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Why the Witness Camp?

by James Tweedie

Editor's Note: On the tenth of July, James Tweedie and Jeff Emmett set up a Witness Camp at the site of the provincial Castle Falls Recreation Area, where Shell had begun its drilling of a critical sour gas well. Shell was given permission by the AEUB in late May to go ahead with the drilling, despite formal requests by the CCWC for a hearing. A hearing was not granted, and to add insult to injury, the campground was closed in order to accommodate Shell's drilling plans.

The Witness Camp is the CCWC's response to this decision and to the consequent closure of a provincial recreation area. For the rest of the summer James Tweedie, Jeff Emmett, and Laura Shevchenko manned the camp and information centre on behalf of the CCWC. We owe many thanks to these witnesses.

From the outset, CCWC has had to dance around the presence of Shell Canada's Waterton Gas Field lying beneath the Castle Wilderness. CCWC's position has been articulated in our brochure since 1996: Shell should continue to produce and develop this field until the natural gas has been exhausted. At that time the roads and wells should be restored as nearly as possible to a wilderness state. Oil and gas exploration should not be permitted in the South Castle, West Castle and Carbondale headwaters.

Over the past year the CCWC has attempted to put an end to this dance by hammering out an agreement with Shell. After reviewing maps of Shell's lease holdings, seismic plays and anticipated future developments in the Castle, the CCWC had proposed to Shell that we might be able to map out areas of "no contest" where both parties might have similar interests in wild land protection, consistent with Shell's stated rhetoric at past hearings. Our hope had been that Shell would finally endorse the concept of a core protected area for the Castle, at least consistent with the 1993 Natural Resources Conservation Board Decision Report and be prepared to move that agenda forward with the CCWC to the government.

Had such an agreement been reached, CCWC would have been prepared to work with Shell to develop a management plan for the new developments proposed for the northeast corner of the Castle Special Management Area, to ensure that best possible practices were used and to avoid the need for public hearings

on each well. We were also discussing and mapping out sites where the CCWC, Shell and Alberta Forestry (as the land managers of the area) could work collaboratively on reclamation and restoration.

Faced with growing public discomfort with their drilling and flaring activities as the company pushed the boundaries of its known reserves, Shell's image as the good corporate citizen was vulnerable to the negative media exposure of public hearings. At the time of their Screwdriver Creek well application hearing, Shell finally responded to CCWC's concerns with a "letter of understanding" regarding their future plans for the Lynx Creek-Carbondale drainage. As a measure of good faith, CCWC refrained from making any intervention against Shell at the Screwdriver Creek hearing. On January 7, 2000, with the hearing behind it, Shell withdrew its "letter of understanding," suggesting the need for "further discussions on how to proceed with the mutual goal of protection in the Castle Wilderness area."

By the end of 2000, with Shell and the AEUB adamantly refusing to recognise either CCWC or CPAWS as stakeholders with legitimate public interest in the Castle over their Maverick Hill and Castle Falls well site applications, environmental lawyers Mike Wenig (acting for CCWC) and Gavin Fitch (acting for CPAWS) were in a full-scale legal wrangle with both Shell and the AEUB. Although we failed to convince the AEUB to hold hearings on these two critical sour gas wells, we were able to contest the adverse rulings every step of the way, short of going to the Alberta Court of Appeal.

In the specific case of the Castle Falls Well application, Shell's application violated a number of AEUB guidelines—particularly the AEUB's Information Letter 93-9 for energy developments on the Eastern Slopes—by failing to include a comprehensive cumulative impact assessment and a development plan covering all activities in the area, and the AEUB's setback guideline requiring a minimum 1.5 kilometre setback from any "public facility," which would include the Castle Falls Campground and Recreation Area. CCWC also contested Shell's reduction of their Emergency Planning Zone (from the standard 8 kilometres to 3 kilometres) as based on incorrect

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CASTLE-CROWN WILDERNESS COALITION

Box 2621, Pincher Creek, Alberta T0K 1W0
 Telephone 403 627 5059 Fax 403 627 5272
 e-mail: ccwcbref@telusplanet.net
 website: www.ccwc.ab.ca
 off-road website: www.canuck.com/off-road/

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Lethbridge	Gordon Bossenberry 403 328 5442
Medicine Hat	Vacant
Edmonton	George Newton 780 433 7904
Calgary	Richard Collier 403 246 8246
Red Deer	Kathy Sheppard 403 746 2472

Upcoming Meetings

Saturday, September 15: Witness Camp Celebration beginning at noon (see notice for details)

Saturday, October 13: Round Table Meeting, Lebel Mansion, Pincher Creek, 10 AM to 4 PM. Potluck lunch (see notice on page 4).

Newsletter

This newsletter welcomes comments and/or submissions from members and others. Please send submissions to the editor at the office or directly by e-mail (mmcragen@telusplanet.net). Please check with the editor for submission deadlines.

The opinions, evaluations, claims and assertions contained in articles appearing in the Castle Wilderness News are the responsibility of their authors, and may not reflect the policies of the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition. The editor takes responsibility for articles, notices, etc., for which an author is not identified.

