

Who Me? Part of a Watershed? Don't Flush Yet!

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I've got the handle in my hand, ready to flush. My eye catches an announcement in the paper I was reading, in the quiet room of the house. It's for a watershed meeting to be held here in town. As the noise of the toilet flushing echoes, I think, "who me, part of a watershed?" As I wash my hands I muse, "I live in town, I don't live on a lake or next to a river." Brushing my teeth I say to myself, "I don't fish and I don't raise cattle that drink out of the river." The coffee noisily percolates and I wait impatiently for that first cup. Fortified with a jolt of caffeine I remark, "I don't know what all the fuss is about. Water is water; it comes out of the tap." That reminds me to mix up some orange juice. I use the bottled water, pour it into the juice concentrate, mix and thirstily drink a glass. The water holds the sweetness of Florida sunshine in suspension. The last drops drain out of the glass and my answer is, "No, I don't know why I would be interested in a watershed meeting."

Satisfied with my decision I head off to work. It's a lovely morning and I linger beside the car savoring the sunshine. Bird song puts my ears on alert and a flash of yellow captures my eye. I think, "That's a funny looking sparrow." I glance over and see my neighbour sitting on her porch peering through binoculars. She's a bit odd; there have been words over her yard. It has become a wild and untidy place with what looks like weedy plants springing up everywhere. She replanted her lawn to some native stuff and she never waters or fertilizes it. This morning though, the differences over yard care seem to have disappeared and she is visibly excited. She shouts to me that the bird is a yellow warbler, the first of the year. "It's just flown up from South America, almost 9000 km to get here." "Nine thousand kilometers!" I think to myself, "how does a tiny bird manage that feat?" Despite the differences I have with my neighbour this intrigues me and I have to ask how this is possible. "Even though these birds only weigh the equivalent of two twenty five cent pieces they manage that migration by stopping in the rich, treed areas along rivers and streams and around lakes and wetlands. They fuel up on insects and then make the next leap." I'm amazed; these wooded areas must be the bird equivalent of 7-11's.

The morning passes at work. My ears perk up at a news report on the radio of a boil water order in some other community. "Boil water, I wonder what that's about?" says one of my coworkers. "It's not about childbirth, corn or canning", says another. "There's either too much mud in the water and it can't be cleaned, or some bug has got into the water and only boiling it will kill it." The thought of boiling water and mud reminds me it's coffee time and I head down to the corner café. The usual crowd is there, dissecting the events of the day. I sit next to the fellow that runs the water treatment plant. When there's a lull in the conversation I ask him about this boil water order. He replies that there are more and more of these to meet drinking water standards. One of

the curmudgeons in the group snaps, “So what if the river is muddy and is covered by green scum-can’t they filter and treat the water with something? Anyway, don’t we get our water from a well?” The treatment plant operator smiles at the opening he’s been given. “Yes, we get our water from a well but most communities in Alberta get all of their water from surface sources like lakes or rivers. Even though we have a well you have to think about where that water comes from; it comes from the surface and slowly trickles down. That water comes from a huge area and even though a lot of stuff gets filtered out, there’s an increase in some chemicals.” “What kind of chemicals?” snorts the curmudgeon. “Well, things like pesticides, herbicides and nitrates that come from fertilizer or animal manure. Even stuff like the weed and feed you put on your lawn can sneak into the ground water. All of these things, including mud, are hard to remove and can be very expensive, especially for a small town like ours with a limited tax base. Our best, and cheapest, option is protection of the water at its source. That’s why many towns are starting to work with the rural counties on watershed protection- its where our water comes from.” “But” he said, “there’s another side to this- we treat our waste water and put it into the river. There are at least three communities downstream of us that take water right out of the river.” The curmudgeon snorts again and sarcastically retorts, “Should we flush twice for them?” That ended the coffee break!

The phone rings at work; it’s a rancher north of town with a side of beef I ordered from him. We agree to meet at my place for lunch. Over sandwiches I tell him about my morning of water, watersheds and birds. He listens intently, with a wrinkle on his brow. He starts to talk. “After 40 some odd years of ranching I thought I knew it all. I’m embarrassed to say there are some things I should have known more about. Back in the 70’s I went to a bunch of seminars where they told me I had to be more profitable and efficient.” He spit the words “profitable” and “efficient” out. “So I fired up the cat and bulldozed all the willows and poplars off my bottomlands by the big river. And they were right, for a few years I could graze more cattle and it was more profitable. Then the first flood came along. Without the willows and the trees to glue the riverbanks together the river just ate them up. I tried to slow down that erosion. I even got the government to help. We dumped rock, concrete slabs and even old car bodies. Nothing worked; the river ate those up too. I figure I’ve flushed more than five acres of my best pasture down the river. I wish I had those willows back. If I had it to do again I wouldn’t touch that brush next to the river.”

The beef is safely stored in the freezer and I decide to walk back to work. Around the corner one of my neighbours, a retired farmer, is trimming his hedge. He’s a quiet, thoughtful man and I share some of the day’s events with him. “As I get older I see more”, he mused. “I grew up fishing, I suspect it kept me out of a lot of trouble”, he said, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “This river used to have walleye in it and I once caught a 12 pound pike. It’s hard to find a fish anymore and that worries me. But if you want fish, can’t you buy fish sticks?” I say, prodding him a bit. “Can’t stand them!” he replies, “Fish in the river tell me the place I live is healthy; that’s why I’m worried.” He’s quiet for a moment, thinking about something else. “Fishing and being next to the river helped me see my place in the world. It’s about making connections, something that eating fish sticks will never do for you. I want my grandchildren to be able to fish, to

make those same connections I was able to make. How can they if we've used up all their chances?"

I almost miss the building where I work; I'm so lost in thought. Waiting for me is a county councilor and I apologize for being distracted by this watershed stuff. She waves off my apology. "Sometimes our thinking is pretty narrow" she recounts, "we are only interested in our own backyards. I used to think, so what if someone drains a mosquito-infested slough 50 km from my back door. How is this going to affect me?" She goes on to say, "The problem is that our backyards are hitched to everyone else's in the watershed. We've got a situation where the folks in the headwaters want more drainage, to get rid of those sloughs that hold all the snowmelt. The people in the middle, especially here in town, have more flooding and bigger floods because the water all runs off too quickly with the sloughs gone. Then, the people at the bottom end of the river complain there's no water left for most of the year." I think to myself that I'm glad to be on higher ground but I do remember the ban on lawn watering during the drought a couple of summers ago. "It's like we're all living in different areas with different ideas about what we want, but we are all part of the same watershed. We've got to figure this out together", she says.

After supper I take a short drive to clear my head. I cross what I thought was a drainage ditch and it strikes me, "No, this is the river!" There's no sign on the bridge and I'll bet many of my neighbours don't realize this is their river. No wonder it doesn't get any respect! We've ignored our river, turned it into one of the back alleys instead of a front street we could be proud of. It's been quite a day. At the last flush of the evening I think, "Me, I'm part of a watershed!" I'm going to go to that watershed meeting, meet my neighbours and get educated about where I live.

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