

The Sand Dunes of Lake Athabaska

Your Adventure in Learning

By Peter M. Jonker and J. Stan Rowe

Reviewed By [Ian Whyte](#)

The Sand Dunes of Lake Athabaska. Your Adventure in Learning

By Peter M. Jonker and J. Stan Rowe. 2001. University of Saskatchewan. Soft Cover 8 ½ x 11 format, vii + 194 pages.

This is a fascinating account of the geology, ecology of a large dune complex located in boreal forest of northern Saskatchewan. The design and presentation of the book portrays the beauties of a still naturally functioning world of sand, wind, and its many creatures large and small that are adapted for life in a world of constantly shifting sands. Reading this book is truly an adventure in learning. I began being scarcely aware that this unique dune ecosystem even existed. The book built up the story of the geological origins of the ecosystem and how it evolved over time including an excellent outline and graphics of the impact of glaciation in that part of the world. There are many fine descriptions, numerous photographs and charts all of which left me with the feeling that I had begun to comprehend the dunes and how the ecosystem as a whole functions. The authors' obvious love for the place came through strongly and transferred itself to some extent to me, the reader and made me want to visit the area for myself.

I now know about ecological processes such as rolling dunes, winter ice push, ventifacts, saltation, and more than a few other active forces that work to shape the sand dune ecosystem. I read each section eagerly. The text is full of excellent descriptions of survival strategies of herbs, shrubs and trees in the ever shifting conditions created by the winds and moving sand. Individual chapters are devoted to the specialized adaptations of plants, animals, birds, amphibians, insects and fish found in the dunes, forests, and waters of the streams and adjacent Lake Athabasca. The chapter on geography and how the ice sheets worked left me with a good understanding of that which I had always thought of as complicated. The chapter on indigenous peoples and visitors is at best a thumbnail sketch of a long human cultural history.

This is an attractive book, and remains so after much time has been spent with it. The layout and style are near perfect; the many inset sidebars of informative text and poetry constantly tweaked my interest. The plentiful colour pictures and diagrams are well chosen and informative.

The book ends with twenty-seven pages of check lists of all species known to be present in the dunes. However, notwithstanding the high quality of the story told, it was the text of the Foreword

that I found to be most thought provoking and philosophical. The first four paragraphs of the Foreword read:

"Nature invents itself. There is absolutely nothing we humans need to do to assist. Nature simply happens, and does so very well without our meddling. After all, to paraphrase the old hymn, "Without our help it did us make." We are ecological beings, formed from air, water, and dust; the result of intricate networks of relationships and dissolving among sunlight and water, minerals, and air; cells and fluids, other organisms and landscapes. All things evolve in concert to make new and more complex forms in the ongoing dance of life.

"For Earth is life and throbs with vitality in every part, not just in the villages, towns and cities where most of us now live but within the more varied forms of lakes and streams, prairies and forests. We are a most fortunate generation, still able to immerse ourselves in the wonder of protected landscapes, in large Parks and Wildernesses. There we marvel at the intricate ever-changing designs of the ancient world from which our ancestors came. In such places as the Sand Dunes of Lake Athabasca, we can learn an important but difficult-to-grasp lesson. Let It Be.

"Is this a contradiction, that we humans are parts of nature yet seem to have an overwhelming need not only to explore ut also to manage, change, and reinvent nature? Perhaps not. Nature is in us. We are nature as surely as any other of our fellow organisms, like our own, forever diligently striving to secure survival by remaking their perceived worlds. A beaver constructing her dam or lodge, a robin making his nest, honey bees building combs-these are examples of organisms, like our own, forever busy recreating their surroundings. From the view point of individual species, necessity, as the saying goes, is the mother of invention. All organisms alter in various ways the world that surround them.

"What is truly bewildering, even frightening, is the increasingly disproportionate scale at which we humans can make change. Unlike the Canadian symbol, the beaver, we no longer knock down a tree here and there for immediate need and use. With mechanical harvesters, monstrous trucks, dozers, loaders, and computer-assisted farm implements we now clearcut immense forests, strip entire horizons of coal, lay down countless ribbons of pavement and gravel, convert entire landscapes into plantations and other crop production systems, create cities and suburbs that spread like infections across the continents. Are all natural landscapes doomed?

My personal expertise is that of a field naturalist and a deep ecologist. Jonker and Rowe have crafted a book which admirably suits one with these interests.

My recommendations are twofold. Get this book; you'll value it! Be prepared to want to visit the Athabaska Sand Dunes!

Ian Whyte, Ottawa

[Other Ecocentric Texts](#)