



**COWS  
& FISH**  
RIPARIAN MANAGEMENT SOCIETY

# CARING FOR THE GREEN ZONE

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# Cows & Fish

## SPRINGTIME REFRESHER

Many newsletters start off with an editor's message. We've tried not to do that too often, assuming the main content of this newsletter doesn't need an introduction each time, but this issue is different – we're launching our new look and logo, and want to share some new things we're working on, as we enter our 32nd year! It was with real trepidation that we (some of us more than others) decided to change our existing logo – it has been a rewarding and challenging journey—we look forward to hearing your feedback on the new look. For those wondering what will happen to our old logo, know that it will still be part of our collection of impactful images—it still portrays a lot of great information, conveying a connection of land to water that helps us explain this thing called 'riparian'.

What does a new brand mean, besides the obvious, a new look? It has been a good opportunity to review our direction and strategies, which our Board members and staff have spent a lot of time on, ensuring what has made us successful continues to be a strong core, as we evolve and adapt to new opportunities.

Determining where we are going is partly determined by where we have been. In addition to the great history piece you'll see from Lorne Fitch, here are some stats to reflect on:

- **We have more than 3,300 sites in our long-term monitoring summary, covering over 2,500 km of riparian areas**
- **Our materials, expertise and requests for involvement have faced high demand: at least 22,500 riparian health field workbooks & over 62,450 Caring for the Green Zone booklets**
- **We have spoken to at least 113,00 people in over 4,375 activities**

We know from our external program evaluations that landowners we work with make changes sooner and differently, as a result of working with us. Many sites we have re-examined are improving, showing that thoughtful, focussed efforts really DO make a difference.

We are going to keep a strong focus of work with riparian landowners, delivering awareness and hands-on learning. That includes monitoring riparian health, with partners and landowners receiving



Our Executive Director, Norine Ambrose celebrates her 25th anniversary with Cows and Fish this year

individual and community summaries on the current state of their riparian areas, along with suggestions on how to continue to care for those places. Our strong connections to counties, local watershed groups and regional watershed councils maintains the link to on-the-ground, locally driven work.

What is new and evolving includes increasing emphasis to reach more women in agriculture, as well as Indigenous communities, who have typically been less reached in our work, and that of agricultural extension, generally. We are fortunate to expand cost-share opportunities with landowners who implement beneficial management practices, and to complete more restoration projects, particularly for streams with threatened native trout or where beaver co-existence benefits both the landowner and the watershed. We are looking to emphasise the importance of ecosystem services, natural infrastructure, and drought resiliency, as cornerstones of healthy riparian areas and healthy communities.

Our strong commitment to provide thoughtful and honest answers to tough questions on riparian management, beautiful and impactful imagery, and stories of practical wisdom from those managing riparian areas, continues.

Happy Spring!

*Norine Ambrose*

# Cows & Fish

Caring for the green zone



Lorne Fitch sitting beside the Oldman River

## A MESSAGE FROM OUR CO-FOUNDER, LORNE FITCH

There have been times in the history of ranching where a brand, to identify livestock ownership, required a change, to make the marking more distinctive, more recognizable and link it clearly to the ranch. Even though the brand changed, the cow never did.

You can say the same about the rebranding of Cows and Fish. What Cows and Fish does, how we do it, the connection to people, and connecting people to riparian areas and watersheds hasn't changed. Not one bit!

What has changed is the symbol, the trademark, if you will, of the organization. Underneath the new brand, a fresh logo, is the same old Cows and Fish with a goal of stewardship of a small but critically important piece of Alberta's landscape—riparian.

The new brand is meant to be cleaner, neater and more evocative. In the way that all famous brands confer instant recognition, this is the step Cows and Fish has taken. When you see it, the instant result will be thoughts of healthy riparian areas, clean water, fish and wildlife and the people who steward these special places.

### STREAMS OF CONSEQUENCE

Lorne Fitch is now a published author. [Click here](#) to learn more about his new book "Streams of Consequence," which is a collection of essays highlighting the splendour and diversity of the landscape of Southern Alberta



# Cows & Fish

## A Cows and Fish Story

### A COWS AND FISH STORY

By Lorne Fitch, P. Biol.

It's a bright-blue, warm spring day in early June. Not warm enough for swimming but deliciously hot after a spell of grey, rainy days. Forty grim-faced people are squeezed into a community hall to talk about the state of their lake.

