



SIGNS OF WATER: COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON WATER, RESPONSIBILITY, AND HOPE

Edited by Robert Boschman & Sonya L. Jakubec

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The Red Alert Project

Barbara Amos

The Context

A small community in Southern Alberta was confronted with the possible effects of resource extraction (logging the forests) along a beloved watershed, the headwaters of the Castle River in Southern Alberta. Located in Crowsnest Pass, Alberta, this is the area where tributaries come into the Oldman Reservoir then travel up to Saskatoon and out into Hudson's Bay. Decades of effort had gone into protecting this area located along these eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, the headwaters for Western Canada. In 2012, a lawsuit against the legitimate claims of the local community citizens had been filed by the resource extraction company. While the lawsuit was dismissed by the courts, new charges were laid by another resource extraction company that wanted to clear-cut an area of forest. They sought to arrest protesters who were holding placards at the side of a road. They succeeded by finding an old outdated bylaw to arrest and block protesters. They served writs to a number of people, effectively preventing them from being on public land. This meant that people could not use the roads, sidewalks, or public parks, they could not observe or protect the land and water.

Letters were written, government officials were engaged, and public opinion was supportive, yet little progress was made to address environmental protection in the area. Despair and anxiety were high. The Red

Alert Project (Figures 12.1 to 12.12) is a story of intimidation and resistance that took place during the protest and the succeeding years of other ways and means of community mobilization for the watershed.

Another Way

Exhausted, the community asked, how do we go forward when we feel such intimidation and despair? It was difficult to believe that this was happening in Canada.

As an artist who recently moved into the area, I invited the community to consider that creativity is a regenerative force and to seek creative ways to advocate for these environmental issues. We needed to mitigate despair and thereby restore energy to this crucial cause. We met in my studio. We engaged with shared intent and creativity. We discovered a creative process that was intrinsically satisfying. While there were no funds or grants to rely upon, over the next seven years, people were consistently involved with intentional non-partisan advocacy. Most of the participation was local, but a few travelled from urban centres and other provinces.

The first event held was titled “Artworks for Wild Spaces.” A request went through the small surrounding communities to gather donated and recycled crocheted afghan blankets. Geometric patterns were selected to create good visual compositions. These handmade items spoke intuitively about the care and the nurturing of our lands. They were potent metaphors for this project. Thirty-three people living or otherwise closely connected to the proposed clear-cut site were wrapped in the afghans. Photographs documented the event and were posted online. Every post was accompanied by a clear, simple statement that these watersheds needed legislated protection.

In these early days of social media, a photograph went viral and generated significant publicity. The photograph and an accompanying article appeared in various print publications—a magazine, online press, and a CBC interview—engaging communities across southern Alberta and in the larger urban centres. Attention to the issue was our goal, but now, in light of legal push back against protesters and their arrests, participants were concerned about being identified and lost a sense of personal safety. Sadly, one realized, it was wiser for the residents to remain anonymous.

Outcomes of Our Work

Initially, the community was divided about how to advocate to protect the watershed. Varying approaches were identified and discussed. It was finally decided that water was the issue that encompassed all others. A focus on protecting the watersheds became central and embraced all concerns.

These events then moved the issues to a wider circle and this proved valuable. One image made the cover of a magazine,¹ while others were included in daily news articles, both in print or online,² or presented at public lectures.³ Some were referenced in academic publications on public discourse.⁴ The community of Castle River grew in numbers and purpose, proceeding to mount a court case against the provincial government.

Attention shifted and focused on resource extraction on the watershed as a result of multiple, sustained connections and renewed energy of members of the community and beyond. While the efforts of many others grew, all concentrated on the same purpose. Over the next few years, I worked with small groups to create the images for the press and online social media postings. Each image was accompanied by a simple statement. The intent was three-fold: to restore and engage the community, to create awareness of the issues, and to bring the outlying urban populations into the discussion.

