

Respect Your Elders: Protect the Oldman with this Pull-out Postcard

Just add a stamp and send!



When we discuss headwaters, we are describing areas where creeks, seeps, streams, and other waterbodies merge together to form the very beginning of a river system.

In Alberta, the headwaters of most major rivers are found in the Rockies and foothills, collectively known as the Eastern Slopes. Most of the water that feeds these rivers starts as snowfall, and generally, the greater the area encompassed within a river's headwaters region, the more snow (and ultimately flows) the basin receives.

Climate matters too, and in dry Southern Alberta, the small, narrow headwaters of the major rivers capture much less water than their wider, wetter, northern counterparts.

This is especially true of the Oldman, something abundantly clear when standing at the southern end of Livingstone Range.

The Continental Divide rises up just 20 km away, High Rock Range marking the Oldman's most westerly boundaries. Looking east, montane ecosystems transition almost immediately into cropland, the square quarters a surrogate for where fescue grasslands once grew.

Here, the headwaters that feed the most heavily used river system in the province are almost entirely visible with the naked eye. And unlike the headwaters of every other major river in Alberta, the Oldman's aren't conserved within parks and protected areas.

Because of this, the coniferous and mixedwood forests populate that region, collecting snow and slow spring melts, enriching and strengthening sensitive mountain soils, storing water, carbon, and nutrients, and mitigating drought and floods, are leased to logging companies like West Fraser. Their cutblocks checker the valley

between High Rock and Livingstone Range.

Tens of thousands of headwaters hectares are also earmarked to coal companies. Mining dramatically transforms the landscape and risks the release and concentration of chemicals like arsenic, selenium, and lead into the surrounding environment, which harms water quality and aquatic ecosystems. Grassy Mountain, its slopes deforested and sculpted by exploration roads, sits centre, threatened by further mine applications from Northback Holdings.

The Alberta government has identified both High Rock and Livingstone Ranges for protection as future Wildland Provincial Parks. This is a great start. But it is clear the entirety of the Oldman's headwaters must be conserved from further development and restored, to protect the health of the watershed and all downstream communities that rely on it.

Let the Province know it's time to officially designate these areas under the Provincial Parks Act and expand their boundaries to protect the sensitive and important headwaters region of the Oldman with the removable postcard included in this issue, illustrated by the brilliant artist Geneva Haley.

-Kennedy Halvorson, AWA Conservation Specialist

Looking out over the Livingstone and High Rock ranges. **Photo © C. Hunter**

