

Departments

AWA's Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture with Richard Thomas – If You're Not Outraged, You're Not Paying Attention

By Nigel Douglas

AWA's Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture returned on November 18, with an inspiring, at times sobering, presentation by environmental activist, and long-time friend of AWA, Dr. Richard Thomas. Richard has never been a person to hold back when something needs to be said, and it was good to see that he has not changed. He jumped straight into his presentation with some scene-setting realities, including that:

- Our species is wholly dependent on the ecosystem services provided by a fully functioning biosphere; and
- Humanity is facing a self-induced existential crisis whose key components are climate change, biodiversity loss, overpopulation, and pollution.

"We have had a collective failure to face up to unpleasant realities," he said, a theme that he returned to throughout his lecture.

Alberta

Richard talked about his experiences working as an environmental activist in Alberta; "in terms of environmental politics, a very surreal place." He referred to the value-laden terms used by industry and government in Alberta. Creating protected areas is called 'sterilising the land'; clearcutting forests is 'harvesting'; draining wetlands is 'improving the land'; old growth forest is 'overmature.' "It is very important for environmentalists not to adopt industry language, which suggests you tacitly support their practices," he stressed.

Richard discussed the Alberta government's 1988 decision – "with zero democratic input" – to sign away 15 percent of the province in two huge Forest Management Agreements to Japanese-owned pulp mills, Daishowa and Alberta Pacific. "There were large protests in Alberta,

the like of which have not been seen since," he remembered.

Then in 1992 he started work as Lakeland District planner for Alberta Parks. "I expected to be battling the oil industry and Alberta Pacific in defence of Lakeland," he says ruefully, "whereas I was battling their proxies. The main enemies of Lakeland were the province's own departments of Energy and Forestry."

From 1995 to 98, Richard was under contract with Alberta Parks as part of the Special Places 2000 initiative, looking for the best candidate Protected Areas in the Foothills and Boreal Forest Natural Regions. In an attempt to address "inter-generational amnesia," or "shifting baseline syndrome," Richard put together a series of aerial time-lapse photos for the Swan Hills between 1949-1991, which have since been used time and time again to demonstrate the cumulative effects of multiple disturbances on the same landscape over time.

Richard's report on the Boreal Forest attracted considerable media attention at the time. Looking for "genuine wilderness" across this vast region (using the definition in the American *Wilderness Act*), he found that less than nine percent of the entire Natural Region remained as genuine wilderness. Richard's uncanny knack of distilling a complex situation into a newsworthy message was amply demonstrated when the media leapt on his finding that, between 1949-1994, the percentage of forest loss was higher in the aspen forest of Alberta's dry mixed-wood Subregion, than it was in the Amazon.

In 2002, AWA asked Richard to be its representative and to participate in the Energy Utility Board hearings into a True North Energy (TNE) proposal to create a tar-sands mine, the Fort Hills project. McClelland Fen, part of McClelland Lake Wetland Complex, "one of the most spectacular in Canada if not in the world," would be effectively destroyed. TNE claimed, with an astonishing lack of

evidence, that turning half of McClelland Fen into a tar-sands pit would still allow the other half to function normally. His participation in the hearings was another eye-opener for Richard, and he described his main findings:

- The outcome of the hearings was a foregone conclusion; "it was pre-decided," he remembered. "TNE had spent \$150 million just getting to the hearing."
- EUB was a "captured regulator." As Kevin Taft later wrote in his book *Oil's Deep State*, "Alberta is a place where the oil industry has captured such a swath of institutions for so long that democracy itself has become fossilised."
- Except for surface water and aquifers EUB had no interest in environmental conservation; it was not part of their mandate. "Conservation to the EUB meant mining every last teaspoon full of tar-sands."

"Destroying McClelland Fen is an absolute crime," said Richard, the emotion still raw in his voice.

The Future?

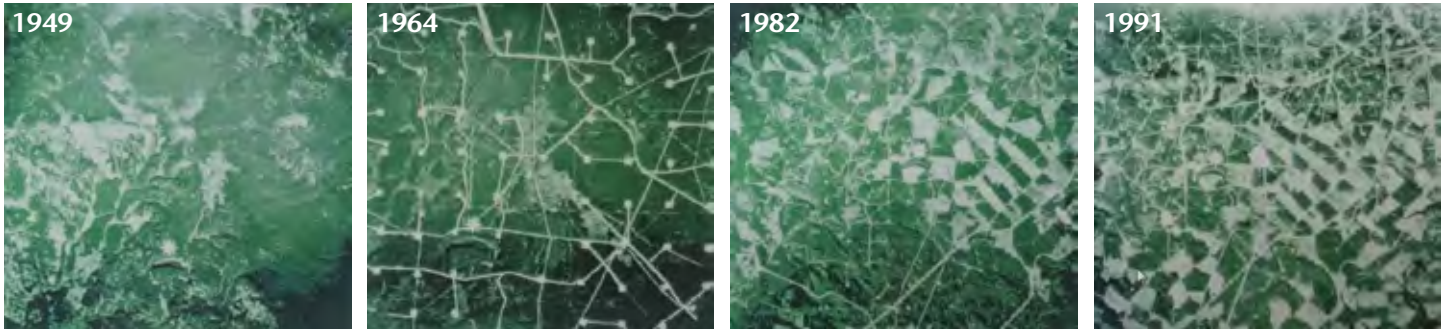
When talking about what the future holds, Richard did not sugar-coat his message. "Humanity is facing an existential crisis," he stated. At the heart of this crisis is clash of value systems. "We need a vast amount of reform to our political, economic and agricultural systems."

- **Political:** The main qualification to be a successful politician, Richard believes is "the ability to raise funds and to win a popularity contest." He added that "the vast majority of politicians are ecologically illiterate."
- **Economic:** "Our Economic system is ecologically unsustainable," said Richard, going on to quote George Monbiot: "What mainstream economists call progress, ecologists call planetary ruin."
- **Agricultural:** Our industrial agricultural system is also unsustainable ecologically. "We have to make the transition from animal agriculture to plant-based food

production,” he emphasised.
Richard finished with a cautionary
message to environmental activists, at a

time when it is so easy to feel overwhelmed.
“We’ve got to stand up to the people who
are driving these crises,” he said but at the

same time it is important to “take care of
yourself too!”



A slide from Richard’s lecture showing an aerial time series of human disturbance in the Swan Hills area between 1949 and 1991.
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