Comments ricochet around the room, "It's like living in a garbage dump," "I used to swim here as a child, but wouldn't chance it now," "It's a long walk to the water," and, "The lake stinks." The realization of all the incremental and insidious changes of the past decades now cascades upon them. They recoil at the unfairness of it, that they are stuck in a community hall faced with these changes, instead of being out, enjoying their little piece of paradise. "We've got to fix it," "We want our children to play here," and the equally as telling comment, "The value of my property is dropping," embody the frantic comments of the crowd. In the transition to awareness, we're still far from an understanding that this is no small repair job, a circumstance that won't be turned around tomorrow. "We just want it back to the pretty little spot it was." That may be wishful thinking, given the rapid escalation in the ageing process of the lake, exacerbated by shoreline development and nutrients delivered from the watershed.

It may well be that the lake never was the "pretty little spot," given the tendency of most central Alberta lakes to be eutrophic, or high in nutrients, naturally. The lens we view the world through has many coloured filters and prisms to reflect the reality we want to remember, not what actually existed.

Others would like to reach into their blame holsters and, like the gunfighters of old, point their .45 calibre fingers at someone else. Because we, from the Cows and Fish program are there, plus some farmers from the watershed, there is a heated exchange over who did what to whom and when.

It is a natural human tendency to simplify the accountability and to deflect responsibility to others. This group will take a while to realize the ownership of the issues includes all of them.



Cows and Fish's co-founders,  
Lorne Fitch & Barry Adams

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# Cows & Fish

## A Cows and Fish Story continued ...

They listen politely, if albeit impatiently, to the words and images of Riparian 101. This description of the ecological functions of their lake begins to help them unravel some of the mystery of the watershed, lake-shore and landscape under their tenure. Not all are instant believers, but it sets up a bit of uncertainty that can only be assuaged through more information. Cows and Fish never sets out to educate people about their watershed in one blinding flash of knowledge. Rather, it is a process of building a cumulative body of knowledge over time, which creates within individuals and the community, the capacity to make better or more appropriate decisions.

In a similar hall, miles south, with a different audience, a group of ranchers are beginning to comprehend the mystery of streams and the green zones beside them. The archival photographs, some dating back a hundred years, contrast sharply with today's image of the same piece of riparian landscape. The changes are often dramatic and indicate a suffering length of stream compared to what it once was. It is a sobering moment for those who thought the landscape has never changed, or that the changes have been benign under their tenure. For some, the information provides a vision for what these streams and riparian areas could be again, with some shifts in grazing management.

Riparian health evaluation is an ecological measuring stick that points out the key pieces of the riparian area, provides a standard system for evaluating a riparian area, and then rolls it up into a category relating to the ability of the site to perform some vital ecological functions. It's really an "eye tuning" exercise to allow people to "see" the riparian landscape through the same set of eyes. A common language is created and instead of arguing over what we perceive, from our own perspectives, interests and backgrounds, we can view the current state of the riparian area. If the riparian area is "broken" we can appreciate that status and start a discussion on how to "fix" it. Ironically, a good deal of what we have learned about successful riparian management, and pass on to others, has been gleaned from ranchers who are ahead of the curve. They provide us with the evidence of how to do it right. Amongst many lessons, we have learned it is not about applying, in rigid fashion, a cookbook prescription.

**"Many organizations give us lots to think about, but Cows and Fish gives us something to think with"**



Lorne Fitch

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# Cows & Fish

## A Cows and Fish Story continued ...

What is more appropriate, is explaining the principles of ecosystems and of management, then allowing people to craft a solution which meets the particular needs of their landscape and operation.

These two groups, a set of cottage owners on an ageing lake, and a herd of ranchers on a small foothills stream, seem poles apart, geographically, socially and economically. Yet, there are some remarkable similarities. They represent a new phenomena (or, a reborn one) in Alberta. These are people starting to take charge of their landscape, not waiting for governments to do something. They are rebuilding, not just the health of their landscapes, but also the sense of their communities. The realization has struck - riparian health is an issue we all face. Based on evaluations that Cows and Fish has done over several years, throughout the settled portion of Alberta, we face some sobering statistics. Only 25% of the riparian areas inventoried were deemed “healthy,” providing us with the full suite of ecological functions from which all benefits, products and services flow.

