

TROUBLED TRIBUTARIES: ALBERTA ANGLERS, FISH FIGHTS, AND THE RACE TO SAVE MOUNTAIN COLDWATER STREAMS, 1900-1930

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Introduction

In December 1929, High River residents crowded into a local courtroom. They were not there for the trial of a cattle rustler or barroom brawler arrested in High River's Gateway Hotel the weekend before. Townsfolk were cramming the benches in hopes of seeing two men punished for having, as everyone presumed, caught trout on closed tributary streams in the foothills the month before.¹

Things did not look good for the accused—B. F. Brown and H. L. Blaman, both from the foothills town of Turner Valley, to the northwest of High River. As the court heard, the two had stopped over on a hunting trip to stay in a cabin on the TL Ranch. Largely by chance, a ranch caretaker had interrupted their visit to chat. Afterwards, he slipped word to the local fishery guardian that he had discovered a crate in the back of the cabin with no fewer than thirty-one fine trout cached inside.

The two men now faced their fate.

They must have felt a bit overwhelmed. A formidable crowd was present. A good portion of the High River Fish and Game Association—founded in 1920 as the Highwood River Angling Protective Association—filled the room. The association counted George Lane as its honorary vice-president. Lane was the legendary cattle rancher and horse breeder under whose ownership the nearby Bar U Ranch had grown to massive proportions. And none other than Edward, Prince of Wales—an avid angler on his stocked lake at the EP Ranch, not far from the Bar U—was the association's honorary president. Although the royal heir apparent was not in attendance, his spirit was conveyed by the Union Jack hanging in the room. It seemed that High River's wealthiest and most powerful folk, not to mention the very weight of the British Empire, was bearing down on the two unfortunate men from Turner Valley.

A magistrate was brought all the way from Calgary, at a cost of \$17 to the federal fisheries department. The prosecutor was Alec A. Ballachey, High River's respected town lawyer—an ardent angler who was also the angling association's president. Not only did he represent the Crown, but he did it free of charge. The trial lasted well over four hours, with the federal fisheries inspector for Alberta, R. T. Rodd, serving as court stenographer.²

Evidence mounted against the accused. Although the ranch caretaker did not specify the species of the thirty-one trout, they probably included the revered cutthroat, the region's unrivalled “king of fishes.” Treasured by Highwood River anglers, it was highly rated for its superior sportiness and, as any angler in the room could attest, plump and “fat as butter.”³ The caretaker recollected that the fish in the crate were “quite fresh from the stream, and chilled but not frozen,” and, even more damning, he recounted how he had later emptied the cabin's pot-bellied stove and, like skeletons falling from a closet, trout bones had tumbled from the cold ashes.⁴

Almost everyone in the room seemed to be anticipating a guilty verdict. Only when the defending lawyer produced a surprise witness, a certain Mr. R. White, did a crack appear in the conservationists' case. White, also a Turner Valley man, could swear on a stack of Bibles that he had been with the hunting party during most of their stay and that not a person fished or ate fish the entire time. Doubt had been cast. Ultimately, the magistrate from Calgary dismissed the charges. Yet, despite losing their case, the Highwood River protectionists were not entirely discouraged. D. A. Richardson, the Calgary area fisheries overseer, thought the case affirmed that “public opinion is assisting in protection.”⁵ Rodd, reporting in a letter to Ottawa, felt that the trial illustrated to “would-be offenders that it is not safe to take a chance, as they do not know who will report them.”⁶

Throughout the foothills of Southern Alberta, anglers had for some time mounted campaigns to protect local rivers and streams, declaring something of a war against fish “hogs” and out-of-season angling. They were taking to task interlopers who trammelled stream banks and plundered the wealth of tributaries. Particularly vexing locals in towns and villages were city folk and other outsiders whom they viewed as fancy-pants tourists hauling trout away from their streams. By the



FIGURE 0.1

A Trout Paradise: Pekisko Creek ca., 1923. EP Ranch Fonds, NA-2626-21 Glenbow Library and Archives.

mid-1920s, they had turned to the courts to pressure magistrates to punish poachers more severely.

