

STREAMS OF CONSEQUENCE: DISPATCHES FROM THE CONSERVATION WORLD

LORNE FITCH. OCTOBER 2023. ROCKY MOUNTAIN BOOKS LTD. 232 PP. ISBN: 9781771606691. \$25.

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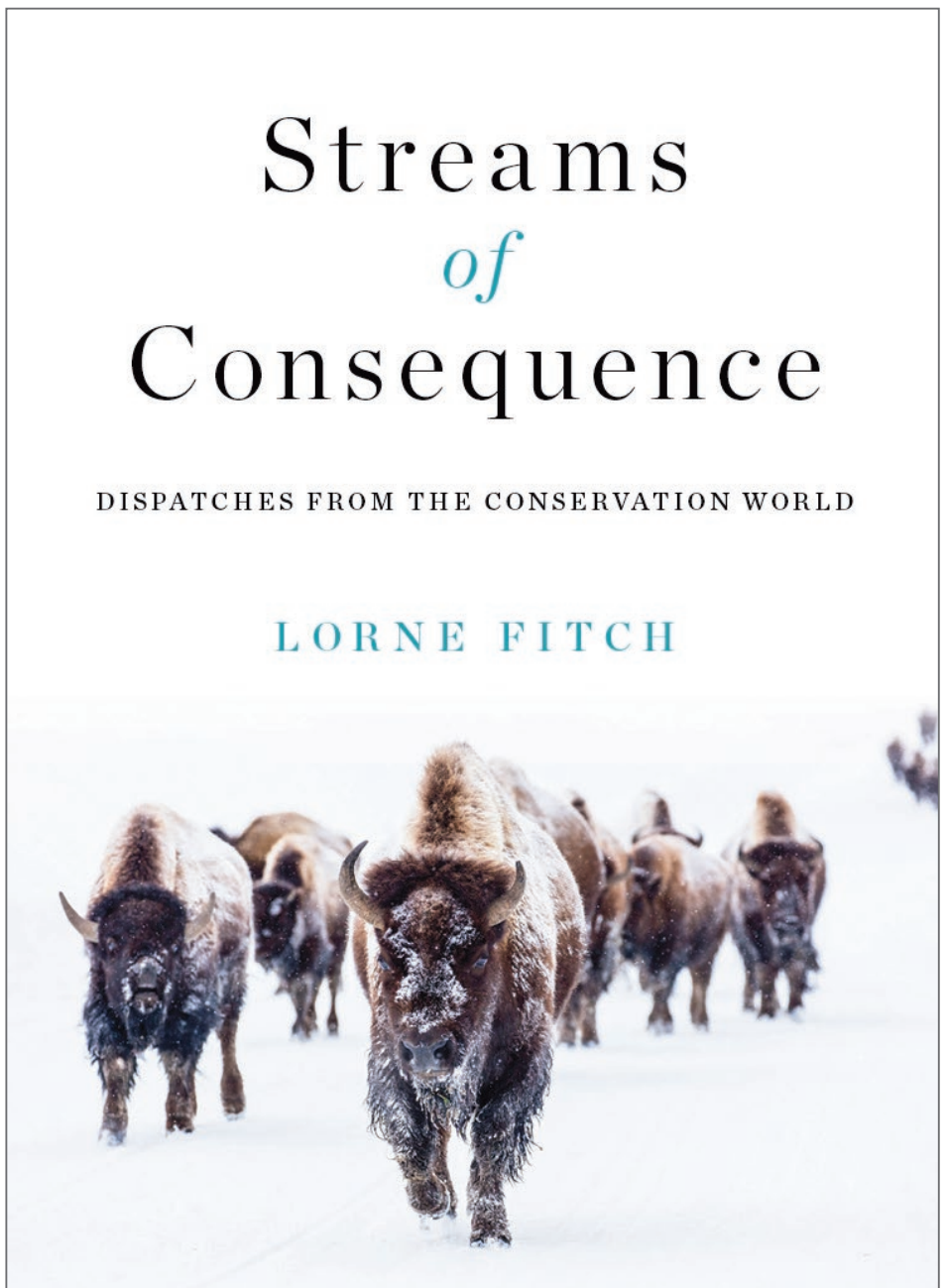
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With its mountains, rivers, prairies and forests, Alberta is a place of undeniable natural beauty. It is also home to vast reserves of oil and other natural resources, which have been voraciously extracted and exploited in the name of economic growth. In *Streams of Consequence*, author Lorne Fitch draws on his decades of experience on the front lines of conservation in the province to deliver a powerful and thoughtful call for stewardship of our shared ecological heritage before it's too late.

