

Departments

Wilderness Defender Award

Richard Thomas: A Many-Caused Rebel

By Vivian Pharis, AWA Board Member Emeritus



Richard Thomas - A man of many causes and principled to the point that he'd never let a career trump his values.

I knew Richard during his “Alberta Years” of environmental activism, from the 1980s to the early 2000s. I knew that he had left Alberta around 2005 to take on what seemed a tailor-made job for him professionally. What I did not know was that his leaving was primarily to escape stifling Alberta politics, or that he'd immersed himself for a year in a solo round-the-world shore-birding trip, ending in England. Or that he'd returned to Alberta in 2007, financially broke and seeking a job. That's when he learned he had a single day left to apply for what seemed like a perfect-fit job. He made the application deadline and aced the competition. Off he went to the end of the world, at the barren tip of the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland. The job was manager of Mistaken Point Ecological Reserve, one of the most important fossil sites on the planet, where he played a major role in getting it recognized as a World Heritage Site partly through his well-honed skills as a writer.

Of course, Richard was a prime candidate for recognition as an AWA Wilderness and Wildlife Defender because of his decades of advocacy work in Alberta alone. So, I was delighted to

approach him by phone and to hear he would accept, but how was I to interview him? I decided that maybe I would just drive over there – to his home in Portugal Cove South – and do it in person, but that's my story, not his. Anyway, after I spent hours hiking in a cold, howling gale across the tundra and over the 565-million-year-old Ediacaran fossils (the oldest known fossil multicellular organisms in the world) above Trepassey Bay, I then spent the evening of June 14 with Richard in his cozy fisherman's cottage. Richard was full of stories, and we thoroughly enjoyed dredging up the past and analyzing it through the lens of time. So many events, deadly serious at the time, had become either head-shakingly worse or could now be seen as hilarious in retrospect.

Richard had come to Calgary in 1981 to join the geology department at the University of Calgary, as a sedimentologist. This was his first career job, after completing a PhD at the University of Bristol and spending two years as a Post-Doctoral Fellow in Oklahoma. He'd grown up in Brecon, a small agricultural town in the south of Wales (now part of Brecon Beacons National Park) where he'd enjoyed an ideal childhood - fishing, roaming through nature and learning to love everything outdoors. He chose to study geology in order to spend his life outside doing field work. However, an undergraduate course in ecology further opened his eyes to the natural world and to the fact that all was not necessarily well. The “Club of Rome's” report and books like *Silent Spring* made him think more critically about his professional future. There would be no working for oil, gas, or mining companies for him!

His thesis was on ancient river deposits and fossil plant spores, spanning two volumes with over 600 pages. Parts were published years later as a 56-page professional paper. If nothing else, this thesis taught Richard how to write,

and how to write well, something that would serve him perhaps better than his knowledge of geology.

After getting “the boot” from the University of Calgary in 1987, Richard took up the life of an environmental activist, spending nearly two decades writing and speaking for most of Alberta's naturalist and conservation groups. But his talents were such that, despite being on various political blacklists, he was repeatedly hired by the Alberta government. He served as parks planner for the Lakeland district for several years, and between 1995 and 1998 he was employed as an environmental researcher/writer for Alberta's Special Places 2000 initiative. During this time, he wrote the first GIS-based disturbance layer analysis of the Foothills Natural Region: this initiated a whole new assessment of ecological integrity, or lack of it, in Alberta. The report opened people's eyes to how rapidly Alberta's wilderness was being converted by industry and creeping urbanization.

His 1998 report *The Final Frontier* discussing Alberta's boreal forest, generated huge controversy when the journalist Andrew Nikiforuk wrote an article based on it that made the front page of the *Globe & Mail*, and exposed Alberta for liquidating its dry mixed-wood forests at a faster rate than Brazil. Further black-listing resulted, but the findings also triggered many new requests for writing, speaking, and presenting to the public and media. Richard even presented on the state of the boreal forest to a federal Senate Committee.

