

## 'Klondike' days on the wane?

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What a time to be an Albertan! Our economy is the strongest in Canada, our resource-based wealth is rising in value daily as global hydro-carbon commodity supplies are drawn down.

Thousands of Canadians are flocking here to participate in the "Alberta Klondike."

They represent a cross-section of Canada's best and brightest, and they bring youthful energy, and engineering, science, financial and entrepreneurial acumen. Meanwhile, back in Ontario's industrial heartland, nervous manufacturers are contemplating the imminent arrival of \$10,000 cars from China to compete with \$30,000 cars from Oshawa.

Calgarians and Albertans in general are riding the up-escalator to new levels of realty wealth. All of our new homes must be filled with sofas, flat-screen TVs, and stainless steel-fronted stoves and refrigerators. Every driveway is sized to house a big new vehicle, and our daily commutes are peregrinations of rust-free SUVs, full-size pickups and sports cars. Gas price increases so far are no threat to vehicle ownership, and while the odd hybrid makes a timid, our taxi fleets, rent-a-cars, and domestic vehicles overwhelmingly embrace old technology under shiny new skins.

Calgary has the largest ecological footprint (at 9.86 global hectares/citizen) of any municipality in Canada. It does not take too much imagination to see the annexation of Okotoks, Cochrane and Airdrie into the maw of the metro-beast soon.

Our water mains and household taps are full of mountain-fresh snow and glacial melt, and our rainfall is kindly augmented by ground water. Trucks still clog our highways, freighting in delicacies from all over North and South America, and you can even buy vacuum-sealed bags of snap peas from China at Co-op if your taste dictates. Big chunks of B.C. farmed salmon are red and gleaming in the fish section, and whole aisles are dedicated to supplying us with delicious high fructose corn syrup sodas, and calorie-free chemical sodas for the body conscious.

Look around and survey this harvest of plenty. When has it ever been this good for so many? Yet, what was that annoying rattle I just heard under the hood of my Hummer? Could it be that right now is the peak of this boom?

Let us just consider a few signals. I had lunch the other day with an astute Calgary real estate investor who has just seen a few other astute folk sell their property and pack up for Saskatchewan. I spent last Monday at a national conference on Canada's water future and heard many distinguished scientists point out that the Bow, South Saskatchewan and the Athabasca are at, or close to, being tapped out for any new water demand, and that flow

regimes in all the rivers of the eastern slopes are declining because of climate change. The downstream impacts of our demand levels are also starting to cause problems in places as far away as the Mackenzie delta and Lake Winnipeg. Fish are being starved of oxygen and heat-induced parasites are building up in their kidneys. We will soon be living in a water world of limits, metering and making do with less. An interesting new indicator in my neighbourhood is just who fertilizes and waters their lawn any more in summer. The family across the street from us has given up on their lawn altogether. They have installed a rock garden. The rest of the neighbourhood has lots of dead lawns on show right now.

What will happen in the tar sands when we must admit that the Athabasca River has given all she can to the steaming of bitumen? How many more casinos and race tracks will we contemplate in the Balzacs of Alberta when all the river basins are at maximum demand capacity in an era of declining flows?

I believe the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, and that Alberta is right now at the apogee of take. Quickly, we need to start viewing our place of supreme privilege from the eye of an oxygen-starved whitefish downstream of Fort McMurray in February; we need to start thinking like a watershed instead of a casino developer, and we need to ask why Calgaryans deserve nearly eight more global hectares per citizen than is sustainable. We might also take a summer vacation in the Yukon and sit for a spell on the banks of the Klondike River. Just where did all those miners go anyway?

Mike Robinson is a board member of the Alberta Natural Capital Association.

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