High River, in that respect, was proving a contentious battleground in the fight to save streams from overfishing. In 1926, two Calgary anglers, the “Pekisko Poachers” (so christened by a Calgary newspaper), were hauled into court for casting flies in Pekisko Creek, a local tributary of the Highwood that had been closed to fishing. High River’s anglers were already on hand, pressing the court to award nothing less than \$1,000 fines to both offenders. They felt it only right to do so, since members of the association had clearly posted the fine on tin signs up and down the Highwood, warning possible offenders to “Beware.” As a writer for the *Calgary Albertan* wryly observed, High River’s anglers took their “fishing propensities seriously.” Fortunately for the two men involved, the fine given was only \$60, but, even at that, fines in High

River, ranging from \$50 to \$60 at the time were the highest awarded in the province—the equivalent, respectively, of \$900 and \$1000 today.⁷

Not only Highwood basin anglers landed in trouble in the 1920s. In 1928, Didsbury's townsfolk mobilized in the case of four young men who had arrived at their homes with suspiciously well-laden creels after fishing the nearby Rosebud River. When dead fish had floated downstream a while later, and someone remembered one of the youths purchasing dynamite the previous fall, the four were charged with exploding it in the stream.

The town's anglers leapt into the fray. The protective association rented the Didsbury movie theatre for the trial, drawing a "large attendance." If the entire town citizenry was not there, probably everyone knew someone who was. Those present heard the father of two of the youths admit that his "boys were fishing," that they returned with "a large number of fish," and that "dynamite was used to kill them."⁸ A \$20 fine was handed to each of the boys—no doubt heaping public shame on the offenders and their families for quite some time to come. R. T. Rodd, again present at the Disbury trial, was confident that everyone in the area now knew that "public sentiment is against such offences."⁹

During the decade following World War I, concerns about conservation steadily mounted, not only in the foothills of Southern Alberta but elsewhere in the province. By 1930, forty-four fish and game protective associations had formed, one in almost every town and city in Alberta.¹⁰ It is not surprising. The economic development in the province during the post-war period had made further impact on finned, feathered, and four-legged creatures. It did not take much of a sharp eye to see biotic life stressed in a time of increasing industrialization, urban and town building, and the growing popularity of outdoor leisure pursuits, including angling. As in the United States, from the pioneer era onward, conservation of some form typically followed from depletion and waste in nature. Although some early environmentalists adopted what can be called a preservationist stance, arguing that nature should be protected in its original, pristine state, the focus of conservationists generally fell on rationally managing nature's bounty for the long-term benefit of the public.¹¹

Just who made decisions about how to do that was not entirely clear-cut, however. There certainly were the affluent and politically powerful political elites who became, at times, the leading force behind

state-sponsored conservation initiatives.¹² In the spirit of “progressive” reform, and often alongside influential sporting groups, conservationists evicted First Nations and Métis from traditional hunting territories and criminalized many of the activities of subsistence hunters.¹³ The history of conservation is often a dark one where formal legislation and wildlife management techniques constrained the activities of First Nations, poor people, and immigrants who depended on both hunting and fishing to feed themselves.¹⁴ Both politically influential settlers and governments also set aside lands as “wilderness” parks, such as the creation of Rocky Mountains Park in 1885 (now Banff National Park), a Dominion Forest Park in 1895 (now Waterton Lakes National Park), and Jasper Forest Park in 1907.¹⁵

Conservation also often depended on a growing perception that nature should be managed by scientific knowledge, typically wielded by government experts. Founded on early scientific understandings of nature, conservationists were frequently at odds with community-based initiatives grounded in experiential and received ecological knowledge. These tensions were particularly evident in fisheries management.¹⁶

At the same time, while acknowledging the capacity of urban social elites, bureaucrats, and scientists, it is still important to understand the power of grassroots initiatives at the local level in determining conservation policies.¹⁷ Alberta’s conservation history cannot be adequately framed solely as a top-down enterprise. Along Alberta’s Eastern Slopes, as elsewhere in Western Canada, conservation came initially from streamside, beginning almost as soon as settlers arrived and growing in force after the big boom of immigration in the 1890s—not long after anglers in the western United States began undertaking conservation measures in earnest.

