

Appendix C: *A River Runs Through It*. An  
Article for the Bibliography of the  
Athabasca River Basin (BARB)

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## ***AU creates a hub for research and collaboration to help ensure a healthy future for the Athabasca River Basin and the communities that depend on it.***

BY ERIN OTTOSEN

ON WARM DAYS, WHEN THE WEATHER'S right, the Columbia Icefield meets the sun and melts. The melting is nearly indiscernible to human eyes, but the water that weeps away from the ice is enough to spawn not one, not two, but three major rivers: the Columbia, the North Saskatchewan and the Athabasca.

As the Athabasca River wends away from the icefield, away from the Rocky Mountains and the B.C./Alberta border, it begins a northeast trajectory that will take it over 1,500 kilometres almost to the Saskatchewan border and through virtually every major industry in Alberta. The first community along the river, Jasper, is a centre for tourism. Then comes Hinton, where the first of five pulp mills operates on the banks of the river. Also near Hinton are coal mines, more tourist attractions and oil and gas activity. Later, roughly halfway up the river's path is Athabasca, with an economy fuelled by agriculture, forestry, oil and gas, tourism and education — the town is home to the main campus of Athabasca University, the only university near the Athabasca River. Finally, not long before the river ends its journey at Lake Athabasca, it passes by Fort McMurray and cuts directly through Alberta's oil sands.

The river is also more than a single channel. It fans out through hundreds of smaller rivers and creeks and lakes to many more communities that also depend on the water it brings. The swath of land nourished by the water flowing from the Athabasca River is called the Athabasca River Basin, and now, through the Athabasca River Basin Research Institute (ARBRI), AU is creating a non-partisan hub for research on the basin that will help Alberta chart a well-informed path for the future of this region.

"We're so lucky as a university to be right at the centre of the Athabasca River Basin," says Dr. Lisa Carter, dean of AU's Faculty of Science and Technology and the interim director of ARBRI, which was launched in 2008. "It positions us perfectly for collaborating with all the basin stakeholders. Also, our online infrastructure gives us a virtual way to bring stakeholders together — very helpful considering the residents of the basin are spread across 159,000 square kilometres of land."

"Everybody works in silos," she continues. "This is what we've realized. It's

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very typical. Everybody has great ideas, but people don't talk to each other as much as perhaps they should. That's why we decided ARBRI was going to be an arm's-length collection of people who would share knowledge and bring in the biggest and the best ideas about the river basin and its management. Ultimately, we're a collection of knowledge."

One way ARBRI is collecting this knowledge is in the form of the Bibliography of the Athabasca River Basin (BARB). "BARB is extremely important," says Carter. "Many different groups have repositories of information

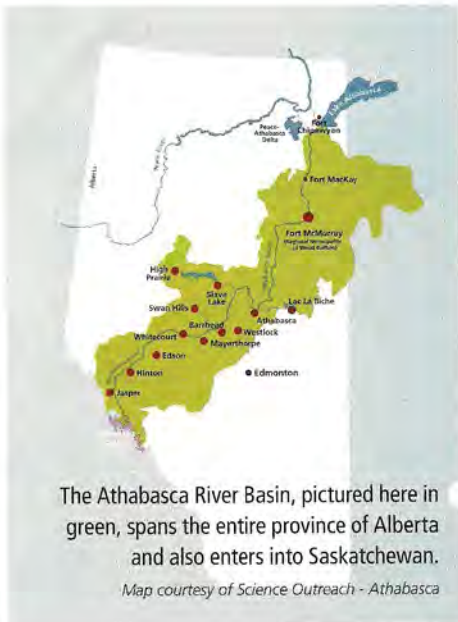
related to the Athabasca River and the basin, but these are sometimes not easily accessible for all stakeholders. I remember meeting once with people from one of the resource companies operating in the basin. They told us they had 10,000 reports sitting in a room and would have loved to have a centralized repository, so people could have easy access to them. That's one of the reasons we've built BARB — so that we have an open-access, interactive repository database containing reports, papers, dissertations and any other data and information that has been collected about the basin."