Donations to CCWC are tax creditable and greatly appreciated.

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and incomplete factual information, and that the proposed well and pipeline posed unacceptable public health risks.

In short, the AEUB's ruling to allow Shell to proceed with the Castle Falls Well without going to a Public Hearing, and the company's refusal to engage with CPAWS in an alternative dispute resolution process over future land-use issues in the area made it clear that the company's policy of talk-and-drill has not changed and the AEUB's fine talk about the need for improved land-use decision-making was just more empty words. The decision makes a complete mockery of any pretensions there may be for serious environmental protection in the new Castle Special Management Area.

And so, the dance continues.

Given our financial inability to pursue these issues at the Alberta Court of Appeal, the CCWC has used the closure of the public recreation area and campground as the occasion to establish our Witness Camp as a low-budget alternative for challenging Shell and the AEUB in the court of public opinion, and to present our alternative vision for the future of the Castle Wilderness to the people now using the area. •

Witness Camp Celebration and Fall Gathering

 *September 15 and 16*

Join us in celebrating the success of the CCWC's witness camp and information centre in the Castle this summer. We will be offering a variety of activities including:

Saturday: 12 noon: Information sessions on recent research projects in the Castle; Shell's well site—up close and personal; improv theatre workshop; walk, bike or swim (brrr) along the Castle River.

6 PM: Potluck Supper, followed by a recognition of CCWC volunteers and an evening of campfire music.

Sunday: CCWC will provide a simple breakfast for those who stay over.

9 AM to 3 PM: Guided hike in the Castle Wilderness.

Location: Witness Camp at Castle Falls Recreation Area, 35 kilometres west of Pincher Creek, on the West Castle road.

Camping: Castle Falls Recreation Area and Castle Bridge Campground are immediately close by. Random camping near the Witness camp is free.

Meals: Please pack your own lunches for both Saturday and Sunday. Saturday evening will be potluck, so please bring an item to share. CCWC will cover evening snacks and Sunday breakfast.

For more: information, directions or to register, contact James Tweedie: 403-628-2422 or <tweedie@telusplanet.net>



At the Witness Camp

by Jeff Emmett

My first night in camp was overwhelming. James had brought me out to camp and together we unloaded the tipi poles and set up a small tent. After he left I got out my camp stove and made a cup of tea, sitting beneath a huge spruce tree on the roadside. I was beginning to realize that the generator at the Shell Atco trailer, their information center and check stop, would run all night. The generator powers the trailer and huge flood lights that project a light so unnaturally white and strong that to sit below them for more than a few minutes is blinding and unbearable. I went for a walk. The grinding drone of the generator faded as I walked and the rolling, bubbling sound of the Castle River was a welcome replacement. This serenity did not last long. A quad, an all terrain vehicle, came bursting out of the forest, splashed its way to the middle of the river and then the driver hopped off and began washing his quad right there in the middle of the river. I turned around feeling disconcerted and went back to camp. I paused to read Shell's warning signs on the road as I walked; I'd read them before and I'd read them again.

Soon the Witness Camp would really grow. The meagre beginning of one tent became a magnificent tipi, a canvas wall tent full of literature and maps, a few banners and a couple of signs to let the world know we were there, and that we were there to talk, share information and witness Shell's activities. At times, being alone there and only speaking to a few people a day, I felt as if I wasn't accomplishing much. But the word was getting out in the media and amongst the local community. People slowly started coming out just to see the camp and to compare the differing views of Shell and the CCWC.

People who stopped to talk were all interested but for different reasons. Most because their recreational playground was shrinking. The government had designated the area as a recreational priority in their April 2001 Integrated Resource Plan, but allowed Shell to start drilling the most hazardous type of sour gas well possible a few weeks later, causing the closure of the 48 site Castle Falls campground until September 15. The contradiction is obvious and stark.

The company calculated its emergency planning zone to be 8.5 kilometres, but then shrunk this to 3 kilometres. The larger radius would have included a minimum security prison, the Castle River Bridge campground, a lot of roadside random camping, as well as some residents living close to Beaver Mines. It seems that government guidelines are being bent to accommodate sour gas.

Another big concern was the possibility of a hydrogen sulfide leak. This hit a nerve of fear in many of the people I talked to. I was told by one passer-by about how Shell had reimbursed a friend of his for two cattle that had died from sour gas exposure. A member of the public has yet to be killed from sour gas, but nonetheless, is the potential for a lethal accident a real one? The statistics provided by the Petroleum Communication Foundation confirm that it is. Three Albertan workers died from hydrogen sulfide between 1992 and 1998. Twenty-three workers from B.C. and Alberta died between 1979 and 1988. In Alberta there were 28 sour gas pipeline leaks in 1998 alone.