Anglers took up conservation at water’s edge. Their work differed from many pioneering pursuits. Certainly, angling was different from fishing. Angling was a sport, a pastime, and, depending on its practice, an art form—a pursuit usually landing fish on a dinner table rather than storing it in the larder for future use. Officially, the law recognized “angling” as fishing with a hook and line usually mounted on a rod, in contrast to net fishing, fish trapping, and other means of catching fish in large quantities. Angling was really all about a fisher catching only a single fish at a time.¹⁸ In her study of American sport fisheries in the Rocky Mountains, Jen Corrinne Brown recognizes that, largely for pragmatic

reasons, settlers chose to regulate their consumption of fish, developing “community-centered angling rules” that reveal a “sharing of conservation ideals among classes.”¹⁹ Incoming settlers tended to take a proactive approach, with angling associations forming in rural communities to draw up rules and guard their precious streams against overfishing.

While these associations certainly boasted their well-to-do and socially prominent members, concerns about conservation were by no means restricted to the well-heeled charter factions of small-town communities. Far more than merely reflecting class interests, anglers who shared certain values and attitudes toward fishing and fish protection joined together, creating associations that cut across social lines and economic strata. The policies they advocated joined communities in efforts to safeguard the quality of local rivers and streams. Even as the bureaucratic state increasingly centralized conservation policy, these local angling associations continued to exert pressure from the bottom up. Indeed, in the towns scattered across Alberta’s Eastern Slopes, locals often impressed grassroots conservation efforts on government, rather than the other way around.

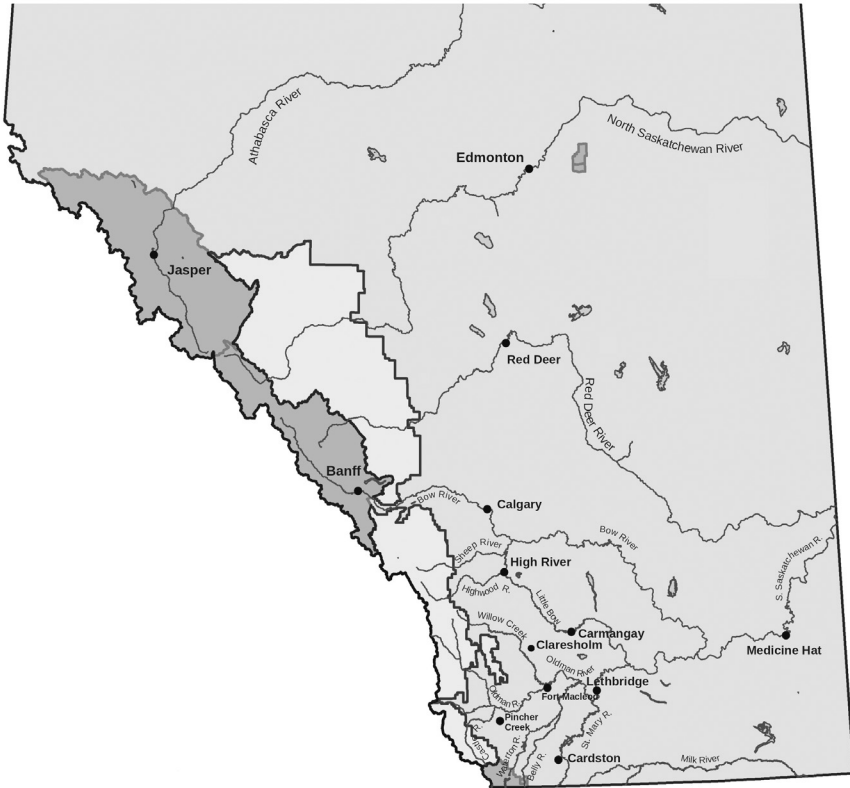
Federal fisheries officials took local folk and their associations very seriously. If anglers in a town wanted certain fish protected or certain streams closed, the government generally acceded to their pressures or at least attempted to strike a compromise. An association could demand that the federal government appoint a paid fishery guardian to patrol local streams; it might write letters and send reports and petitions to Ottawa; and, if all else failed, it could also mount a mass community campaign that could deeply embarrass locally elected territorial, provincial, or federal officials. An association also censured its own members if they disobeyed the laws and kept an eye on everyone else to make sure that they followed the rules. In fact, fisheries officials depended on local angling associations to help them enforce fishing regulations, to report real or potential problems and generally to serve as stewards of the environment.²⁰ In short, a good deal of power consolidated in local communities for small-town anglers to exert a considerable influence on federal fisheries policy.

