



FLOW (Friends Living On Water) Conversations

Summary Elk River Alliance, 2011



wildsight

Background

Elk River Alliance

The Elk River Alliance (ERA), a program of Wildsight Elk Valley Branch, is a community-based think tank with a vision of connecting people to our watershed, ensuring it is drinkable, fishable, and swimmable for future generations. The primary goals of the Elk River Alliance are to:

- Increase and ease access to information, respecting the public's right to know about their water.
- Encourage public participation to restore and enhance aquatic ecosystems, wetlands and riparian areas.
- Use education and community outreach to increase water literacy and participation in decision-making about water

ERA's past activities include an ongoing community water monitoring and sensitive habitat monitoring project on Lizard Creek, Streamkeeper and Wetlandkeeper courses, wetland restoration, Water Wonder Wednesday education workshops for children, FLOW (Friends Living on Water) Conversations with Elk Valley residents, H2oh! Workshop in Sparwood, Swim Drink Fish festival and shoreline and fishing/paddling stage area river clean ups.

FLOW Conversations, 2011

In March and April 2011, ERA hosted three community discussions about the health and future of the Elk River. The FLOW (Friends Living on Water) Conversations were held in Fernie, Sparwood and Elkford. Over 50 people came out to these events representing industry members, municipal representatives, recreationalists and interested citizens (Appendix). We shared our values for the Elk River, our concerns and examples of stewardship activities along the river. We also created 20/20 vision maps of our ideal future for the Elk River watershed. Water is a unifying element required by all life and provides a focal point for community collaboration. The 2011 FLOW Conversations provided an opportunity for community input into the beginning of grassroots participation in the Elk River watershed planning process. The information collected at these events

will be valuable when considering the goals and objectives throughout this anticipated 5-year Watershed Planning process.

Results

This “wordle” represents the feed back from participants on the FLOW Conversations. The size of the word represents the relative number of times that it came up during the conversations. By using “wordle”, some clear Elk River watershed themes emerge such as *fishing, people and community, clean quality water, monitoring, future impacts in the watershed.*



Discussion Topics

Five discussion topics were presented at the FLOW Conversations. Each participant answered the following questions:

- What do you value about the Elk River and its watershed?
- What concerns do you have surrounding the Elk River and its watershed?

- What example of stewardship activities do you see along the Elk River?
- How would you like to participate in decisions made that affect the Elk River?
- What are you taking away from this FLOW Conversation?

Community Values for the Elk River

Values for the Elk River were wide ranging but can be summarized by six main themes that came up during the FLOW discussions in Fernie, Sparwood and Elkford. Many participants expressed their intimate connection to the watershed through everyday life and consider the Elk River to be an integral part of who they are.

- 1. Water Quality:** Clean fresh water was often the first major value by community members as it is essential for all life. Clean, healthy water for both fish and people was highly valued by many of the participants.
- 2. Water Quantity:** Participants expressed that having constant flow of water, in the right quantity at the right time, as important for the health of the Elk River. Participants valued the beauty and magic of flowing water and felt lucky to live near it.
- 3. Recreation:** Elk Valley residents value the river because it provides for a diversity of recreational activities such as fishing, boating, swimming and walking along the Elk River.
- 4. Fish:** The fish, fish habitat and fishing on the Elk River emerged as a major theme in the FLOW Conversations. Many residents felt proud that the Elk River hosts a world class Westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout fishery.
- 5. Wilderness and Wildlife:** Many people highly valued the ability to be in the wilderness and to see and interact with wildlife along the Elk River. Seeing mammals and birds while having quiet experiences in nature was a noted highlight for many individuals.
- 6. Public Resource:** Water was identified as a precious public resource that is shared between all community members along the Elk River. Equal access to the water provides an opportunity for community building.

Community Concerns for the Elk River

A variety of concerns were expressed during the FLOW Conversations. Not surprisingly, the concerns arise when community values are threatened or compromised. A primary concern was the cumulative effects of industry and humans within the Elk River watershed. Seven main concerns were identified.

- 1. Lack of Baseline information:** Citizens identified a lack of accessible information about water quality and water sources. Participants voiced that “there needs to be more constraints on industry, more regular monitoring, more rigorous environmental assessment, more accountability and more involvement by government.” This concern was the most frequently repeated throughout the FLOW conversations.
- 2. Water Quality:** Many residents were concerned about a variety of contaminants entering the river including selenium from mining operations, sediment from forestry, urban pollutants and toxins from coal bed methane fracking.
- 3. Water Quantity:** Concerns surrounded water use by mining, coalbed methane and changes in flow regime due to climate change and human development.
- 4. Cumulative Effects:** People expressed concern regarding the thresholds for urban drinking water, recreation and industry. Questions raised were: can this watershed sustain all of the human impacts and still be healthy, thriving and diverse? How can we address these cumulative impacts?
- 5. Fish:** Is the way the fishery is being currently managed in this watershed sustainable? There were concerns about the way fish were handled and the impacts of catching and releasing the same fish many times.
- 6. Recreation:** Concerns were expressed around high levels of traffic on the river in summer.
- 7. Wildlife:** How are wildlife affected by humans and industry? There were concerns expressed that invasive species (eg. rock snot) are having a negative impact on our aquatic ecosystems.
- 8. Privatization:** People expressed concerns about the privatization of water in our communities. Will independent power projects have an impact in our valley?