The Petroleum Communication Foundation's approach to analyzing this risk leaves me dumbfounded. "When considering sour gas developments, regulators consider the risks in light of the normal risks of living in a modern industrial society. This is not unique to sour gas. For example, we live with a small but ever-present risk that an airplane will crash on us." So, because of "normal" risks it is okay to add another one? Unless residents near to sour gas developments move, they have no choice but to accept the risk of sour gas.

The camp has also been visited by people who share our wilderness values. There are people who understand how connected we are to the diversity of life. The preservation and restoration of lands in the Castle needs no defence—it's worth it, they know. They came to the camp to show their support for our initiative, their visits flashed hope and happiness into the barrage of off-road and industrial vehicles that would pull up the dust in front of the Witness camp.

I hope you all can come and lend your support for the camp's celebratory gathering on September 15. I would like to thank you all for allowing me the opportunity to raise awareness about, and bear witness to, this hazardous well that has compromised the health of living things and the integrity of a wild place. •

Reference:

Bott, Robert, 2000. Sour Gas: Questions and Answers. Petroleum Communication Foundation, Calgary, p. 13, 17, 22, 31.



Office Notes

by Judy Huntley

Editor's Note: After an extended period without an office person, the CCWC is happy to now be able to bring Judy Huntley aboard. Judy is a CCWC founding member and will bring years of skills from her work with the Alberta and Canadian Environmental Networks, as well as numerous provincial and national organizations and agencies. Her duties will include coordination of the campaign and strategic planning activities, fundraising, and Board and volunteer support. Please feel free to contact her at the office to obtain information, to volunteer for any of CCWC's ongoing activities, or to provide input. Welcome Judy!

For a number of months through the winter and spring, funding constraints made it impossible to have staff in the office. The Board on behalf of the members extend heartfelt thanks to the many volunteers who have kept CCWC operating through that time, covering the array of CCWC's activities such as membership, financial administration, the newsletter, fund raising, research projects, and the campaign.

Over the summer, CCWC has once again been busy with various projects and summer staff. Gary Parkstrom, who did a study of the proposed sewage lagoon at Castle Mountain Resort as a student research project two winters ago, later joined the CCWC Board while living in Calgary and working on a master's degree in geography. This summer he temporarily stepped down from the Board to accept a position working with Dave Sheppard on the Restoration project. He was able, travelling on foot and by bike, to study many of the trails and roads in the South Castle in June, assessing the damage and providing recommendations on restoration options. Unfortunately, before the second phase of his fieldwork, he broke an ankle, and is therefore currently doing a review of relevant literature (as well as completing his Master's thesis) while recovering. He anticipates completing the fieldwork this fall.

He notes that this is a good and exciting project and a potential model for work elsewhere, and says that the main issues are that roads and trails that are supposed to be closed are still being used, and that some that are open are real ecological and sedimentation liabilities.

Dawn Nelson, a long time resident of Pincher Creek, a continuing student, and mother of three, has looked after the office for the summer. She has done a superb job of organizing the huge amount of information available there, such that it is now fully accessible to members, students and others who may wish to make use of it. As well, she has generated two new pieces of research as part of the restoration project.

Having helped Dave seek out literature that is particularly relevant to the project, she has focused on eight species that are extirpated or much reduced in the Castle. As a result of her work, recommendations will be made on species restoration. Dawn is now looking at articles on connectivity, old growth, road densi-

ties, restoring fire, and keystone species. This research will lead to a section in the restoration report on restoring wilderness.

Jeff Emmett was on staff last year as an outreach worker, presenting CCWC's message both at assorted venues through the summer and at Calgary schools during the winter. This year he has been the stalwart staff person at the information centre in the field. An intrepid world traveller, he will be returning to the University of Calgary this fall to finish a degree in International Relations but looks forward to meeting as many CCWC members as possible at the final weekend of the camp, September 15-16.

Three volunteers are making particular contributions to CCWC's current projects. Jennifer Taylor, who is going into her fourth year in geography at the University of Lethbridge, is helping with the restoration project by looking at the restoration of native plants and grasses, and the elimination of exotics.

Ben Kunz is doing a two-week field project in the Carbondale drainage, travelling by bike in the areas affected by fires last year, and extending the mapping work that CCWC has done over several years in conjunction with the Miistakis Institute. He will map the additional roading that resulted from both the fire fighting and the subsequent salvage logging.

And finally, Laura Shevchenko, who has felt connected to the Castle and to CCWC since she was one of the Precipice Theatre players in *Clown of the Continent* years ago, returned to Alberta this spring after several years abroad and has been a valuable part of the witness camp and outreach activities at the information centre. •



Fall Round Table Meeting

Although members are welcome at Board meetings, it has been some time since CCWC has held one of the Round Table meetings that provide all members with a specific opportunity to gain detailed information, and provide their input, about the activities and direction of the organization in general and the campaign in particular.

This fall we will be working with CPAWS, AWA, and others in Y2Y to evaluate and confirm the strategic direction for the campaign.

Come out, get up to speed, and share your ideas.

October 13, 2001

10 AM to 4 PM, Lebel Mansion, Pincher Creek

❖ potluck lunch ❖