

# THE MEEWASIN VALLEY AUTHORITY'S PROGRAMS FOR 1981-1986

ELLEN GOULD, Meewasin Valley Authority, 200 - 701 Broadway Avenue,  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7N 1B3

Water has a special significance for people living in the dry climate of the Saskatchewan Plains. The Temperance Colonists who originally founded Saskatoon were grateful to reach the shelter of the South Saskatchewan River after their difficult trek across the wind-swept prairie. The South Saskatchewan River valley is no less important for human settlement today. Residents of Saskatoon have the rare privilege of living in an urban setting where natural vegetation extends right into the centre of the city. However, the demands on the river and its banks have intensified with the expansion of Saskatoon. Conflicts between uses are becoming more evident.

The Meewasin Valley Authority (MVA) was established in September, 1979 to help its four participating parties — the City of Saskatoon, the RM of Corman Park, the Provincial Government, and the University of Saskatchewan — protect the river and river valley and resolve river-related land use conflicts in the municipalities of Saskatoon and Corman Park. The MVA was also created to initiate projects which would promote the optimum use of the river and its valley as natural resources. In some areas, these projects will make the river valley more accessible to a range of recreational users; in other areas, where the land is fragile or is an important wildlife habitat, the projects will prohibit the kinds of activities which would damage these sensitive lands.

The MVA's Master Conceptual Plan

sets out key principles for the projects the MVA initiates. To quote from the plan:

"The objective is *balance*. The umbrella idea, the broad concept, is *health* (defined by the World Health Organisation as a "state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of infirmity"). If the continuing physical health of the river and all its connected parts — creek, coulee, ravine, slough, aquifer, land and air, the natural system as a whole — is related, directly and indirectly, to individual health and social health, the supporting concept must be one of *fit*, the fit of man with this natural system. The theme is *linkage*: the physical linkage of the city and rural areas to each other and to the river and the natural system, the social linkage of people to people; the linkage of time — past, present and future."

Balance, health, fit, linkage — four principles which together suggest a vision of how the river valley should evolve. They hold out the promise that the process of urbanisation need not represent the threat to the environment usually associated with the growth of cities.

The principles of the Master Conceptual Plan are made concrete in the MVA's development plans. In drawing up its first development plan, the MVA has concentrated on establishing policies and planning projects for four programs. These are: the *Waterfront Program*, the *Heritage Resources Program*, the *Land Resources Program*,



*The MVA will identify hazard lands in the valley such as this slumping bank.*

and the *River Resources Program*. All of the MVA's projects over the next five years will contribute to the goals of these four programs.

Under its *Waterfront Program*, the MVA will concentrate on the development of parks for recreational purposes and on enhancing the scenic features of parts of the river bank. The project which will probably have the highest visibility will be the MVA's involvement in the development of the South Downtown Concept. The South Downtown Concept provides for the urban development of the southern end of Saskatoon's downtown in a way that will draw the full benefit from the scenic and recreational potential of the waterfront.

At the same time, the MVA will be participating with other agencies in the assembly of land for, and the development of, waterfront parks. An illustration on how the MVA will go about park development in conformity with the principles of health, fit, balance, and

linkage is represented in the way Meewasin Park will be developed. Meewasin Park is a 250-acre park extending from the site of the proposed 42nd Street Bridge north to the city limit along the west bank of the river. The plans for the Park are designed to promote the health of the natural area along the river bank and provide for the kinds of human activities which will not conflict with the preservation of the existing natural areas within the Park where in addition to the native flora a considerable wildlife population flourishes.

One aspect of Meewasin Park will contribute to another of the MVA's goals — that of developing a link with the past. Under the MVA's *Heritage Resources Program*, archaeological and historic sites in the Park will be developed along with interpretive programs for these sites.

The *Heritage Resources Program* also involves the MVA in the restoration of Riel House, the oldest structure

standing in Saskatoon, and in an oral history project, which has already begun to record the personal recollections of early settlers of the Meewasin Valley. An interesting theme that has begun to emerge from these stories is how the species of plants and animals living in the Meewasin Valley have changed over time. Some of the people being interviewed attribute these changes to the pollution of the river which accompanied the growth of the city. Another theme emerging from these oral histories is the plight of immigrants, uprooted from their native lands, trying to understand the new sights and sounds of the prairie environment. For example, Alan Wright, whose family settled in Corman Park, related the following experience:

... something that got us was the bush partridge ... For years, we never knew what it was. We never saw it, but we'd hear it. Thump, thump, thump, thump, rrrrrrrrr. ... We hadn't a clue as to what it was, so we christened it the "ghost engine." It would start up, and we'd look up and down the river. It must have been 6 or 7 years before one day I finally saw one, beating its wings, so I found out what it actually was. We never had

anyone to tell us.

Under the *Land Resources Program* the MVA will develop policies, guidelines, and projects which will be aimed at preserving environmentally significant areas of the Meewasin Valley. "Environmentally significant" in this context means an area worth preserving for its scenic qualities and/or its natural vegetation, wildlife habitat or land forms. In such areas, the goal of arriving at a balance between nature and people is especially important. The Beaver Creek Nature Park located along the east side of the river south of Saskatoon is an example of the kind of areas the *Land Resources Program* is intended to protect. The MVA is working with other agencies to eliminate the causes of the environmental damage evident in the park. A plan is being drawn up to suggest ways to restore an ecological balance, and the kinds of human activities appropriate to a conservation area.

Recognising the importance of the health of the river to the ecology of the river valley, the MVA has created a fourth program, *The River Resources Program*. This Program will deal specifically with river issues such as



*Under its Land Resources Program, the MVA will seek to preserve important natural features of the valley.*



*The River Task Force is helping the MVA explore the recreational potential of the South Saskatchewan River.*

water pollution, land filling and erosion, and the quantity of water needed for the many uses to which the river is put. In order to draw on the expertise of those already working on these issues, the MVA has established a River Task Force which will help to establish policies and guidelines related to river use.

All four of the MVA's programs will have both an educational component and ways for people to become involved. This two-way flow of information will be accomplished in a variety of ways.

The education component will take the form of environmental awareness projects carried out in cooperation with the schools, the gathering and distribution of information materials on the river and its valley, and the opening of an interpretation centre. The MVA's interpretation centre will include displays on both the natural and cultural history of the Meewasin Valley. There will also be specific projects designed to promote an awareness of environmental concerns, such as the yearly MVA Clean-Up Campaign.

The public's involvement in the MVA's programs is a necessary part of

their implementation. The very existence of the MVA reflects a strong interest on the part of the local community in the health of the river valley and the MVA has instituted ways for people to offer their advice and suggestions. The creation of opportunities for people to get involved is a constant of every MVA project. These opportunities take the form of open houses, public meetings and informal meetings which can be held at the request of interested individuals. In addition, four community advisory committees have been established to advise the MVA on its four programs. The committees are made up of individuals from the community and of representatives of a number of organisations; e.g. the Natural History Society will name a representative to the Land Resources Advisory Committee. The Authority considers these committees to be essential to the success of the MVA's programs.

It is no accident that so much of the natural vegetation along the river banks has been preserved. It took foresight and planning to preserve these areas in the face of urbanisation. With the intensifying pressures resulting from rapid urban growth, even more foresight and planning will be required in the future.