

# “Roll On, Columbia, Roll On” Rolls On

Tim Rogers

Some fairly recent events at the headwaters of the Columbia River in British Columbia have prompted me to rewrite Woody Guthrie’s hymn to that great waterway. From its source near Invermere in south eastern B.C. to the small town of Donald some 180 km downstream, the Columbia River is surrounded by fertile and biologically diverse wetlands. In 1996 these wetlands were classified as a Wildlife Management Area (WMA), a designation that protects wildlife living in the region. In August of 1997, following a number of complaints from local residents, the B.C. Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks (MELP) enacted a ban on motors greater than ten horsepower in the WMA. This ban was introduced because high horsepower vehicles (especially jet skis) were creating disturbances that contravened the principles of the WMA. Local response to this ban was mixed, and significant disagreements emerged when public hearings were convened to discuss the development of a long-term plan for the WMA. Some supported the ban, typically favouring conservation, a “wild” future for the region, and privileging wildlife. Others challenged it, using arguments ranging from economic necessity and individual rights to nostalgia for the “way things used to be”. In short, the Columbia wetlands and the river became embroiled in a major environmental tussle. Several court cases ensued. For example, the groups opposed to a horsepower limit argued that the Columbia is a navigable waterway and, therefore, that the Canadian Coast Guard, not MELP, should have jurisdiction. Needless to say, this has become a highly controversial and complex issue, with multiple jurisdictions making multiple claims. At present, the wetlands still await a court ruling on their future.

These ongoing efforts of some individuals to overturn the horsepower limitation on the Columbia River are deeply troubling for anyone who cares about B.C.’s special places and ecosystems. It seems waiting and praying is about all that can be done. But wait! Let’s not forget singing. Rather than just sit and wait for the grinding wheels of the legal system to move forward, I decided to put together an updated version of Woody Guthrie’s classic “Roll On, Columbia, Roll On”.

Guthrie was an itinerant songwriter who traveled throughout America during the 1930s, writing songs

about the working (and out-of-work) folk during those difficult times. Seen as a “poet of the people,” he penned many songs that have become classics of campfire singing, such as “This Land is Your Land” and “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Ya”. But Guthrie had to make a living too. He not only wrote songs for the workers, he wrote songs for the bosses. On one occasion he was hired by the Bonnyville Power Company to write lyrics celebrating the triumphal completion of the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River, the very dam that contributed to the elimination of sea-run salmon in the B.C. wetland region.

“Roll On, Columbia, Roll On” was the best known of these songs. Guthrie penned a mini-history of man’s conquest of the great river, and set it to an adaptation of the tune of “Goodnight Irene”. The lyric starts in the “Canadian north west” and follows the course of the river, mentioning historical figures such as Lewis and Clark, and culminating in this celebration of human accomplishment:

These mighty men labored by day and by night,  
Matching their strength ‘gainst the river’s wild flight,  
Through rapids and falls they won the hard fight,  
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.

The song is very singable, with a rousing chorus – a good candidate for anyone’s campfire. I’m not sure if Woody would object, but it seems to me that some updating is in order. After all, the new millennium is a pretty different time and place from the depression-racked America of the 1930s. So I rewrote his song to celebrate the special place of the wetlands at the headwaters of the Columbia. My hope is that perhaps it may be heard by the sage judges who will be deciding the fate of the Columbia in B.C. Maybe it will help urge them on to making the best possible decision for the future of the region. Maybe if we sing this song we will begin to convince some of those bent on destroying the wetlands that they are making a mistake. And maybe, just maybe, we might, as a community, begin to fully understand the irreplaceable worth of ecosystems like the Columbia River wetlands. At least, this gives us something to do while we wait for the wheels of justice to grind slowly to a decision.

# Roll On, Columbia Roll On

(Wetlands Version)

Original song by Woody Guthrie  
BC words by Tim Rogers, 2000

**Chorus:** D (E7) A7 A7

Roll on Co-lumbia Roll on. Roll on Co-lumbia roll on. Your  
beauty and wetlands must ever live on. So roll on Co-lumbia roll on. From

**Verse:** D A7 D D7 G E7 A7 D

Columbia Lake with its mountains serene. Dutch Creek adding its water so clean. It's  
there you be-gin on your great ocean dream. So roll on Co-lumbia roll on. So

Roll on, Columbia, roll on,  
Roll on, Columbia, roll on,  
Your wetland and beauty must ever live on,  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on!

(Verses)

From Columbia Lake with its mountains serene,  
Dutch Creek adding its water so clean,  
It's there you begin on your great ocean dream,  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.<sup>1</sup>

Many clear streams add water to you,  
The Sinclair, the Francis, and Kindersley too,  
The Toby and Luxor, the great Bugaboo,  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.<sup>2</sup>

When you reach the old Spilli your wetlands are vast,  
Your sloughs and your channels will always outlast  
The old paddle wheelers that came in your past,  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.<sup>3</sup>

Your lifeblood comes from the east and the west,  
The Rockies, Purcells give you life at the best,  
In turn you give homes to the birds for their nests,  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.<sup>4</sup>

There are those who are acting like man at his worst,  
With jetskis and skidoos, the wetlands they cursed,  
But we took a stand and now wildlife comes first,  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.

As you flow to the north you are home to untold  
Birds, wildlife and plants that are now in your fold,  
We pray you keep flowing and make our lives whole,  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.

Notes: 1. A slightly different version of this song was published in the *East Kootenay Environmental Society Newsletter*, 14:7 (2000), 4-5.

2. Rivers that feed the Columbia between Invermere and Golden, BC, from both east and west.

3. Spilli is a local abbreviation for the Spillimacheen River. Prior to the CPR, paddlewheelers were the major mode of transportation between Golden and Invermere, hence the designation of the upper Columbia as a navigable waterway. One legal case was based on the fact that this designation was never quashed despite the installation of non-lifting bridges after the steamers stopped sailing.

4. The Purcells are the mountain range that lies immediately west of the Columbia River, between Invermere and Golden.