It's a huge job to turn this sinking riparian elephant around, but it must be done. Regardless of our backgrounds, interests or politics, we all depend on the 2 to 5% of the landscape called riparian. In the work of the Cows and Fish program, usually at the community level, we are told, “We need to do it ourselves, but we need help.” Our role is to help communities figure out how to “eat the elephant” of issues facing them. It begins with one bite. The first bite is awareness, giving people some elemental understanding of the landscape they live on and make a living from. Awareness is the foundation that leads to a cumulative body of knowledge, not only about the landscape but also who to work with, what tools are available and how to monitor changes. Embodied in our pathway are elements of responsibility, authority, ownership and motivation. Cows and Fish doesn't “do” things for people, rather we create the opportunity for people to do things for themselves. One farmer summed up our program this way: “Many organizations give us lots to think about, but Cows and Fish gives us something to think with.”



Lorne Fitch giving a presentation

Many of our riparian landscapes have been quietly deteriorating for many decades; we won't turn this around quickly. What we have seen in over a decade of applying the Cows and Fish program throughout Alberta is a growing realization and a sense of action. Measuring that social change isn't as easy as applying some measuring stick to the landscape but is equally important if we are to see change persist. Acknowledging our mistakes represents a fundamental shift in thinking; ensuring we don't repeat them is the potential legacy of the Cows and Fish program.



# Cows & Fish

## Riparian Trends for 2024

### WE HAVE A NEW LOOK FOR 2024

By Amy Berlando, Provincial Riparian Specialist

The natural look is back! We've been hearing a lot about AI (Artificial Intelligence), but what about natural intelligence? NI (Natural Infrastructure) is the network of natural features and nature-based solutions that collectively provides society with free services, such as water storage and filtration. Because NI relies on natural elements like soils and plants, NI also comes with added co-benefits, such as air purification, carbon storage, habitat, and beautiful spaces to enjoy. At a regional scale this could look like enhanced protection of natural areas, increased tree and wetland density, and enhanced riparian health. More locally, incorporating NI could be including native plants in landscaping, or minimizing disturbance in natural spaces, particularly if you are lucky enough to have a riparian area on your property. Whether managing riparian land or not, incorporating NI into your look will contribute ecosystem services and increase climate resilience. So, flaunt those natural assets and show off what mother nature gave you. **Here's a few tips to achieve that 'natural look:'**

### DON'T MOW, LET IT GROW

Sometimes less is more when it comes to maintenance



A riparian area was frequently mowed on a golf course, resulting in a lack of vegetation



This same riparian area began to naturally regenerate after a period of rest

### KEEP IT MESSY

Adorning that natural look, means keeping it a little messy. Try leaving behind some leaf litter to blanket soils and prevent erosion while providing homes and food for small critters like insects and microbes. Leaf litter also fertilizes the soil and can mitigate the need for added synthetic fertilizers, trapping precious moisture and providing forage even when little new grass grows.

### LAYERS, LAYERS

Adding structural complexity (layers) in riparian areas, including grasses, native flowers, small shrubs and tall trees helps slow the overland flow of water. Varying heights of tree and shrub canopy intercept and slow precipitation before it hits the ground (think umbrella). The deep root systems of native plants also allow water to percolate into the soil, so water can stay in the system longer. Layering also creates more habitat and cover for the big and the small, and allows you and your livestock to stay cool in heat, and stay sheltered in the cold.

### ALLOW REST

Nature works best when you let it rest. In the same way we all need to take a break sometimes to recharge, natural systems also need rest to allow for regrowth. Protect areas from becoming overused or trampled with tools that allow rest, such as fencing to minimize or control timing of access.



As you can see in the before and after images above, the riparian area flourished after fencing was installed around the water body

# RESOLVE TO MAKE 2024 YOUR YEAR OF ACTION

By Amy Berlando, Provincial Riparian Specialist

So, you've learned the importance of riparian areas in keeping our watersheds and communities healthy, and you've resolved to take action toward health, now what?

Taking action to care for riparian areas can be as simple as sharing what you've learned. Follow us on social media and like or share our content, or have a conversation with someone in your community about the importance of keeping riparian areas healthy.

Even if you don't own or manage property beside a stream, wetland, or lake, you can still take actions to maintain or improve riparian health while you're visiting. Take the pressure off sensitive riparian habitat by being mindful to not damage or clear plants when you recreate near water and ensure you keep your wheels out of water by using designated crossings.

If you're looking for an opportunity to get your hands dirty and give back, sign up to volunteer on [our website](#) and stay informed about upcoming opportunities. There are many other conservation-focused groups that we work with that offer hands-on opportunities such as, [Trout Unlimited Canada](#), [Alberta Native Trout Collaborative](#), or local watershed groups.

Do you own or manage riparian land but don't know where to start? Maybe you're looking for advice on the different options available. [Visit our website](#) and get in touch with a riparian specialist near you, or check out the management-focused resources on our [publications page](#).