A professional biologist and former provincial fish and wildlife scientist, Fitch's work has taken him far and wide across Alberta, giving him deep and broad knowledge of the land and its wild inhabitants. Countless meetings with bureaucrats, industry representatives, ranchers and others have also given him an understanding of the economic forces and political philosophies that led to broken prairie, forests crisscrossed with logging roads, and streams and rivers filled with sediment.

Streams of Consequence brings these two threads together in a series of essays that offer a crash course in the ecology of Alberta while highlighting conservation issues. Each essay serves the narrative flow of the book as a whole, however I can see myself revisiting individual essays for reference in the future as well. Several pieces pay homage to species both iconic (caribou) and obscure (hare-footed locoweed) without sugar-coating their challenges, often due to industrial or agricultural expansion into their habitat. The role of water, wetlands and in particular the headwater streams of the eastern slopes as critical trout habitat is also discussed in some detail.

Fitch drives home the enormity of the current situation by placing it within



a deep historical context. The caribou, the rough fescue grass, and the arctic grayling are all survivors, with millennia of geological history written into their bodies by countless generations of slow adaptation. These species and others were well-suited to the western Canadian landscape forged by the retreating glaciers at the end of the last ice age, but they simply can't adapt to the landslide of rapid changes occurring in their

environment because of human activity. Species that have existed and thrived since before humanity emerged are now disappearing in a virtual instant.

The situation Fitch describes in Alberta has also played out in Saskatchewan, in the rest of Canada and across the world, as the ecological heritage of past and the stability of the future are traded away for material wealth in the present.

Streams of Consequence was influenced by the great American writer-naturalist Aldo Leopold, who is quoted frequently. While reading, I was reminded of Leopold's quote that "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."

Fitch shares his sadness and frustration with the current trajectory of things in a letter of apology to the future, in the form of his young grand-niece and grand-nephew. This letter is one of the best bits of polemic in the book, sharply criticizing the greed and short-sightedness of his own generation, while expressing grief at what has been and will be lost. "I wish you could have seen trout swimming in water so clear they seemed to float," he writes, but "... in the end there was no refuge where trout could escape hook, heat, or mud."

The trout are a recurring theme in the book. When he was a boy, Fitch had encountered a bull trout in a log jam on the Tay River. Though still vivid in his mind, the species has been extirpated from the river for decades and is unlikely to ever return. If not, the author has at least sent them off

with a proper eulogy.

Fitch argues for a long-term view of prosperity and an acceptance of limits, rather than the ideology of endless growth that dominates our modern politics. In advocating for environmental protections, he has consistently heard the usual arguments that economic interests trump environmental concerns. Indeed, he has heard "greenie" or even "environmentalist" itself thrown around as a pejorative.

Fitch has even come to believe that the label may not be useful since it separates environmental concerns into a separate basket, when economic and environmental concerns should be two sides of the same coin. In effect, we should all be environmentalists if we realize that our very survival is dependent on the natural world around us.

While we need to think big to save what remains of our natural heritage, and we will need well-informed public policy to carry that out, studies and data alone are not adequate to win over the public imagination. Understanding on an intellectual level that we are reliant on

the natural world for our own survival is crucial, but that on its own will not save endangered species.

Fitch's love for his land and the creatures it supports is the most inspiring and even hopeful aspect of the book for me despite the generally dire situation. For people to truly care and support conservation, there is no substitute for engagement with and love for wild nature, and strong nature writing such as *Streams of Consequence* is an excellent gateway to new places and new creatures. I may or may not ever spot a cutthroat trout in a mountain stream, but I know that I care about them and their survival after reading this book.

Fitch is pragmatic, but he believes that Albertans have love for the east slope of the Rockies in their very DNA. If worst-case scenarios can still be avoided in Alberta, or anywhere else, it will be because of love.

Joel Cherry is a birder, communications professional, and former journalist. He is a regular contributor to the Blue Jay. 🐦



PHOTOGRAPHY

Submitted by David Larson.

Confusing times. Is this flowering moss phlox (*Phlox hoodii*) the last remnant of a dying fall or the harbinger of spring? It was flowering 16 km south Maple Creek, SK, on December 22 — the day after the winter solstice — so should it be looked at as a late season record or as the first flower of the coming spring? December 2023 followed the rest of its year with warmer than usual temperatures as average daily highs and lows were +4.2 and -5.0 °C, respectively (Environment Canada, Cypress Hills Park). However, the flower's time in the sun was brief for by January 14, it was under several cm of snow and the low temperature was below -40. Hopefully it will make a comeback at a more usual time, like April.