

Legacy Spotlight: Karsten Heuer

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In November 2024, the conservation community said goodbye to Karsten Heuer, a wildlife biologist, park warden, storyteller, and adventurer whose three-decade career with Parks Canada transformed how we approach landscape-level conservation. Born and raised in Calgary to German immigrant parents, Karsten's love for the outdoors began with family trips that introduced him to the mountains. What started as weekend adventures evolved into a life dedicated to protecting the wild places he understood so intimately. At 56, diagnosed with a rare neurological condition, he chose to end his life on his own terms, surrounded by family in his beloved backyard writing shack in Canmore.

There are lessons held in Karsten's approach—one which made him a remarkably effective force in protecting wildlife and the wilderness that they depend upon.

Starting on the Land

Time on the land was the foundation of Karsten's approach to wildlife conservation. Those who travelled or worked in the field with him were used to the natural, but remarkable, ease with which he moved through the wilderness. This deep connection to wild places gave Karsten the ability to marry science with lived experience and to connect with people from all backgrounds with quiet credibility.

In 2003, he and his wife Leanne Allison, an award-winning filmmaker, spent five months on foot following and documenting the migration of the Porcupine caribou herd across 1,500 kilometres to their calving grounds on the Beaufort coast. Moving with the herd of 123,000 caribou, without the structured itinerary typical of human plans, allowed the pair to experience and document the true depth of effects that proposed oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would have. Karsten's book, *Being Caribou*, and Leanne's award-winning film of the same name, shared the urgency of habitat protection in a way only possible when rooted in such profound experience.

In 2007, Karsten, Leanne and their two-year-old son Zev, canoed 5,000 kilometres from Canmore to Cape Breton Island. Their film, *Finding Farley*, chronicles the six-month journey through the settings of Farley Mowat's best-known books. All his time on the land gave Karsten an approach that was easy to describe but difficult to earn—one that achieved the kinds of results for wildlife that practitioners in our field seem always to be chasing.

Being Impactful

In the early 1990s, Karsten worked on Parks Canada's landmark 'Bow Valley Study'. His research recommended the removal of substantial infrastructure, including bungalows and a paddock containing a small bison herd, to restore an important wildlife movement route skirting the Banff townsite. The decision-makers agreed, the facilities were removed, and the corridor was restored—resulting in a significant increase in wolf use of the area. Karsten later cited this as a moment of realization about the impact that a person could make by working hard on something they believed in.

Karsten went on to a legendary career with Parks Canada as a warden and biologist, ultimately leading the team that reintroduced plains bison to Banff National Park starting in 2015. Unlike the display paddock removed in the 90s, this program brought bison back to their former range as free-roaming wildlife. Under Karsten's leadership as project manager, the complex reintroduction successfully returned a keystone species, began restoring Indigenous cultural practices that had been lost, and became a conservation milestone for Parks Canada. From an initial founder herd of 16 animals in 2017, the population now thrives at over 130 bison plus new calves in 2025. Karsten's book about the project, *Buffaloed: Lessons From the Reintroduced Banff Herd*, will be published posthumously.

While impacting wildlife conservation, Karsten was also shaping the people around him using his calm, understated leadership style. He exemplified what can be accomplished with creativity and hard work, mentoring countless conservationists who continue his work today.

Thinking at Scale

Alongside his three books, Karsten led and contributed to impactful ecological research. He leveraged science in his decision-making but also recognized a tendency of western wildlife science to narrow itself into esoteric questions. He emphasized the importance of seeing bigger-picture connections in the natural world—between species, their habitats, and the larger landscapes that support them. This perspective allowed him to produce big ideas and take action to make them happen.

In 1998-99, to support the burgeoning idea of a protected Yellowstone to Yukon corridor, Karsten undertook one of his most epic journeys—hiking this 3,400-kilometre stretch of the Rocky Mountains from end to end. In his resulting book, *Walking the Big Wild*, Karsten made tangible the importance of large, intact, interconnected landscapes for wildlife. More recently, he led the advocacy effort against the proposed Three Sisters Mountain Village development near Canmore, which would eliminate the last available wildlife corridor in that section of the Bow Valley.

The vision of connected wilderness landscapes was with Karsten to the end of his life. As Harvey Locke, friend and fellow conservationist, put it in an interview shortly before Karsten passed away: "I see Karsten as a guy who does what he thinks is important, no matter what the effort required is."

Karsten's contributions extend far beyond those listed here, but they provide a foundation for understanding the value of living and working with purpose, as he did. His legacy lives on in the wildlife corridors he protected, the bison that once again roam Banff's backcountry, and the countless conservationists he inspired to think bigger and act with conviction.