The Cows and Fish team getting their hands dirty installing a [Beaver Dam Analogue](#) (BDA)

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Already know what action you want to take but looking for financial support? The following programs offer funding support for on-the-ground projects:

### The Resilient Agricultural Landscape Program (RALP)

RALP is a program offered under the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (Sustainable CAP). RALP funding is available for producers interested in Beneficial Management Practices (BMPs) that will maximize the provision of Ecological Goods & Services (EG&S), particularly increased carbon sequestration and enhanced climate resilience. [Click here](#) for more details on eligibility and how to apply.

### Rangeland Sustainability Program (RSP)

[The RSP program](#) works with organizations to promote the conservation and long-term sustainability of Alberta's rangelands and the ecosystem services they provide. Applications will open Summer 2024.



# Cows & Fish

## Upcoming Events

### AGRICULTHER SCHOOL

The AgricultHER School is an inspirational, educational day for livestock-focused women in the Peace Region.

#### DATE

18 June 2024

#### LOCATION

Goodfare, AB

#### SAVE THE DATE

Link coming soon

### ALBERTA RANGE STEWARDSHIP COURSE

Learn more about riparian & range management principles, native plant identification, beavers & drought, bush encroachment, & more

#### DATE

17-18 July 2024

#### LOCATION

Consort Golf Club, Special Areas No. 4

#### SAVE THE DATE

[coordinator@albertapcf.org](mailto:coordinator@albertapcf.org)

### SOUTHERN ALBERTA GRAZING SCHOOL FOR WOMEN

Meet other women in the agriculture industry & learn more about riparian & range health, plant identification, and grazing principles & practices

#### DATE

24-25 July 2024

#### LOCATION

Seven Persons Community Hall

#### SIGN UP

<https://SAGSW2024.eventbrite.ca>

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT CONT...

Already know what action you want to take but looking for financial support? The following programs offer funding support for on-the-ground projects:

### Watershed Resiliency and Restoration Program (WRRP)

Municipalities and non-profit organizations can apply for WRRP funding for projects that will enhance a communities' ability to withstand future flooding or droughts and promotes the ongoing stewardship and preservation of Alberta's watersheds. Projects can focus on restoration, conservation, stewardship, or research. For more details, [click here](#).

### Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS)

ALUS provides expertise, resources, and direct financial support for farmers producing valuable nature-based solutions and ecosystem goods and services. The program is community-developed and delivered locally by Partnership Advisory Committees (or PACs) made up of farmers and local organizations. Check to see if there is a PAC in your area: <https://alus.ca/>

Is undertaking a project of your own too much to take on right now? No problem. If you're looking to sign-up with a group already engaged in on-the-ground recovery actions and you want to lend a helping hand, become a volunteer today!

## PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

### Our Work in Southern Alberta

Cows and Fish works collaboratively with other organizations on many stewardship projects around Alberta. Visit our website to learn more about our projects and initiatives

### VISIT OUR WEBSITE TO LEARN MORE

[Click Here](#)

# Cows & Fish

## Connecting land & water

## HAVE YOU WORKED WITH COWS AND FISH IN THE PAST?

- Have you wondered how your riparian area scores now?
- Want to have an extension event in your local community?
- Have a riparian management story to share?

To increase the broader community's riparian awareness and expertise, we will deliver extension events with local partners, bringing together neighbours and sharing successes. If you are a landowner we worked with in the past, and want to reconnect with us, give us a call or email. Visit our [contact us page](#) for more information.

## WE LOVE HEARING FROM YOU!

Please contact Norine Ambrose: [nambrose@cowsandfish.org](mailto:nambrose@cowsandfish.org) or any Riparian Specialist, to follow up on any items in this newsletter. For full contact information, visit our [contact us page](#).

### COWS AND FISH

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Riparian areas, the areas connecting land and water, help clean our water, create drought and flood resiliency, and provide habitat for fish and wildlife.

Cows and Fish's mission is to promote healthy landscapes by fostering riparian stewardship.

## MEET OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Cows and Fish Board of Directors and Members include local producer and community representatives.

Cows and Fish members provide the input, support, and guidance needed to achieve Cows and Fish's mission. We also rely on financial and in-kind support from Donors and Funding Sources to accomplish our goals. Visit our [support page](#) to make a donation.

## CONNECT WITH US

Find a riparian specialist in your area or send us a general inquiry

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### VISIT OUR CONTACT PAGE

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