

Big Lake Environment Support Society President's Report for 2005

Presented at the BLESS Annual General Meeting on January 31, 2006.

I would like to provide an overview of BLESS accomplishments and activities from last year and then outline some directions for where the society might go this year. It is important that you, the members of BLESS, express your views as to what you think our priorities should be in 2006. I invite you to actively participate in BLESS activities in 2006, remain in touch with the BLESS board of directors throughout the year and give us your opinion on the issues and where you think BLESS should be headed.

BLESS activities in 2005

Through the year BLESS has been represented on the St. Albert & Area Multi-stakeholder Project (STAMP), initially by Bill Bocock and then for the majority of the year by John Samson. Participation in this group is an important annual BLESS activity because of the close proximity of oil and gas activities to Big Lake and the potential for these activities to harm the natural area.

The annual BLESS Springing to Life event occurred April 16 and April 30th. Dan Stoker and Miles Constable braved the cold wind on the BLESS platform to count and record early bird arrivals and talk with those who came out about the migratory waterfowl that use Big Lake.

BLESS had a great presence for Earthday at Hawrelak Park on April 24. Dan organized the event with aquatic displays and games for the kids. Miles set up and manned an information booth then fielded numerous queries about the new park throughout the day. Megan Stoker, Erin Cameron, Dan Stoker and Bruce Cameron tended the BLESS aquatic and game displays all day. Judging by its popularity, BLESS had one of the best displays at Earthday in 2005.

Last year saw another milestone in protection for Big Lake. On Earthday the Provincial Government transformed the Big Lake Natural Area into Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park and added another 302 hectares (746 acres) of land, on the west side of the lake. Miles Constable crafted a very convincing letter in support of a park that we sent to the Minister of Community Development Gary Mar early in March. BLESS Director Louise Horstman wrote a beautiful poem in honour of the new park. Entitled "On the Creation of Lois Hole Provincial Park". The poem can be found on the BLESS website (www.bless.ab.ca/) as well as the province's official website for Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park .

The park dedication ceremony on April 21 was attended by the Hole family, Minister Gary Mar and current Lieutenant Governor Norm Kwong. The Alberta Government

kindly offered invitations to the ceremony to all BLESS members in recognition of BLESS stewardship initiatives over the years.

Alberta Community Development has since told us they are negotiating for the purchase of land in the far southwest corner of South Riel. The government recognizes this land with its wide diversity of vegetation as being perfect for an interpretive area.

Community Development has also told us the Pioneer Gun Club on the north shore has approached the government and offered an appraisal of their land for inclusion in the park as that group can longer hunt there. So the vision for the Park is gradually coming together.

Spruce Up the Sturgeon, an event in which BLESS participates every year, occurred on Sunday May 1st. Stuart Loomis helped the city organize this event on behalf of BLESS. Last year's event saw a decent turnout from city hall; three councillors came out and pitched in to rid the river of winter's accumulation of trash.

The Roy Financial Mayor's Walk for Charity came off without a hitch on June 18th, thanks in part to Stuart and Rosalind Loomis who helped organize the walk on behalf of BLESS. They were joined on that rainy day by Nicholas Batchelor, Nick Robinson and Miles Constable.

2005 saw the first Water Quality Awareness Day sampling in Alberta. BLESS undertook to sample Big Lake, the Sturgeon River and Riel Lagoon on June 5th. Stuart, Bruce and myself sampled the river near the new bridge and then paddled to the Sturgeon inlet on the west side of the bay and took water samples. We were joined in the afternoon by Miles. It was an absolutely great day to be out on the lake.

The city continued building its West Regional Road in 2005 and BLESS was there to monitor construction activities. Stuart and I attended three stakeholder meetings where we raised observations that the city was not in compliance with what was stated in the Environmental Impact Assessment. We also wrote to Fisheries and Oceans and informed the minister of the noted deviations and the lack of public transparency into design changes.

On June 22 last year, Stuart and I attended the first meeting of a proposed Sturgeon River Watershed group, intended to be a subset of the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance, with the purpose of developing a detailed management plan for the Sturgeon River along its entire length. In Attendance at the meeting were representatives from the City of St. Albert, Alberta Community Development, Ducks Unlimited Canada, Alberta Environment the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance and the Land Stewardship Centre of Canada. The group identified a need to engage all stakeholders, governments and stewards along the river to harmonize bylaws and regulations and develop an effective management plan for the watershed. The watershed group met only the one time last year but we have since met again twice this month and intend to move forward

in 2006 with an open house on April 12th to bring awareness to the public of the issues affecting the watershed.

BLESS can play a significant role in this initiative by helping to educate other stakeholders of what needs to be done to ensure the long-term sustainability of the watershed. Certainly we need to be involved in such important planning initiatives.

In support of this initiative, Stuart attended a Watershed Strategy Implementation conference November 2-4, last year in Sherwood Park. The North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance along with Partners for The Saskatchewan River Basin put the conference on to explore practical ways for community-based watershed groups to put plans into action. Stuart returned with a significant contribution to BLESS coffers as a result of his winning the conference draw.