"That's the fibre that's going to bring about the interdisciplinary perspective on the basin that I'm really passionate about," she says. "To understand the basin, you have to look at it not just from one perspective — you have to look at the whole picture. That's what ARBRI is doing with BARB."

In 2009, ARBRI received \$200,000 from the Imperial Oil Foundation to develop the bibliography. "As a responsible energy supplier, our company has a duty to encourage ... innovative programs that engage the environmental awareness of Canadians," says Cindy Christopher, manager of environmental policy and planning at Imperial Oil Limited.

"Accordingly, the Imperial Oil Foundation works with organizations that advance education, conservation and understanding in the areas of air, land, water and energy. [BARB is] a valuable resource in supporting researchers, stakeholders, educators, students and the general public in accessing information on this important watershed."

Led by Tony Tin, the head of digital initiatives and electronic resources at AU's



Library, BARB now contains over 27,000 items within an open-access, searchable online database. So far, research assistants hired for the project have been populating the database, but Tin has a much grander vision for BARB.

“My ultimate goal is that BARB becomes the go-to place to access Athabasca River Basin materials online,” he says. “We would like external researchers and scientists to contribute, along with government, industry and the general public.”

Meanwhile, with other initiatives like the inaugural ARBRI Day conference held in Athabasca in the spring, Carter is working to bring about river basin research both by AU faculty and external research partners. “I’m trying to begin a dialogue and spark interest so that researchers think about how to integrate their unique skills with river basin research,” she says.

For example, Dr. Frédérique Pivot, an AU assistant professor of geography, does research with drones, planes that fly without a human pilot inside them. “[We’re talking] about using the drones to study things such as snowmelt and wildlife migration,” says Carter.

The Government of Alberta is also funding two new research chairs for ARBRI through the Campus Alberta Innovates Program. One chair is in hydroecology and environmental health, while the other is in computational sustainability and environmental analytics.

And with the Community Engagement

Project, a new ARBRI project just beginning, ARBRI is reaching out to communities in the river basin to help them identify what they want their future to look like, how to get there and how to protect the river basin from a local perspective. The project is modelled on an earlier ARBRI initiative called A Study of Sustainability Options for Resource-Based Communities.

“[The sustainability study] created a template that worked,” says Jim Sellers, project manager for both the sustainability study and the Community Engagement Project.

“What we did is our researchers met with stakeholders for the communities of Hinton and Grande Cache, and everyone worked through a list of questions that touched on all the social, environmental and economic needs of the communities.... This helped them boil down what was most important to them in terms of sustainability planning. We now have researchers looking into the priorities that were identified, and they’re developing specific recommendations that can then be tested with applied research.”

“It’s been very successful, because we’ve been working collaboratively with community stakeholders,” says Sellers.

The Community Engagement Project is funded in part through \$250,000 donated to ARBRI in 2011 by the RBC Blue Water Project. It is also supported by the Alberta Rural Development Network (ARDN), which has contributed

\$120,000 to ARBRI for the Community Engagement Project and the Hinton/Grande Cache sustainability study.

“The funding we’ve received from ARDN, the RBC Blue Water Project and the Imperial Oil Foundation has really helped us expand our work with Athabasca River Basin communities and stakeholders,” says Carter.

“We’ve been able to build relationships by working together, by bringing in people who otherwise might not sit at the table together.... This sort of collaboration is what we need to do to ensure a healthy future for the province, and it’s so exciting to me that Athabasca University is contributing to this collaboration through ARBRI. ARBRI will be, I think, Alberta’s legacy for future knowledge keepers and also for improving the life and sustainability of the province.”

Visit the Athabasca River Basin Research Institute (ARBRI): [arbri.athabascau.ca](http://arbri.athabascau.ca)

FUNDERS



RBC Blue Water Project



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