

Prairie Conservation Forum
Presentation by Alan Gardner
‘SLOW DEATH OF THE GOOSE THAT LAYS THE GOLDEN EGGS’
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It is our nature as people to desire more and more. Whatever the reason, people have never been satisfied for long with what they have. In addition, humanity has never been particularly good at sharing. Instead we compete. We compete for mates, for food, for resources, and for the ultimate proxies – power and money.

It is also our nature to be poor at learning the lessons of history, which teaches us that while we have the power to imagine the future, we are predisposed to ignore it. We are much more interested in what we can get today. Perhaps it comes from thousands of years of living with shortages. We say that ‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush’. Or to repeat a phrase from a recent pirate movie: ‘Take all you can – give nothing back’.

This predisposition is exacerbated by the ‘tragedy of the commons’, a circumstance where a few take most of the benefits from harvesting a resource, and the liabilities are spread over a much wider group. When given the opportunity, people cannot help but take all the cookies they can get.

We are all familiar with the parable of the golden goose. Can we be satisfied with the slow but steady stream of golden eggs, or do we start eyeing the goose for the best Christmas dinner ever? It is analogous to the person who, not satisfied with the interest from an inheritance, starts to take withdrawals from the principle. We cannot seem to resist the impulse to dip into our assets to support the lifestyle to which we would like to become accustomed.

The southern foothills of Alberta, the Eastern Slopes, represent a number of key assets, not least of which is that of a rather important watershed. But it also represents many other assets which provide golden eggs, including recreation, ranching, clean air, scenic vistas, wildlife habitat, hunting, and low-input beef production.

The Southern Foothills Study (or SFS) was initiated because people were concerned about the loss of assets. The study is focused on providing us with a look into the future of the southern Alberta foothills landscape. The SFS is driven by the people who actually live and work in the area. We understood that the current policy of zero planning (also known as ‘let the market work things out’, or ‘let’s allow anything, anywhere, at any time’), was not going to protect the key assets provided by this landscape.

Many different interests make a claim on the landscape. As a result, landscape planning is very complex and involves many parties. A fundamental goal of the SFS was to provide some science on which to base discussions between land owners, industry and government. It was to promote intelligent discussion rather than draw strict conclusions. The current conflict between landowners, government and resource companies is bad for business, bad for the people who live in the area, and bad for our society as a whole.

Phase One of the study included hiring Dr. Brad Stelfox to populate his ALCES model with the data for our study area and then running what is called the base case, or ‘business as usual’ scenario. This was completed in September of 2006. It showed that the integrity of the landscape has significantly declined over the past decades and will almost certainly continue to decline – about 2% a year when it comes to water quality. Information on the study and the report download is available at the SALTS website (www.salts-landtrust.org/sfs).

Phase Two of the study included seven public meetings around the study area to show people the results of the ALCES model outcomes, and to get feedback on their reaction. The total attendance at the meetings was just over 600 people. Attendees were asked to fill out a survey form and 344 of them were returned. The preliminary feedback from the survey showed that people are very concerned about the foothills environment, and are willing to modify their own behaviour to protect its essential quality. The study also commissioned a random telephone survey in Calgary and Lethbridge, as well as around the study area, to compare with the results of the paper survey.

Another key feature of the Southern Foothills Study is the emphasis on cumulative effects. The damage being done to the ecosystem is not the

result of a single activity. It is the result of many activities, including agriculture, recreation, aggregate mining, and oil and gas, all wanting to use the landscape for their own ends, and with nobody to set a cumulative limit on what they can get.

For example, an oil and gas company buys a mineral lease from the government and does some exploration. Based on this data, their technical folks say they will need a certain number of wells to drain the resource. Whether this is 10 wells or 500 wells, they expect to be able to drill them. They do not expect to be told that the current intensity of agriculture, recreation, and forestry will limit them to 1 or 2 wells per year, or a maximum number of 10 wells. Instead, Alberta Energy and the Alberta Energy Utilities Board pave the way for them to drill pretty well all the wells they want. At the same time, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development is forcing the leaseholder of the Forest Management Agreement to harvest all the trees possible. All the access roads created by these other activities now allow access to scores of people flocking into the countryside for recreational activities. This is the reality of the watershed today. Who speaks for the value of the existing assets of the foothills?

All the interests compete for the golden eggs, and when there aren't enough eggs, the goose will surely be cooked. The question that we must ask ourselves is whether we are willing to stand back and allow our inheritance – the assets of the southern foothills – to be slowly squandered.

If you own your own house without a mortgage then you know very well the value of having an asset. If you have a mortgage, then you can imagine what it would be like to use that monthly payment to improve your lifestyle. Assets allow you to live a better life. Without assets, we are all poorer, whether it is an individual, a community, or a society.

The Southern Alberta Land Trust Society is an environmental land trust that encourages people to place conservation easements on land to protect existing biological assets. It is a method of extending this protection to private land – something government cannot do. Yet, even a conservation easement cannot stop the Energy and Utilities Board from approving wells. It comes down to right of access. Unlimited access means unlimited damage to existing assets, and this equation must be rebalanced to protect the watershed.

In our rush for the good life, we need to ask ourselves some questions. Can we live within our means? Can we be happy with an omelet rather than demanding the goose for dinner?

Thank you,

Alan Gardner