

OLDMAN RIVER

Prince Edward Islanders heard a lot about South Moresby and the rest of the Queen Charlotte Islands as conservationists and native groups teamed up to save the unique area. And the proposed developments at Greenwich and Boughton Island have become hot news items in our own backyard. Friends of the Oldman River in Alberta are now fighting a battle to save the last wild river in the South Saskatchewan watershed, and are looking for support from across the country.

Starting as springs and seeps in the Rockies, the Oldman River runs through the foothills of southwestern Alberta and carves its way into the high plains. The planned Three Rivers Dam will flood the Oldman, Castle and Crowsnest River, ruining some of the best fishing areas in the province. The loss of habitat for deer and burrowing owls, and the destruction of nesting sites of prairie falcons, herons, ferruginous hawks and cliff swallows has raised the hackles of naturalists across Canada. Here's what people have had to say about the proposed dam: Robert Bateman, artist and naturalist: "The Oldman dam is another of

those huge mistakes that will destroy another precious piece of our natural and human heritage."

Andy Russell, outdoorsman and writer: "Everything the Oldman represents and has nourished for 10,000 years is in jeopardy. If future generations are to be inheritors and not just survivors, we have an obligation to act with firmness and utter finality in its protection. There is no legacy in all nature to compare to a free-flowing river."

Friends of the Oldman River are leading the campaign to stop the dam, and are convinced it can be stopped. But they need your support.

How can you help? Write to the Hon. Tom Siddon, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, and ask him to initiate an environmental assessment. Talk to local MP's and ask them to support the call for assessment. The Canadian Environmental Defence Fund is accepting donations (tax-deductible) to support the Friends' work. Cheques

BENEFITS... what benefits?

Why is the Three Rivers dam being built? Here is what the government says:

- a dependable supply of water, in an area where demand for water often outweighs available supply.

From 70 to 90% of the water use in the Oldman River basin is for irrigation farming. At the time when the dam was first proposed, only a third of the water taken from the river even made it to the fields. The ditches of the Lethbridge Northern Irrigation District were among the most inefficient in the province.

In other words, there is no shortage of water, not even in drought years. The problem is waste.

Farmers are not charged for the water they use, but simply for its delivery. There is no economic incentive for them to conserve.

Albertans are being asked to pay half a billion dollars to subsidize inefficiency.

- storage of water during spring runoff, for gradual release later in the summer.

Several off-stream reservoirs are in the process of being expanded (also at our expense) to hold spring runoff. The Lethbridge Northern Irrigation District main canal is being doubled in size, specifically to catch the spring runoff and improve efficiency.

Considering this, and the fact that water is being badly squandered already, the Three Rivers Dam is redundant.

- irrigation of more than 170,000 additional acres

Alberta Environment's own rating classes only 106,000 of these acres as suitable for irrigation. This means that the remaining 64,000 are likely to be damaged by salt accumulation when irrigated. Soil salinity permanently ruins soil.

On average, it takes 30 years for irrigation projects to reach half their potential. This means that by the year 2020, we might see 85,000 acres of land converted from dryland

grain farming and grazing to irrigation - at a cost of close to \$5000.00 per acre - with a third of that destined to be ruined by salt.

Recently, Alberta Environment indicated another 108,000 acres can be irrigated near the reservoir and said that millions more acres are potentially irrigable. That would take a lot more water than is in the Oldman system. Where is the rest going to come from? It could only happen with interbasin transfer.

- \$42 million dollar annual increase in food production and 1700 new jobs.

Since these figures are based on the 170,000 acres already referred to, and include spin-off jobs that would result from most government expenditures, they are unrealistic. Even if they are accepted, this amounts to an expenditure of \$200,000.00 per job created. It also assumes that dryland farmers will convert to irrigation. Farmers are having trouble as it is. Going further into debt for irrigation equipment hardly seems likely.

- recreational opportunities on the reservoir.

The reservoir is in the windiest part of the province. Since water will be taken out all summer for irrigation, there will be a 22 metre drawdown, leaving nothing but extensive mud flats, and in drier times, a dust bowl. Even Alberta Environment's own consultants concluded there would be major problems with recreation.

The Bighorn Dam on the North Saskatchewan was touted as offering recreational opportunities. It is a barren, windswept reservoir today; boating is discouraged.

Today, at no cost to the taxpayer, the Three Rivers area offers some of the finest trout fishing, big game hunting, wildlife viewing, canoeing and other recreation in southern Alberta. In three years, if the dam is built, this unique ecosystem could all be gone.