Part of a much larger forty-year effort to protect the headwaters of the Castle River in Southern Alberta, this project enabled a place to hold tensions alongside companions; it provided comfort, celebration, grief and anger, and vigilance. A new provincial government of 2015 passed legislation to create a new provincial park called the Castle Provincial and Wildlands Park. Heeding the red alert signaled by so many, this offered protection to remote areas of the Castle River watershed and managed use of the accessible areas. The wider project is not over.

We need to continue our vigilance, and continue to revisit what we value and the lines we must draw to protect it.

The Red Line Images

This series of images document the Red Alert Project, and is about the questions that we need to consider. What is the bottom line? What are our limitations? Figures 12.1 to 12.6 introduce the overall project. Figures 12.7 to 12.12 depict the wider story explored within the Red Alert Project with a spotlight on the insights and questions raised as the lines were drawn.



FIGURE 12.1. THE WATCH



FIGURE 12.2. THE GUARDIANS



FIGURE 12.3. GRIEF AND ANGER



FIGURE 12.4. VIGILANCE



FIGURE 12.5. TENSION



FIGURE 12.6. THE RED LINE

Drawing With Survey Tape

Survey tape in a forest means that dramatic change is about to occur. I draw with survey tape. It is like a red felt marker. Instead of making a drawing of nature, I make a drawing with nature. The riverbed is my page. I draw a line. The water or the breeze shifts the line. It is a collaboration that fascinates me. We all know that enormous changes are on the way. This moment of collaborating with nature as illustrated in Figure 12.7 restores me, brings inspiration and hope.



FIGURE 12.7. DRAWING WITH SURVEY TAPE

Line of Clarity

A sharp line of survey tape (see Figure 12.8) in the water notes purity and clarity. When did you last see a river like this? What is the line of clarity? How do we hold on to it?



FIGURE 12.8. LINE OF CLARITY

Limitations

Sometimes we do not know natural limitations until they have been reached. Then it is too late. Figure 12.9 depicts this truth. All over the world, major cities are trying to buy back their watersheds. It is expensive. It takes time. Our waterways are vulnerable. Legislation would protect them. We need public will to create that legislation.



FIGURE 12.9. LIMITATIONS

Change

Water creates everything. It changes everything. Water is an essential to life. It is limited. It is viewed by many as a resource. Resources are viewed as commodities in our present world. Resources are regulated, permitted, bought, and sold. We need a different approach for water. We need to protect our water. It is so beautiful (see Figure 12.10). It makes me wonder. Can we change in a way that brings us hope?



FIGURE 12.10. CHANGE

Ice Petroglyph

What will those in future generations think of our era? Figure 12.11 invites the question.



FIGURE 12.11. ICE PETROGLYPH

New Horizons

There is uncertainty as we look to new horizons (see Figure 12.12). We need to remember that change might bring us a better world.



FIGURE 12.12. NEW HORIZONS

NOTES

- 1 *Wild Lands Advocate* 20, no. 5 (Oct. 2012).
- 2 Such as, The Calgary Herald Regional Section Front Page; The Lethbridge Herald; The Pincher Creek Echo; The Prairie Post; The Crowsnest Pass Promoter; CTV News; CBC News; CBC Radio One, The Noon Hour; Alberta Views, “Eye on Alberta”, and Pincher Creek Journal.
- 3 Guest lectures at the Visual Arts Alberta Association (CARFAC) Annual Conference, 2014; the Calgary Association of Life Long Learners, Speakers Series 2016; the Under Western Skies Panel, 2016; the University of Calgary, Nickle Arts Museum Curators Selections, 2019; and the Alberta Eco Trust Gatherings, 2020.
- 4 Maureen Daly Goggin, “Yarn Bombing: Claiming Rhetorical Citizenship in Public Spaces,” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship*, eds. Christian Mock and Lisa Villadsen Lisa (Leiden University Press, 2014), pp. 93-116, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/46337>.

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