

Martha Kostach

b. 1949. Minnesota U.S.A. d. 2008 Rocky Mountain House, Alberta.

Martha and her seven siblings were brought up on a Minnesota farm. In 1975 she, her husband Tom and their four sons moved to Alberta to set up their veterinarian practice in Rocky Mountain House. Tom returned to the U.S.A. in 1990.

Martha and her family took particular delight in the Kootenay Plains and the threat of an enormous resort to be built there was the catalyst that started her work as an environmentalist. It took nine years of persistence to get the project stopped and eventually led to the Plains being protected as an Ecological Reserve.

Her strong personality, tireless energy, fierce determination and her meticulous attention to detail soon made her small figure a well-known and respected participant at public hearings and, later, on advisory committees.

One of the key issues she tackled was air quality. Her veterinary records were used to reveal a link between sour gas emissions and the reproductive disorders in the cattle she was treating. With new regulations, the level of methane and SO₂ emissions in the region was reduced by 80%. She was a leading participant in the Clean Air Strategic Alliance (CASA). Their work led to a 70% reduction of gas flaring and venting and other innovative programs to improve air quality in the Province, which earned CASA Emerald awards for their initiatives.

When a proper environmental assessment was not done prior to the building of the controversial Oldman Dam, Martha took the case all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1992 she won the landmark decision that upheld Ottawa's constitutional responsibility to conduct environmental assessments on provincially sponsored projects. This decision was incorporated into the provisions of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act.

Other prosecutions in which Martha played a leading role resulted in rulings that proposed transportation stream crossings required the approval of the Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans and gravel mining of Alberta rivers is no longer permitted. She represented ENGO's in several cases under the North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation which is part of NAFTA and also advised many individuals on their legal rights in conservation matters and how to achieve them.

She was a member of several environmental and naturalist groups, including RDRN, and took part in Provincial and Federal advisory committees and hearings panels, including those on the Oilsands.

Martha was firm in her convictions but was rarely confrontational in presenting them. She was known for her integrity and respect for other people's

genuinely held opinions and feared for her impatient scorn of hypocrisy or deliberate distortion of the facts.

In her personal life, Martha practised what she preached. She drove an energy efficient car, bought her clothes and most other necessities of life second hand and, helped by family and over a hundred friends from the environmental community, industry and government, built an off-grid, energy-efficient house of natural materials.

In 2005, Martha's health deteriorated and she closed her veterinary practice. She was diagnosed with Multiple System Atrophy, an incurable neurological disease. With the help of drugs, she continued her environmental work, having made it very clear that, when the time came, she would choose when to die and not wait until she could no longer exist without artificial means and constant care. She died peacefully on 23rd. April 2008, aged 58 years.

People talk of wanting to leave a legacy and Martha certainly left one that will continue to be valued and bear fruit in the future.

Because she was known for her efforts to involve the public and for advocating consensus building, the Provincial Government has set up an annual bursary in her memory for people from NGO's to study those subjects. Athabasca University has acquired the digital rights to Martha's vast collection of environmental information and will make it available for public reference.

However, for her family and many friends she also left a legacy of memories of a loving, caring lady who, even with the enormous amount of dedication and energy she put into her environmental work, always had time to help others, who radiated joy in nature and who laughed a lot.

As she had wished, a memorial gathering in her honour was held on her beloved Kootenay Plains on May 31st. 2008. About two hundred people met and hugged, reminisced, told tales of Martha's accomplishments and kindness and laughed at the funny things that had happened along the way. Martha would have loved it!

Awards

□ 1992 The inaugural Alberta Emerald Award for her leadership on environmental issues. □ 2002 The first Canadian Geographic Environmental Achievement Award □ She accepted the Emerald Community Award on behalf of CASA □ 2003 Douglas H. Pimlott Award, Nature Canada's most prestigious award for contributions to Canadian conservation. □ 2004 Wilderness Defender's Award.

Alberta Wilderness Association's lifetime Achievement Award. □ 2008 A special Emerald Achievement Award was to have been presented to Martha on June 3rd. It was accepted for her by her son.