Yet, in matters of conservation, anglers were—and still are—far from united in their views. And their inclination to take a strong stand on an issue is highly pertinent to the history of conservation. As will become clear, different groups of anglers in Alberta frequently disagreed

with each other and quickly divided into town and country cabals. In High River, as elsewhere, a community of anglers cleaved to its own set of views on the appropriate season dates, on the introduction of non-native fish, and on the regulations written in Ottawa—which, until 1930, continued to own and regulate the province’s fish populations. Even after 1928, when the Alberta Fish and Game Association brought multiple conservation groups under the umbrella of a single association, many conservation associations remained ardently independent in outlook.²¹ Although they sometimes joined into alliances over particular policies, they still often disagreed about how best to manage fish populations in order to safeguard—or, in some cases, to enhance—the bounty of a local river or streams.

Given that responsibility for abiding by and enforcing conservation measures so often devolved to local associations, anglers had every reason to take a keen and proprietary interest in the streams around them. Disagreements were the product, in part, of their local understandings of nature. In formulating their positions on local stream management, angling associations chiefly drew not on the scientific theories of government experts—in fact, they frequently relied not a whit on science. Their understandings of nature were derived from the experience of their members. Then, as now, anglers, especially fly fishers, could talk at length about the fine characteristics of a native trout species and the larger biotic world in which it swam. In communities, those who commanded such knowledge were recognized experts. It was a fish and game association that developed a community’s customary understanding of nature, while it also cultivated relationships with fisheries officials that conferred on them quite a bit of local control over stream management.

Grounded, as they were, in their lived experience, it isn’t surprising that the policies advocated by anglers in Alberta’s towns and cities sometimes lacked cohesion, reflecting a pluralistic rather than a uniform understanding of nature. For the most part, the grassroots conservation movement, and the significant civic engagement that it represented, channelled local concerns to government about specific rivers, streams, and lakes, sometimes with little reference to the bigger picture. And not surprisingly, given this lack of co-ordination, the measures that these groups succeeded in putting in place had unintended consequences for others, including the fish swimming in streams.



MAP O.1
Major Rivers in Alberta. Map by author.

Over time, scientific research refined and then overturned many of the views of these early Albertan “stewards.” In the 1950s, fisheries biologists, through significant experimental research and careful field studies, revolutionized perspectives on trout behaviours and their life histories in Alberta and decisively challenged approaches to conservation still popular in angling communities. In Alberta, it was zoologist R. B. Miller at the University of Alberta who helped to persuasively shake “the backbone of traditional trout management” and its four main pillars of regulation: closed seasons, minimum size limits, the permanent closure of tributary “nursery” streams, and hatchery fry stream plantings.²² All of these approaches dominated the work of Alberta’s angling communities. Still, one cannot discount the many

ranchers and farmers, city barristers, clergy, mineworkers, and shopkeepers who wielded authority within their communities as experts on the natural world. As members of local angling associations, they promoted a vision of the way in which the underwater world of Western Canada could be both imagined and managed.

