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EDITORIAL

Citizen Action by Jackie Flanagan



IN HER MEDITATION ON THE RELATIONSHIP between people and trees (Eye, p. 18), Carolyn Pogue tells of asking children to think of a tree they know well and to describe it; then to imagine someone saying, 'That tree must come down!' She has them write their reaction without stopping. "What came through was a fierce, heartfelt protectiveness."

Most of us feel protective of the environment. Albertans love the incomparable beauty of our natural landscape. But we are rapidly depleting it. Of all Canadian cities, Calgary and Edmonton consume the most natural resources per person (Eye, p. 15). We can try to be more responsible to the environment as individuals. We can be more conscious in our personal lifestyle choices. Dolly Sillito and Christine Caskey (p. 36) suggest ways for living lighter on the land: consume less, walk more, drive less, take shorter showers, turn off lights, recycle—all worthy actions. Such individual action is necessary, but not enough to save the environment. Only our collective action as citizens can do that.

Consider the impact of taking shorter showers. The amount of water used per person per day in Sweden is 1,000 litres, in Canada 4,400 litres and in Alberta 10,000 litres. Agriculture accounts for 70 per cent of the water used in this province, the oil industry 16 per cent and municipalities 5 per cent. Conscientious individuals taking shorter showers will not solve the problem of the depletion of our rivers. To really effect change in water consumption, we need better public policy regarding water use.

The comparison of Edmonton's and Calgary's approaches to recycling by Amber Bowerman (p. 34) shows the impact of public policy as opposed to private action. In Calgary people recycle on their own initiative. They must drive or carry their newspapers and tin cans to

drop-off depots, or pay a private company to pick them up. In Calgary, 20 per cent of residential waste is recycled and 80 per cent goes to landfill. Edmonton has city-wide curbside recycling as part of its regular garbage pick-up. Consequently only 40 per cent of Edmonton's residential waste goes to landfill.

Municipal and provincial governments are supposed to enact legislation in the public interest. The regulatory bodies in the province claim it is for the good of all of us to approve industrial development in wilderness, including lands as beautiful and ecologically important as Mountain Park. But these decisions are not for the public good, they're for the profit of private companies. In Ben Gadd's account of his fight to save Mountain Park from the incursions of the Cheviot coal mining operation (p. 23), he tells us, "Industry clearly had the ear of the regulators, while we didn't. Never mind that we were the only ones standing up for the interests of all Albertans, whose public land was getting wrecked, plus the interests of the grizzly bears and other wildlife. The government was listening only to people who were making a buck off the place." Economic interests are placed ahead of all other values.

The Karsten Heuer interview (p. 38) is an account of the trip he and his wife Leanne Allison took to follow the caribou to their ancient calving grounds in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which is at risk of oil development. People don't want this area to be destroyed. Heuer says, "If development happens on the refuge, it will be a huge tragedy, not only for the caribou and for everything else that depends on that area, but also for democracy—because if it happens then democracy doesn't work."

Does our government respect citizens' desire to protect the environment? Do citizens make their intentions known?