Dan has provided an excellent review of the Summer Nature Program so I won't delve into it too much detail. I would like to emphasize, however, that BLESS, as always, made this educational program available as a free service to the public. There was absolutely no cost to the children who attended or their parents. I believe this program to be one of the most important of the BLESS annual activities. Children are the future of conservation, it's critical that we engage them, that they gain an appreciation for our natural environment and learn at an early age the importance of preserving it.

BLESS applied for and received partial funding for the 2005 nature program from the Alberta Government Step program and TDCanadaTrust Friends of the Environment Foundation.

I must also mention that attendance was up 17% over last year thanks to an exceptional effort on the part of Sarah Pearson and Dan Stoker. The number of children who enrolled in the Young Naturalist Program was more than double the number from 2004. The BLESS Summer Nature Program also enjoyed excellent coverage in the press last year thanks to the writing and marketing efforts of both Dan and Sarah.

I would like to acknowledge Michelle Riopel who volunteered 14 hours instructing the children as part of the Summer Nature Program. Volunteer support of this kind is invaluable to such programs. Thank you Michelle.

Dan Stoker stepped forward last year and took the new River Edge Enhancement Project under his wing. He single-handedly did the research and report writing for REEP and organized work crews, did all the necessary ground work with the city and then presented the project to a receptive city council. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude.

The REEP project was fun. We had an enjoyable outing early in May with a test planting of willow shoots and managed to protect some young trees from beavers in the fall.

BLESS applied for and received significant grants in support of REEP in 2005 from the Alberta Conservation Association and the Suncor Energy Foundation.

Stuart and Nicholas attended a Steward Monitoring session at Wagner Natural Area put on by Coral Grove and Joyce Gould from Alberta Community Development on May 15th 2005.

Then on July 5th we initiated the first of what I hope will be many photo monitoring tours of Big Lake. The tour around the entire circumference of the lake was well attended by BLESS members and interested residents from the community. We systematically recorded the condition of specific areas of the lake with digital photos and documented the precise location (latitude and longitude) and camera lens settings so the shots could be reproduced in future years as a visual record of changes to the natural area. The entire day's activities were captured digitally and provided to Alberta Parks and Protected areas on CD.

For Parks Day on July 16th, BLESS joined with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) in an event at the BLESS shelter designed to showcase our new provincial park. Rebecca Reeves from CPAWS was instrumental in organizing the event. Considering the wet weather and the abysmal condition of the city's parking lot that day we had a pretty good turnout. CPAWS is currently working on a major study regarding the state of Alberta Parks which is due to be released early this year.

BLESS received a very great honour in 2005. Thanks to the hard work and perseverance of a succession of members over many years, the society was awarded the Steward Service Excellence Award by the Alberta Government. Over the years members have raised funds to build the BLESS shelter and viewing platform, lobbied the provincial government to gain protection for Big Lake as a natural area, obtained international standing for Big Lake as an Important Bird Area and supported the initiative to further protect Big Lake with provincial park status. The Steward Service Award is given out by Alberta Community Development Parks and Protected Areas to only one group per year province wide for long term dedication, positive attitude and actions that have benefited the natural area under the group's care. Dan Stoker received the award on behalf of BLESS at the Parks & Protected Areas Volunteer Conference in Blairmore on September 9th. The painting of a Great Blue Heron that commemorates the award was created by Alberta artist Ann Macdonald and is entitled "Taking Off." It will reside in the front lobby of the Parks and Protected Areas office in Edmonton. Coral Grove from Alberta Parks and Protected Areas has graciously brought the painting here tonight for our enjoyment. Parks and Protected Areas also gave a smaller version of the painting to BLESS; it's currently on the wall nearest the door in the log cabin.

We were blessed in 2005 in many ways. For the very first time a pair of Great Egrets nested in shrubs along the north shore of Big lake and raised a clutch of 4 young birds. This is a most unusual occurrence given the normal range for these majestic birds that rarely venture into Canada and almost never this far north.

In response to increased development pressures around the lake, the board of directors started several new initiatives last year. Early in July Bob Russell developed a BLESS position statement on the lands in South Riel which we sent to St. Albert City Council and the Alberta Government and which we then released to the press. Our position is that all the lands in South Riel between the road and the lake should be preserved as parkland for inclusion in the city's Red Willow Park and Lois Hole Provincial Park. I recommend BLESS maintain lobbying efforts in future to ensure as much land as possible is set aside as parkland.

