



PHOTO: J. HILDEBRAND

THE WONDER OF WILD PLACES

On April 28, AWA staff and a few other concerned Calgarians had the privilege of spending the morning with three Achuar natives of the Peruvian Amazon. Carlos Mukuin, Manuel Tampet, and Henderson Rengifo, accompanied by a human rights lawyer and two U.S.-based representatives of Amazon Watch, were in Calgary to meet with Talisman Energy Inc., which in 2006 acquired petroleum interests on traditional Achuar land.

We listened to their heartbreaking story of how over 30 years, oil and gas operators discharged about nine billion barrels of toxic oil extraction by-products directly into the rivers and streams that the Achuar used for drinking, bathing, washing and fishing. The results were devastating: a decline in fish and game populations and agricultural productivity, dangerously high concentrations of lead and cadmium in both children and adults, and sickness and disease in both humans and wildlife.

While Alberta's environmental issues initially paled in comparison, it quickly dawned on us that we face some similar challenges. As in Peru, oil and gas leases are sold with no public consultation; government often turns a blind eye to industry's regulatory violations; wilderness, water, and wildlife on which First Nations and others rely are being despoiled with little regard for human or wildlife health; toxic lakes are proliferating north of Fort McMurray; and for the most part, we don't know how to reclaim – never mind restore – the flayed landscapes after extracting their treasures.

In my two years as an AWA staff member, however, I have become convinced that many Albertans are deeply concerned about what is happening to our wild places. Sometimes outraged and occasionally overwhelmed and despairing, they articulately defend wilderness and the creatures that depend on it. This issue of the *Wild Lands Advocate* features some of those inspiring advocates – people like Lorne Fitch, Dave Sheppard, Cliff Wallis, Ward Neale, Martha Kostuch, and more. People who have built on the foundations of earlier defenders of wilderness.

May 27 marked the 101st anniversary of the birth of Rachel Carson, the quiet, reserved scientist who focused world attention on the devastating effects of pesticides on humans and wildlife, and moved environmental issues to centre stage. Her classic, *Silent Spring*, sits on my shelf beside her earlier trilogy about the sea and its wonders. In fact, *wonder* was what motivated Carson to speak out. "It is a wholesome and necessary thing," she wrote, "for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know the sense of wonder and humility."

Facing immense opposition from powerful institutions, Carson believed that experiencing the beauty of wilderness is critical to our survival. "The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for the destruction of our race."

In wilderness the white noise that pervades our "normal" existence disappears, allowing us to listen to the deep wisdom of rocks, trees, lakes, and wildlife. "We need to embrace silence so when we do speak, the clarity of our voice will be unmistakable," wrote Ontario Algonquin Robert Lovelace on April 7, 2008 from prison, where he was incarcerated for refusing to leave his community's peaceful protest blocking industrial access to their traditional homelands for uranium exploration activities.

In our efforts to keep and expand the wild places we have left in Alberta, let's not forget to go to them, to draw our strength from wilderness and its creatures.

– Joyce Hildebrand, Editor