

A COWS and FISH Story - Changing the World One Community at a Time

Lorne Fitch, P. Biol.
Provincial Riparian Specialist
Cows and Fish

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 a ways 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. Their lake was probably always subject to some algae blooms. An old-timer in the group quietly confirms this with me, privately, away from the ears of the non-believers. His observations are that the magnitude of problems has grown with lakeshore development.

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. They're still at the lashing and lunging stage with one another.

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, lakeshore and landscape under their tenure. Not all are instant believers, but it sets up a bit of uncertainty which 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 that creates, within individuals and the community, the capacity

to make better or more appropriate decisions. The world we live in is a complex one, but some elemental knowledge is required to allow us to fit into it, in a way that doesn't preclude options for the future. Some in the audience are confronted with some cause and effect relationships they obviously weren't aware of before. Many become pensive and their previous complaints of lake problems and of the suspected guilty parties come into sharp focus. It is a bit of an epiphany when they begin to realize none of us see the world through the same lens and we communicate imperfectly about what we do see and how we value it.

Out of the silence comes the voice of one individual who declares her contribution to lake restoration will be the installation of a new septic system for her cottage. She's realized that an already overloaded lake cannot stand any more nutrients. This is where a community response always begins, with one individual taking responsibility. It will take much more time, many more discussions and information sessions, before the community starts to work together to craft solutions. But, they are on the way.

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 was once. 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.

However, no matter how non-threatening and non-controversial we try to craft our awareness messages it is unavoidable to touch some individuals in a sensitive spot. One rancher, uniformed in Wranglers set off with a large silver belt buckle, feels singled out and explodes, "this is B.S." He doesn't use the acronym, but paints his frustration with colourful language and a noisy exit. An embarrassed quiet falls on the crowd- not the attention-getting device we would have wished for to improve their listening. Never saying "whoa" in a tight spot, the presentation picks up again and finishes to polite applause. The untimely interruption seems to have enhanced retention and motivated a sense of action for we are invited back within a year. This time we are helping the community divine the intricacies of riparian health evaluation.

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. With so much energy often expended on arguments over our differing visions, this short circuits the emotion and concentrates on what is in the realm of the possible for positive change.

In that crowd of ranchers on the side of the stream, each clutching a little green workbook on riparian health assessment, was that bright, shiny hubcap of a belt buckle attached to the rancher that we had last seen a year ago beating a hasty exit from the hall. He was quiet throughout the day-long training exercise. We were on pins and needles waiting for the next outburst. It never came. At the end of the day he pulled one of us aside and said he had spent a long time (almost a year) thinking about the information we had provided. His observations, tuned a bit with our insight, had led to him concluding changes had happened on his ranch, ones he had concern over.

Over the next few months, working with that community, he stepped up to the plate and began to implement several grazing management changes, to deal with some riparian health issues. Some of those changes involved fencing, to temporarily exclude livestock to allow regeneration of balsam poplars and willow, which he realized was a valuable shelter component, useful for livestock in winter and for spring calving. He had also seen the destructive portion of the 1995 flood and knew he had to get more of nature's glue and rebar growing on his stream banks. Most of the changes however, were related to changing the timing of riparian grazing and setting a more conservative stocking rate, both equally useful riparian management techniques. 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. What is more appropriate and accepted, 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 that riparian health is an issue we all face. Based on evaluations Cows and Fish has done over several years (1997 – 2006), throughout the settled portion of Alberta, we face some sobering statistics. Only 22% 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. A total of 51% are "healthy, with problems", where the signs of stress are apparent. In 27% of the cases most ecological functions were severely impaired or were lost; these are "unhealthy" reaches of shoreline or stream bank. These results go well beyond what could be expected in the natural variation of riparian health. This affects water quality, biodiversity and agricultural sustainability, things that touch all of us.

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 the program this way: “Many organizations give us lots to think about, but Cows and Fish gives us something to think with”.

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.

For more information contact Cows and Fish at 403-381-5538 or view their website at www.cowsandfish.org.