!"

4. Oldman Dam. In the late 1980s, plans to build the \$350-million Oldman Dam were opposed by a huge alliance of environmental groups, residents and First Nations representatives. "The rebels were called upon once again," recalled Christyann. "We went door to door seeking signatures on petitions to stop the dam." AWA helped to organise a concert with Ian Tyson and Gordon Lightfoot, attended by almost 8,000 people. "People were inspired to care," said Christyann, and indeed more than \$20,000 in donations was raised that day. Although the Oldman Dam went ahead anyway, perhaps AWA can take some credit for the fact that no more dams on that scale have been built since.

5. Working with industry. AWA and Shell Canada went head-to-head in the late 1980s, culminating in protests against proposed gas wells on top of Corner Mountain (Prairie Bluff) in the Castle and even an injunction served on Vivian and other board members by Shell Canada. Shell ignored AWA's arguments that new developments in directional drilling meant the gas fields could

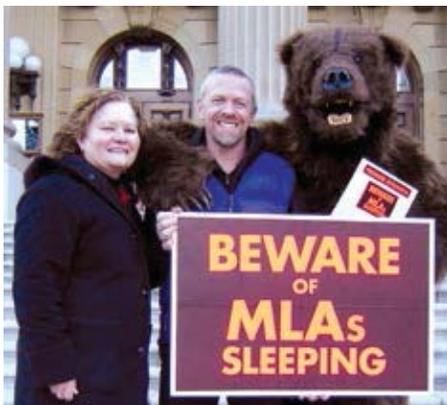
be easily accessed without the need for access infrastructure, or destructive wells on top of the mountain.

Early on in her tenure as Executive Director, Christyann and AWA's board agreed to meet with Shell to talk about restoration work in the Waterton field. Over time those meetings continued to develop, resulting in greatly improved working relations. "This helped ensure that best decisions – including expensive ones like buried power lines and avoiding stream crossings – were put in place to minimise environmental damage," pointed out Christyann.

6. The Castle. "In 2015, 50 years after AWA's inception, the birthplace of AWA was finally given... some protection," remembered Christyann. She paid tribute, once again, to the countless individuals who played their part over the years. "Modern day rebels like Gord Peterson, Rick Collier, Sid Marty, Mike Judd, Peter Sherrington and so many others deserve recognition for taking a stand against logging in Castle," she said. "On their behalf we are grateful for the Castle Wildland Park and Castle Provincial Park."

As is so often the case, the work isn't done. "The fine print really matters and to this day we are still waiting for the promised protection to be enacted by removing off-Highway vehicles from critical westslope cutthroat trout habitat," she emphasised.

7. The Bighorn. "Through the years, so many of us have worked to see the Bighorn protected," said Christyann. This is a fight that AWA has still not won, so the work continues. "The Bighorn is a real jewel and we still hope we will see real protection," she stressed.



Christyann with Nigel Douglas and our bear mascot - protesting the Spring Grizzly Bear Hunt on the steps of the legislature in Edmonton. Photo © AWA



Christyann celebrating the twinning of Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Provincial Park with the Dalai Lakes Wildland in Inner Mongolia. Picture second from right is Bu Tegan, director of the Dalai Lakes National Nature Reserve Management. Photo: © S. Nichols

Christyann talked about some of the many projects that AWA has been involved with in the Bighorn, including garbage-clearance expeditions, trail maintenance trips on the Bighorn Historic Trail and AWA's Bighorn book. Not to mention AWA's innovative Bighorn trail-monitoring project, described by Christyann as "a 20-year project to look at damage that would be done to trails authorised for motorised use." Data from AWA's work proves that "there are places too fragile to have motorised recreation allowed."

8. Grizzlies. "In 2006, another great success was helping to have the spring grizzly bear hunt stopped," Christyann recalls, remembering the award-winning media campaign created by AWA board member Frank Calder and his team. But, as is so often the case, even when AWA secures a win, battles may have to be fought again. "We'll need to be vigilant and base our arguments on the best science available to make sure we keep grizzlies in wild spaces in the years to come."

9. Sage grouse. Christyann recalls being "horrified with the lack of urgency to stop the extirpation that sage-grouse were facing in 2012." Always looking for new ways to make its case, AWA held an emergency summit of scientists and other experts, and the resulting communique started the ball rolling towards protection of these critically-endangered birds. "Using the last tool in our tool kit, we went to court and forced the federal environment

minister to produce an emergency protection order," she explained, describing it as "the slowest emergency ever."

"Greater sage-grouse are not out of trouble yet," she pointed out. "Some progress has been made in removing infrastructure and orphan wells in primary habitat." With the help of privately-conserved land, there is a chance, but we need to do more to protect critical habitat on public land.

10. Hay Zama. Cliff described the "long, sordid story" of AWA's involvement in Hay Zama. "The indigenous people of the Dene Tha' stood firm, they were so supportive of protection in their homelands, and we were happy to help in any way," said Cliff. He went on to describe AWA's work in the twinning of Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Provincial Park with the Dalai Lakes Wildland in Inner Mongolia. Both are important Ramsar wetlands with minority indigenous populations. Christyann concurred, referring to a "story of cooperation and collaboration, of convincing decision makers, and working with indigenous peoples."

Christyann finished her lecture with a toast to Wild Alberta. "May we celebrate the legacy we have, that we will leave for our children and for theirs. May we all have the wisdom to care enough to make a difference for wilderness, wildlife and wild water."

Nigel Douglas is a former AWA Conservation Specialist now living and working in the UK's version of Wilderness.