To view these people in their work, the following chapters flow as do the streams of Alberta's southern watersheds—through the channels cut deep into the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies, alongside which communities have grown. I begin with an overview of the rapid changes that were occurring in the Canadian West by the end of the nineteenth century, changes that had, by the start of the World War I, prompted a lot of concern about fish. Conservation gained its first expression in Calgary with the founding of Alberta's first fish and game protective association in 1907. Chapter 2 examines what happened in Calgary before and after World War I when the city's population continued to increase, industrial development expanded apace, and fish began to fall in numbers on the Bow River and its tributaries, a problem that food shortages during the war years had only exacerbated. Anglers watched with growing consternation as the most intensively angled streams in the area, particularly the Bow River itself, underwent significant alteration from urban growth, pollution, and almost no end of water diversion projects.

Within Calgary's angling community, rifts began developing during the war and deepened in the immediate post-war period. The more serious—and, certainly, the most skilled—anglers in the city sought to protect the region's native trout, the cutthroat, as well as to preserve existing season dates that favoured this local hero. The city's new booster upstarts, however, led the charge for earlier, tourist-pleasing seasons and launched a concerted war on bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and other "coarse" varieties of fish. By getting rid of unwanted species, they reasoned, predation on esteemed varieties would be reduced, and that would leave more room in streams for game fish. The same anglers pressed for an earlier season opening, even though hazardous to spring-spawning cutthroat, as well as an earlier closing in the fall, which would protect the potentially larger and tourist-pleasing populations of fall-spawning Rocky Mountain whitefish (*Prosopium williamsoni*), commonly called grayling in Southern Alberta. These booster anglers also championed, controversially, the introduction of exotics.

Chapter 3 directs the focus to the Highwood River, a quieter watershed, and the work of anglers in High River, who unabashedly privileged the Highwood as the best fly-fishing stream in Western Canada—some dared say in North America. Ardent cutthroat preservationists, they worked at odds with those who had wearied of the native cutthroat and were now pressing for the introduction of exotics into mountain streams. High River's anglers identified cutthroat as the fish most natural to western watersheds. Their greatest concern for this native beauty related to the masses of outsiders, especially urbanites from Calgary who, by the early 1920s, were converging by train and car on the town's trout sanctuaries. Their solution—tributary closure—became the most significant new direction in fish management, one that reflected a particular understanding of how nature operates. In the view of High River anglers, watersheds divided between upstream sources and downstream wealth. They were convinced that protecting “nursery” areas near the source waters could guarantee a perpetual supply of fish for themselves and the rising tide of outsiders in their midst. A massive, grassroots movement led by High River folk managed to get other foothills communities, including Calgary, on board.

As we will see in chapter 4, the need for more fish was especially evident in the southernmost areas of the province. Quite apart from tourists arriving in droves to Waterton Lakes National Park and sloshing their way into streams around Lethbridge, large and voracious human populations were heavily fishing tributaries of the Oldman River, particularly in the Crowsnest valley and the Pincher Creek area. Both the social realities and the ecological history of the coal-mining districts in the Crowsnest Pass forced conservation onto a different course. Measures such as tributary closure did not make sense in the Crowsnest. In a region where fish was still a major staple in coal miners' diets, poaching was rampant, and stream dynamiting common; angling enthusiasts believed stream closure simply would not work. Instead, towns throughout the Crowsnest valley organized associations that embraced a more inclusive approach, aiming to induce coal miners, regardless of ethnic background, to co-operate in conservation efforts. They sought to keep membership fees low and promised to their members hatchery disbursements to support a more abundant food fishery. These associations favoured the opening of rivers to legitimate angling, this to crowd out skulking and dynamite-wielding poachers.