Development pressures from Edmonton and Parkland also became evident last year. Both Edmonton and Parkland County have Area Structure Plans for Big Lake and surrounding lands. Last year these signs began showing up along south shore. There is of course already a subdivision adjoining the lake in Parkland County just outside Edmonton City limits. As more and more lands become developed we will begin to see the same kind of adverse environmental effects to the watershed that are currently emanating from the City of St. Albert. Road runoff is a problem, as is inappropriate development, outmoded residential planning and unwarranted intrusion upon sensitive natural areas. Our conceptual plan for Big Lake will be a voice for the environment in dealing with inappropriate development initiatives. The plan will also engage you, BLESS members, and communities around the lake in charting the future of the new park. It will recommend what we the people believe to be the best land use and development policies to ensure the long-term preservation of Big Lake and its wildlife.

BLESS directors engaged all levels of government in efforts to protect the natural area last year. When the city's chief engineer indicated the power lines along Riel Pond dike and across the river near the BLESS platform would not be moved underground to follow the road alignment, we wrote to Community Development Minister Gary Mar and asked that the province take a lead role in relocating the lines. Minister Mar had previously indicated a desire to see the power lines removed to be more in keeping with the esthetics of a provincial park. In his letter of response in December the minister assured us he will be looking into the matter.

We also wrote to the federal Environment and Transport ministers in November regarding the lack of legislation that would allow motorized watercraft to be banned from the lake to preserve and protect habitat. We have yet to hear back from either federal agency. Last year we had a few occasions where motor boats or hovercraft were tearing around the lake. Given the importance of Big Lake for breeding birds we believe it's critical that legislation be available to protect habitat from motorized traffic, both surface and water.

BLESS was pleased in 2005 to see a nomination go forward recommending Elke Blodgett for a Canadian Environmental Award. A big thanks to Bob Russell for shepherding that nomination through to completion.

We increased BLESS capital assets in 2005 with the purchase of a used 16-foot canoe. The canoe will enable us to do more monitoring of Big Lake from the water this year. I'm hoping we can set up some processes in 2006 that will allow the canoe to be signed out and used by members throughout the year. We also need to find an appropriate parking spot for the canoe. Right now it's stored at the log cabin.

I would like to just take a moment to acknowledge the outstanding contribution Dan Stoker made to BLESS in 2005, in both time and resources. Dan put in well over 400 hours in 2005 in organizing and running Springing to Life, the BLESS presence at Earthday, the Summer Nature Program and the River Edge Enhancement Program. In addition, Dan contributed the very significant monetary proceeds from a four-week course he taught at Leo Nickerson to BLESS coffers. Much of what BLESS accomplished in 2005 was due to Dan's efforts, we owe him a huge debt of gratitude.

BLESS Activities Proposed for 2006

So, where are we going this year? I see BLESS priorities in 2006 as being:

- Completion of the Lois Hole Provincial Park conceptual plan
- Continued Participation in Sturgeon watershed planning group
- Continued participation in the River Edge Enhancement Project
- Continuance of the Summer Nature Program

Along with those activities will come the need for fund raising and grant writing.

If directors could raise enough funding and find a person with the right skills, I would like to see another major project undertaken in 2006. Alberta Environment has indicated there is a lack of information in the Sturgeon watershed on benthic invertebrates. I think it might be worthwhile to undertake such a study for Big Lake.

Given the threats from urban expansion in St. Albert, Edmonton and Parkland County and their potential impact on the natural area, I believe there is a need to expand the number of BLESS stewardship inspections in 2006.

I believe it's also important that we take concrete measures to increase our numbers this year. Increased membership brings with it more credibility when dealing with politicians. It also helps spread the workload and would enable us to accomplish more.

The new BLESS board should form a committee structure early in the year to handle all commitments and requirements. Committees could include Communications and Public Relations, Fund Raising, Stewardship and Monitoring, Events, Membership and Land Use Issues.

We need to follow up with the new federal government in 2006 and urge it to enact laws to protect habitat from motorized watercraft. We should remain active in ensuring governments work together to restore our new park to its natural state by removing unsightly and dangerous power lines. BLESS should continue to lobby the City of St.

Albert to provide reasonable pedestrian access within city limits to the new Provincial Park.

We should also monitor the city in its efforts to implement the stormceptor program for the river. The city appears to be making some progress but must significantly reduce the amount of road sediment from St. Albert streets that is going into the river.

We need to continue to monitor construction activities with the West Regional Road. Last year's construction brought threats to the river, especially in the spring, and little has changed since to lead us to expect it will any different in 2006.

BLESS should also continue to participate in the many annual initiatives we have to date, including, Springing to Life, the Roy Financial Mayor's Walk for Charity, Clean Up the Sturgeon and Earthday. We should participate once again this year in Alberta Water Quality Awareness Day.

Elke Blodgett has suggested BLESS apply to include Big Lake on the RAMSAR list of Wetlands of International Importance.

The RAMSAR convention promotes the concept of "Wise Use" which is defined as the sustainable use of wetlands for the benefit of mankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem. Wise Use espouses to meet current needs while maintaining the potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.

Inclusion on the RAMSAR list will raise the bar another notch in affording protection to the Big Lake wetlands. I think it's an initiative the new board of directors should seriously consider.

Dave Burkhart
BLESS President, 2005