Stewardship Activities on the Elk River

FLOW participants identified a variety of stewardship activities on the Elk River spearheaded by community groups, industry and municipalities.

- **Community:** Examples of community group stewardship activities include the annual river clean up, wetland inventory and restoration, Lizard creek monitoring and education programs by the Elk River Alliance, fish stocking and bank restoration by the Fernie Rod and Gun club.
- **Industry:** Examples of industry stewardship activities include the Selenium advisory panel, Tembec forest stewardship activities and best handling practices by local fishing guides.
- **Municipal:** Examples of municipal stewardship activities include Fernie being proactive with new developments such as storm drain hydro carbon catchments and river setbacks, Sparwood is implementing water meters for water conservation, and the regional enforcement for federal legislation prohibiting motorized boats on the Elk River.

Participation in Decision Making

FLOW participants discussed current and proposed ways for public to have a meaningful say in decision making in the Elk River watershed. The ideas can be summarized in the following themes: education, government, collaboration and community.

- **Education:** Participants found that there needs to be a raised public water consciousness. This could be achieved through public consultation, education programs in schools and more water issue presence in the media.
- **Government:** Members of the government act as our representatives. We can share our voices through our MPs, MLAs, Mayors, RDEK representatives and Ministry of Environment employees. The sentiment expressed that more government representatives need to be at the table in community discussions and events was raised several times.
- **Collaboration:** Multi-stake holder venues where everyone is welcome are important. Suggestions were made for ERA to act as a catalyst for the coordination of a 'watershed planning council'. Some participants suggested this could model the watershed boards formed in Ontario.
- **Community:** Community members can independently organize forums and letter writing campaigns.

Conclusions and Closing Thoughts

FLOW participants came away from the conversations with increased knowledge, more hope for a sustainable water future and commented it was a great experience in 'critical thinking'. One participant said that "the FLOW conversations helped them to understand that everybody is downstream and our actions have a wide range of potential impacts and threats". People came to recognize the river and its watershed as a valuable and potentially fragile resource that deserves our attention.

While participants felt concerned about the cumulative impacts within the Elk River watershed, they also felt inspired by the variety of community interests in water. Words that participants used to describe this sentiment of participating in watershed thinking at the FLOW Conversation included: "impressed, encouraged, relieved, and hopeful". Some people felt more confident in the remediation and prevention efforts being taking by industry, for example mining operations.

Participants left the conversation thinking critically about the way industry and recreation operate, wondering if they need more strict regulations and what we can do to ensure accountability and enforcement.

Overall, the FLOW conversations were seen as a great start to the watershed planning process that built momentum for community input in decisions impacting the health of the Elk River Watershed.

Appendix

List of Participants:

Name	Affiliation (if any)
Robin Johnstone	Teck
Carla Fraser	Teck
Casey Brennan	Wildsight
Ryland Nelson	Wildsight
Terry Nelson	City of Fernie
John Poirier	ERA
Ian Johnson	Tembec
Peirre Alleyne	Fernie Rod & Gun Club
Louise Gonsalvez	Citizen (water privatization)
Mario Rocca	Fernie Rod & Gun Club
Brian Fantuz	Fernie Rod & Gun Club
Peter Harrison-Edge	Citizen
Gary Walker	Paddler
Allan Phillips	Citizen
Doug Marteinson	ERA, Citizen
Dan Sliva	Wildsight
Chalice Walker	Youth
Lindsay Watson	Citizen Consultant
Kirsten Gillespie	Citizen
Lesley Graham	Artist

Matt Ferguson	Citizen
Jon Knaut	Mountain High Rafting
Trent Switzer	ERA
Laura Nelson	Wildsight
Joni Kratz	Teck
Mark K Shmigelsky	Invermere
Al P	Rancher
Leigh Stickney	Resident
Matt Huryn	Sparwood Fish & Wildlife
Sam Medcalf	Sparwood Fish & Wildlife
Kevin Podrasky	SFW & Teck
Brent Bush	Independent
Brielle Will	Elk Valley Herald
Stella Swanson	Swanson Environmental
Don Sacino	Teck
Glen Duthie	Teck
Lois Halko	District/Sparwood
Muriel Stikney	Sun Life Financial
Shelly McLean	Councilor Elkford
Joe Zarowny	Councilor Elkford
Stu Clowi	SRMMP
Diana Lynne Vandergytt	Resident
Doug Carter	Elkford SAR
Chuck Shiners	Elkford Gun Club
Brian Whitney	Resident and paddler
Kenneth Wildeman	Councillor Elkford