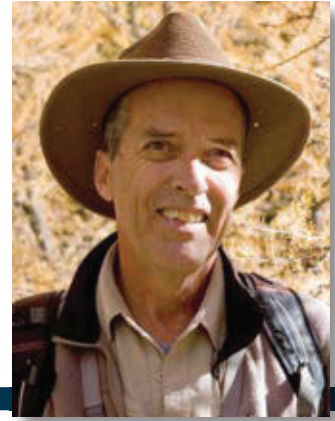


Op-Ed: Of Stuffed Grouse and Big Tents

By Kevin Van Tighem



There is a sharp-tailed grouse on our cabin wall, balanced on a piece of driftwood, that stares at me through glassy eyes as if wondering why it's still there. Or why I am? It's been pondering the same questions ever since 1990 when the Alberta Wilderness Association held its 25th annual general meeting in Pincher Creek, Alberta. The AGM included, as usual, a silent auction.

I'd been a relatively passive member of the AWA since joining back when I was in university, but the environmental controversies of the day – massive boreal forest giveaways and pulp mill expansions, commercial over-development of the national parks and a dam on the Oldman River – had taken me from a mere consumer of the wild to a passionate defender of it.

It was a wonderful gathering, as is often the case when good people gather in rural halls. Some of my conservation heroes were there: people like Vivian and Dick Pharis, Cliff Wallis, Dianne Pachal, Ray Rasmussen and two of the organization's original founders: Steve Dixon and Bill Michalsky. Mike Judd was there, with his sharp eyes, droll humour and simmering anger over what oil and gas companies were doing to his beloved Castle Wilderness. There were long lanky cowgirls and cowboys, earnest young environmentalists dropping Latin names and multisyllabic jargon into intense conversations by the bar, and quiet people with far-looking eyes who seemed to wonder why they were in this crowded room on such a nice evening. It was an eclectic gathering of people whose only real similarity was their love of wild nature and their determination to protect it from bad ideas.

I recall feeling a deep and humble affection for those people, but also feeling that I didn't quite belong. My unfortunate solution to that was to drink three beers, probably a bit too fast. Then I wandered around the auction tables in a warm and happy haze. And that's how I ended up with a stuffed grouse, originally donated to the AWA by Garry Hackler.

Back home, my partner Gail looked at me, looked at the grouse in my hand, looked back at me again, until I admitted that I'd maybe gotten a bit carried away. Fortunately, neither the wife nor the grouse have ever left me; the grouse has accompanied us now to seven different homes and seems relieved, as am I, that the moves are finally over. We are quite happy here in our cabin by the Oldman River. It may have been an introvert's beer-fuelled mistake to bid once too often on that

grouse, but I'm glad I did. It continues to remind me of a golden evening among fine people, united by love of our home place and the often-desperate feeling of watching others dismantling it.

But it also reminds me of failure and disillusionment, because in the years since that gathering it can't be said that we have saved a whole lot. We put the brakes on a few things, but the Oldman dam got built and filled. The pulp mills expanded; surrounding forests are now mangy with clearcuts. Commercial exploitation of the national parks slowed, but continues. Native prairie – unbelievably, given how much we've lost and how many of its species are now at risk – continues to be ploughed under. Birds that were common when I was a kid are now endangered. Back then, we had awful environment ministers like Ty Lund, and it seems that we still have



A photo of the stuffed sharp-tailed grouse donated by Garry Hackler and now mounted at Kevin's cabin. Photo © K. Van Tighem

awful environment ministers today such as Jason Nixon who has fortunately been moved to another post. Bad things keep happening to our province.

Loving Alberta is like loving someone suffering progressive dementia: bit by bit the place is losing its identity, mislaying pieces of itself; forgetting who it is. At that AWA gathering back in 1990 we were celebrating the organization's birthday and our shared passion; not our victories. Out beyond the edge of town, there was little cause for celebration in a place that seemed constantly at war with its very nature. But maybe that has changed?

Earlier this summer I joined another gathering where I again felt both out of place, and profoundly grateful for the people with whom I had the good fortune to spend the evening. Gathered around the fireplace were Niitsitapii water protectors, urban environmentalists, foothills ranchers, musicians, business owners, moms, dads – again, an eclectic mix. But this time we weren't celebrating an anniversary. We were gathered to celebrate a nearly unprecedented environmental victory: saving Alberta's Eastern Slopes from our government's misguided plans to fill them with coal mines. In our most critical source water region. Upstream of endangered native trout populations, and in the midst of a worsening climate catastrophe.