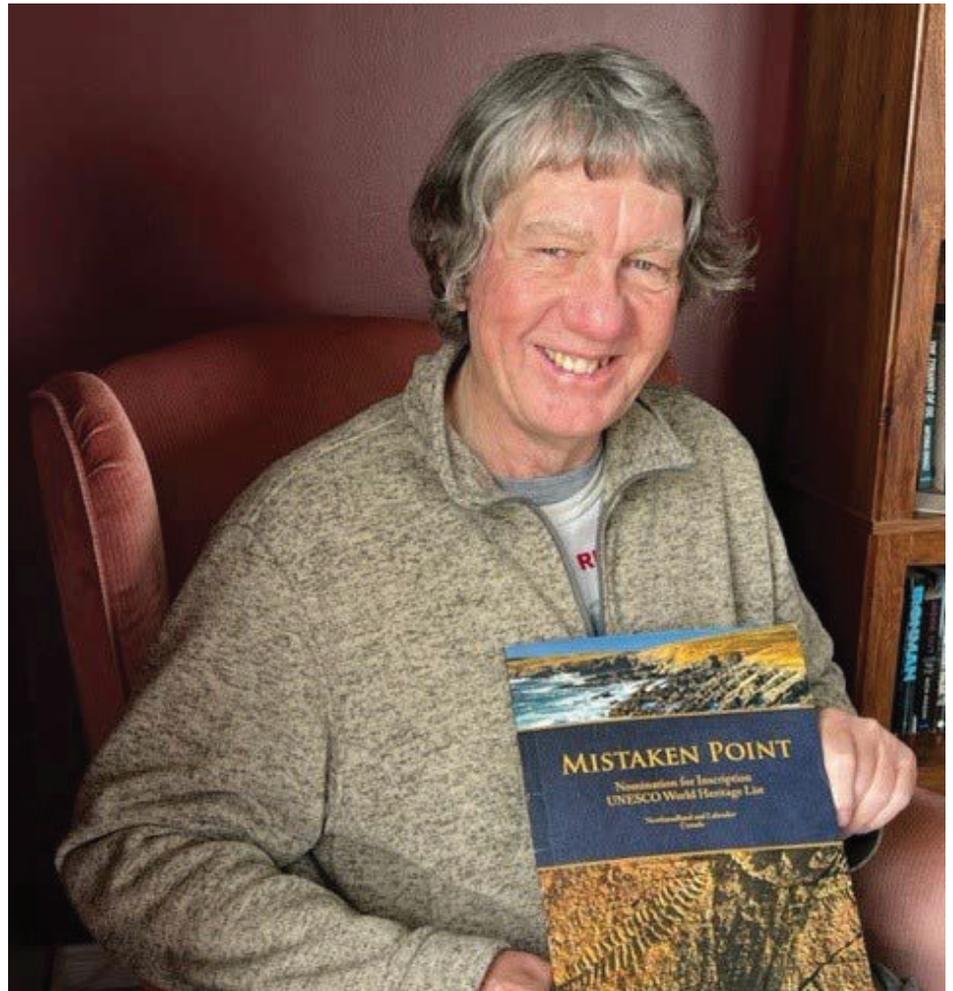
Always an avid birder, Richard was skilled at showing how boreal birds are key indicators of habitat health. His knowledge of birds led to jobs writing birding guides for various groups including government, and people sought him out to lead birding trips, including National Geographic and *The Nature of Things*. Richard could use the plight of birds to alert the public to a range of

ecological threats and issues. He could also be bitingly savage in bird defence as when he wrote “The Attack of the Killer Scapegoats” published in the Lac La Biche Post and the Edmonton Journal, after the local Tory MLA claimed that double-crested cormorants caused the demise of the Lac La Biche commercial walleye fishery and was demanding a law to cull fish-eating birds.

One of his primary achievements was *Making Connections: Alberta's Neotropical Migratory Birds*, a 24-page booklet explaining the plight and importance of hundreds of species of birds migrating between the tropics and the temperate zones of the Americas, with Canada's boreal playing a key role in breeding cycles. The self-published booklet, subsequently reprinted by the AWA, was written in the early 1990s and was used extensively to try and defend the boreal forest from massive clearcutting by large foreign-owned pulp mills which had been invited into the province starting in 1989.

It is Richard's claim that AWA, through the support of Cliff Wallis, initiated his life as an environmental rebel when Cliff approached him at the geology department to review geotechnical documents associated with a proposed dam on the Oldman River. The implications he saw affected him and caused him to want to speak out. Since then, Richard periodically researched and wrote for, led field trips for, and represented the AWA in many instances, particularly associated with the Boreal Natural Region - he even served for a year on the AWA board.

At an AWA board meeting in 1990, Richard astonished members by pulling a crumpled, used hanky from his pocket and plopping it on the boardroom table. He used this disgusting medium to illustrate an idea burning in his head. AWA was influenced enough to commission its first and only painting. Richard had already approached well known Calgary artist Joice Hall, and she was already planning her approach. He was “blown away” with her enthusiasm and the final large work entitled *Stop the Rip-off*. AWA used the image to produce hundreds of timely and effective posters,



Richard at his home in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland in June 2022. Photo © V. Pharis

and the original work now resides at the AWA. Joice Hall perfectly rendered Richard's idea of a feller-buncher ripping back the colourful, natural skin (hanky) from Alberta, to reveal a stark industrial landscape of clearcuts, farmed wildlife and overwhelming human appropriation. The image is as true today as then.

Undoubtedly, Richard's crowning achievement has been the work he's done in Newfoundland, against considerable odds, to raise the stature of Mistaken Point Ecological Reserve to World Heritage Site status. In 2008, Richard became Mistaken Point's first full-time employee and he worked to enhance protection of the site and set up interpretation programs and in 2010 he became the lead in seeking world heritage status. But in 2013, a 30% cut to Newfoundland and Labrador parks budgets threatened to kill this initiative. However, a coalition of stakeholders – the Mistaken Point Ambassadors – raised

enough funds to continue the project. Meanwhile, Richard was elevated to Reserve Geologist and rallied an army of scientists and citizens to successfully and triumphantly take the project forward.

Along with Queen's University's Dr. Guy Narbonne, Richard was able to assemble an extremely well-documented, illustrated and well-written 138-page book, that could not have failed to impress the UNESCO committee and win it over. In 2016, UNESCO's committee met in Turkey where political unrest cut the meeting short, but not before Mistaken Point was formally inscribed as a World Heritage Site.

But once again, bureaucracy was foreclosing on his principles, until finally at the end of 2017, early retirement offered him a way to escape. He continues to reside in Portugal Cove South, a barren spot, but a paradise for a devout birder like Richard.