



PHOTO: C. WEARMOUTH

TOO BLESSED TO BE STRESSED

The arrival of a “lifestyle” magazine in AWA’s mailbox a few weeks ago, with promises of “affordable luxury homes” (a fascinating oxymoron), contained multiple ironies. The thick glossy pages are filled with opportunities to invest in “vacation and investment properties” in the most pristine of environments. A double-page spread features Canmore’s Silvertip golf resort, with the Three Sisters towering in the background. Even if it were within the financial reach of AWA staff, we’d have a hard time justifying owning vacation property in a development we fought to prevent. Gleniffer Lake, a popular resort southwest of Innisfail, is described as containing “crystal-clear glacier water.” Perhaps this went to press before the lake was contaminated in June by an oil pipeline break that spilled 20,000 litres of crude into the Red Deer River, which feeds into the lake.

The photos of stunning natural vistas are captioned with references to “Mother Nature’s finest locations,” the “soothing properties of water,” and the “many natural wonders” of the featured resorts, without a hint that those wonders will decrease in proportion to the increase in development. The Lake Newell area, south of Brooks, is exalted as an ideal venue for water skiing and wakeboarding, and for enjoying its three bird sanctuaries, all in the same breath. Moving to more exotic locales, a large photo features the Arizona desert in golden evening light, with subtle shades of desert rocks and flora backgrounding manicured, startlingly green turf – “desert golf at its finest,” says the caption. No mention of the vast amounts of water needed to paint this arid landscape green in an area with annual precipitation of seven inches.

The final irony – the magazine ends with an article about making green, sustainable living “the new normal.” The author recommends driving a hybrid car, buying carbon credits when flying, and avoiding bottled water – all valid suggestions, but they will do little to help conserve wilderness, keep our water clean and plentiful, and boost dwindling wildlife populations if we continue to feed our hunger for owning wild places.

The stones I’m throwing here are aimed at my own fantasy glass (or rather, strawbale) house in the wilderness. The desire to “own the Rockies,” as a current website address exhorts, is sometimes overwhelming, especially as the city I live in continues to grow. But I also believe that Margaret Atwood has a point when she writes that the moment I say “I own this / is the same moment when the trees unloose / their soft arms from around you, / and the birds take back their language, / the cliffs fissure and collapse...”

Here in Alberta – although the “boom stress” is reflected in increased poverty, homelessness, and road rage – many of us are too blessed to be stressed about the future. As our coffers overflow, our long-term vision atrophies. We tend to forget – or maybe we never knew – that everything we do impacts non-human nature, either directly or indirectly. This issue of the *Advocate* reminds us of those impacts – from the decrease in biodiversity because of species we have introduced into the province to the taming of a wild river by damming it up, from the destruction of wilderness by high-impact recreation to the loss of grizzly bears because of our government’s refusal to address the real cause of their demise.

Alberta may someday be listed among the many civilizations whose “success” led to their demise because of a refusal to live within the cycles and limits of non-human nature. Let’s hope we wake up in time to avoid being the subject of Jared Diamond’s *Collapse II*.

– Joyce Hildebrand, Editor