This idea was stupid. But stupid ideas have never stopped previous Alberta governments from pursuing them anyways. What stopped them this time was a massive uprising of Albertans – from all walks of life, all political persuasions and every kind of lifestyle, all determined to save the Eastern Slopes. Social media helped. It probably helped that the issue blew up during the Covid pandemic when people were stuck at home, frustrated and annoyed. It certainly helped when celebrities like Corb Lund and Amber Marshall stepped up to give the issue wider reach. And of course, it was one of the least competent governments in Alberta's history that launched the coal fiasco and tried to manage the outrage. Still, looking around at the happy faces of people who had never even met one another before the coal issue blew up, I couldn't help asking myself: why this victory? Why didn't we win those

other ones?

The reasons, I believe, are complex and worthy of more words than I have to work with here. But besides the contributing factors already listed above, I think one of the most overlooked but important ones is that the coal fight was fought, for the most part, from a non-partisan stance. A lot of the strongest voices were from the rural foothills, from people who had actually voted for the UCP government and who consequently felt most badly betrayed by the coal surprise. Coal, after all, had never been part of the UCP election platform.

Many others, of course, were in fact NDP supporters, nostalgic for those few brief years when we actually had a brilliant environment minister in Shannon Phillips. But, following the social media campaign to save our headwaters, I observed that every time someone tried to dumb down the debate by blaming conservative politics, others would chime in to point out how many conservative voters were fighting for water security and intact mountains with the rest of us. The government certainly tried to make coal a partisan issue. That way they could dismiss the uproar as simply being the opposition party playing politics. But they abandoned that approach when it became clear that they were accusing their own supporters of being their opposition. Not the best re-election strategy to pursue.

The coal campaign became the "big tent" that the UCP had always pretended to be. Our big tent was defined by who we are: Albertans who care about the places we love – and what we believe in: clean water, native trout, healthy landscapes, intact mountain landscapes, and honest governments. Coal strip-mining threatened all of those. Everyone crowded into the same tent and stayed there because they belonged. Including many who identify as conservative but who had only lately realized their mistake in thinking that the UCP was a big-tent party, rather than a far-right insiders' clique. They felt welcome in the growing conservation coalition against coal, made new friends, and stayed.

The coal issue is not dead. But it's been put to sleep by caring Albertans who were able to unite behind what we love, rather than around political lines. We'll almost

certainly have to beat that coal dragon down again, unfortunately; conservationists must win our battles against bad ideas repeatedly. Still, we may be arriving at a stage in this province's history when conservation starts to see more wins than losses. It's a bittersweet thing to say that, because we've already lost so much. But it's inspiring too. Albertans seem to be finally waking up to who we are (or who we could be), understanding why wilderness matters, and how it's up to us to save it. One betrayal too many, and everything has changed.

How do we make that hopeful prediction come true? In part it means striving not to label people based on their politics or how they live but instead, to remind them constantly of who we all are: Albertans, living in an Alberta worth fighting for. Driving home from this latest gathering I glanced into the ditch and there, staring back at me, was a sharp-tailed grouse. A live one, at home in its native Alberta landscape, 57 years after a small, lonesome core of caring, determined people founded the AWA. We're not lonesome anymore. Let's keep it that way. Conservation is not a partisan issue. It's a human issue. An Albertan issue. And we are all Albertans. Coal showed us how conservation can bring us together, making us truly a force to be reckoned with.

Let's keep pulling our neighbours into the big tent that coal built, and let's be careful not to push anyone out. Wild Alberta is the best part of who we are; together, we can keep it that way. All of us, and all our relations. 🍄

Kevin Van Tighem is a long-term AWA supporter and former Superintendent of Banff National Park. He is the author of 14 books on conservation and wildlife, including The Homeward Wolf, Heart Waters: Sources of the Bow River and Wild Animals of the Canadian Rockies. Ever the determined optimist, Kevin feels that no matter how bad the current ecological situation is, it can be fixed, but only if enough people become mobilized or engaged.