At the same time, many sports-minded anglers in Southern Alberta had, like much of their angling brethren farther north, grown impatient with what they perceived as the shortcomings of native trout. Clamouring for larger, “sportier” fish, they advocated ridding waters of some species and replacing them with new, exotic ones—an interventionist approach that would, in the end, radically change stream ecologies. During the pioneer era, overfishing mattered. But not well appreciated were the impacts of mining and railway construction, which already had gone a long way toward overwhelming stream ecology. Log runs, large-scale agricultural operations, ranching, and irrigation diversions added to these disturbances—to the point that fish were finding their watery world uninhabitable. At the time, anglers believed that fishing—that is, the rising pressure on streams from anglers themselves—was to blame for the startling decline in fish populations. A relatively simple remedy, they thought, would be to boost fish numbers through hatchery fry.

As chapter 5 explains, it fell to the Banff hatchery to boost streams in an effort both to implement government conservation policies and to satisfy the wishes of anglers landing trout. As hatchery staff soon discovered, however, production could barely keep up with demand for frisky cutthroat—and, in some cases, for fish of any kind. Initially, the government’s policy against the introduction of exotics formed a bulwark against town and city angling groups pressing for sporty aliens. Given pragmatic considerations and sheer popular support for such interventions, however, federal officials were obliged to reconsider. Shortly after the war, the hatchery began introducing rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) into the streams of Southern Alberta. These newcomers were followed in the Red Deer River basin by Loch Leven brown trout (*Salmo trutta levenensis*), Nipigon brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*), and German brown trout (*Salmo trutta*). Elsewhere, West Coast steelheads were thrown in, as well as Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*), and lake trout (*Salvelinus namaycush*). Local streams began to lose some of their distinctive character.

The final chapter examines the impact of tourism on recreational fishing during the 1920s, a decade in which more efficient railway service and, above all, the growing affordability of the private automobile boosted numbers of sport fishers. In rural areas, invading visitors—apt to leave behind heaps of garbage or accidentally set fire to hay

meadows—disturbed the serenity of quiet ranch landscapes, earning the enmity of locals. To the west of Calgary, Rocky Mountains Park attracted an ever-expanding influx of tourists who crowded the shores of lakes and, especially, converged upon the upper Bow River. These recreationalists were heavily indebted to technology, and not merely in the form of automobiles. Often relatively new to fishing, they generally chose baitcasting over fly fishing. As tourists, they arrived festooned with a wide range of elaborate lures, spoons, and other new-fangled fishing equipment now proffered by virtually every sporting goods store in Calgary and Banff. In contrast to fly fishing, which tends to be a solitary pursuit requiring considerable concentration, baitcasting is a far more social activity. Rather than hiking up streams to reach quiet, isolated pools, automobile tourists usually camped right beside rivers and lakes, and clustered together to socialize. Often travelling with their families and constrained by holiday schedules, they often had little time to gain a keen sense and understanding of the natural beauty around them. More often, nature became a thing to visit and view from afar to capture in photographs, a distancing that helped to entrench an understanding of nature as “wilderness”—pristine, magnificent, and more remote from their own experience.

Conservationists in Southern Alberta reacted in varying ways to the changes in their natural world, changes not only to the ecological balance of streams and forests, but also to the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Like conservationists elsewhere, they embraced the view that nature was something that could, and should, be improved upon by human intervention, and that the environmental problems stemming from human transformations of the landscape could be resolved by further transformations.

Accordingly, the efforts of conservationists were directed less at preserving what was original than at refashioning it in light of the declining abundance around them. Present-day Albertans are attempting to reconcile their ways of life with the pace and scale of environmental change around them, especially as their own transformations of the environment raise questions about the future of the biosphere. We might do well to reflect on Alberta conservationists’ engagement in the 1920s—and their concerted efforts to save cold-water streams of the Rocky Mountains while they fished them.