

Letter to the Editor

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“It’s becoming an industrial wasteland.”

That’s how I would describe the condition of our public land for 100 kilometres between the Crowsnest and the Highwood River.

My skiing partners Mike Sawyer and Tony Partridge agree after the three of us spent nine days in early March, ski touring the maze of drainages that feed water to the Oldman River. The vision of 95 square kilometres of clearcut forest, and more than 4,000 kilometres of industry pipelines, trails, cutlines and roads plowed into every drainage for motorized recreation, logging, oil and gas, the abandoned pipeline and gas wells left behind, and the new locked gates forbidding public access to Cabin Ridge, by foreign and Canadian coal interests are strong indications that the headwaters of the Oldman are simply a sacrifice to the extractive corporations.

If anything became clear to us, it is not the public that value our water, wildlife, fish and wilderness that are setting land use policy.

Our route, best described as a groomed race track for the snow machine elite, crossed Racehorse Creek, Dutch Creek, Hidden Creek and many of the smaller tributaries that provide essential water for southern Alberta. Although several feet of snow covered them, we realized that underneath in some of those streams 29 populations of federally-listed threatened native cutthroat trout are struggling to survive. Twenty-two of those are virtually guaranteed to disappear if open pit coal mining goes in the Oldman. Nor were there signs of significant wildlife.

Although our route traversed some willow bottoms and what should be good winter moose habitat, we saw only two moose tracks on the entire trek. A single wolf track and a couple of lynx tracks made up the wildlife count in the entire area. No doubt that single apex predator, the trademark of wilderness, the lone wolf, will bear the responsibility for the lack of wildlife, while the hum of the timber harvesters continues, night and day, snow machine convoys whine, and Caterpillars move relentlessly towards the peaks.

At night around our campfires we debated the questions, whether Albertans understand how much of their forest on their lands is disappearing, and what that ultimately means to the sustainable flow of their river system, and we wondered at the incredible bi-partisan resistance to open pit coal mining on the eastern slopes, in stark contrast to the deafening public silence about the unscrupulous deforestation and roading that has been ongoing in the same area for decades.

None of these major environmental impacts have positive results for water quantity or quality, or a good ending for fish, bears, wolves, moose or people.

For more than 40 years there have been proposals to protect the headwaters of the upper Oldman River with strong wilderness legislation. A legislated bill that would put an end to political giveaways. Legislation that would ensure that all Albertans can enjoy their forests, fishing, hunting, hiking, even backcountry skiing, into perpetuity. Legislation that would ensure the watershed would become and remain permanent forest. A wilderness bill for the upper Oldman would remove extractive corporations, motorized machines and human activities that are verifiably damaging to the wilderness and its life-giving waters.

Southern Alberta has been shaken by the looming threat to the water they need to survive, and the possibility that it could be permanently impaired by pollution carried down from their very own public lands in the mountains.

One can ask: What new threats are around the corner? There is a viable solution to secure the future of the headwaters of the upper Oldman.

Any government can do it. Let's get on with it. Let's pass a wilderness bill for the upper Oldman River, and let our children and grandchildren inherit a viable future in a place they own and enjoy.

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Pincher Creek