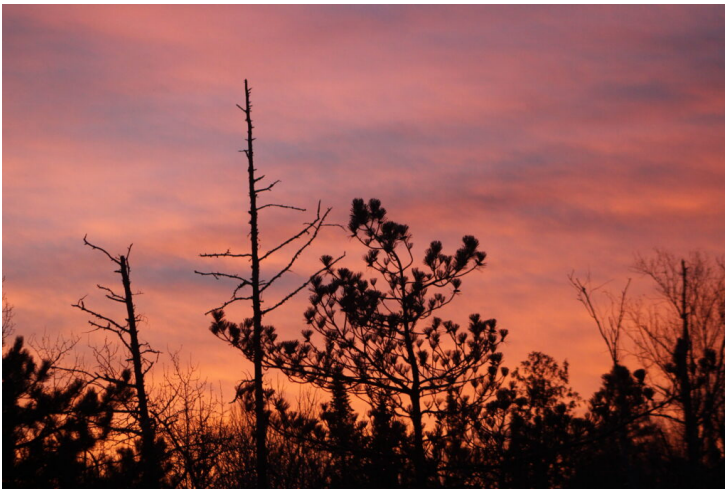


## Media deserts and garbage decisions



By Nate Smelle

ANYONE WHO HAS ever spent a significant amount of time in the desert can relate to the deafening silence one experiences when wandering through these surprisingly abundant ecosystems. Back in 2006, while visiting friends in Bow Island, Alberta I had the chance to immerse myself in this uniquely rich stillness when I borrowed their Jeep for the weekend and headed out into the Badlands of Drumheller. Only a few hours into my three-day long trip, I found myself lost among a maze of hoodoos, buttes, and ravines. I ended up hours away from the beaten path while chasing a deer, which magically disappeared into the landscape, and I swear to this day, transformed into a curious coyote in the blink of an eye. Keeping an eye on the creature as it followed me cautiously from a distance, I did my best to retrace my steps. However, with a mosaic of stones hiding my footsteps in the sand, and the rapidly fading daylight impeding my efforts, I realized that I was in for an adventure. Climbing to the top of the highest hill I could see, I stopped for a moment to collect my thoughts and carefully choose my next steps. Taking a seat on a perfectly placed boulder at the crest of the hill, I scanned the horizons in all directions looking for landmarks that might hint of which direction I needed to go to get back to my campsite. Without a cell phone at the time, Google Maps or MapQuest were not an option. Although I had a map of the area where I was camping in my pocket, it was more of a tourist's brochure than a helpful navigating device. With nothing but a few twigs, some grass, the map/brochure, my notebook, and lighter it was clear that riding out the night fireside was not an option either. Starting to worry as I remembered that the nightly temperatures often dropped below freezing, I sat there listening to the sounds of silence all around me. One eye still on the coyote that seemed to be circling me slowly, I could see the light and shadows beginning to dance to a different tune. Remembering a trick I had learned from a wildlife photographer I had met aboard the Lyubov Orlova en route from Greenland to Labrador six years earlier, I held my hand out in front of me aligning my pinky finger with the edge of the horizon. According to the three fingers of space between the horizon and the bottom of the sun, I was able to estimate that I had a little more than 45 minutes before I would be enveloped by the deserts darkness. Realizing that I had been hiking for at least four hours, I quickly came to terms with the severity of my circumstances. Well, I guess this is it, I thought to myself, I either freeze to death or somehow find my way out in the morning with one hell of a story. As I colour of the light began to change with the coming twilight, I decided to make the most of the situation. Fortunately, in my backpack I had wisely packed a mickey of rum and a cigar that a friend had brought back for me from Cuba to bring on my voyage west. Lighting up and taking a hefty swig, I fell into the silence and became mesmerized by the setting sun. Pulling the notebook from my bag with the intention of finishing a short story I had been working on earlier in the day, I decided to read what I had written before putting pen to page. It read, Sun on my back, I headed into the badlands in search of prehistoric silence. Aha! I shouted as I jumped from my seat. Reminded of where my journey had kicked off early in the afternoon, I quickly gathered my belongings, turned my back to the sunset, and aimed myself towards the rising moon. Luckily, as I made my way back to the campsite, the moonlight replaced the sun as a shining beacon leading me home. Although completely physically spent by the time I found my site, a couple hours or so later, my mind fully engaged, I stayed up until sunrise, soaking in the fullness of the experience. Reflecting on what I learned from my

careless disregard of place and time back then, I can't help but think of the critical importance of accurate information when faced with danger. In the badlands I may not have had a phone to search the internet for a way back to my campsite or how to survive a night in the desert; but, thanks to some friendly advice from a fellow wilderness freak, and the accuracy of my observations that I had jotted down earlier that day, I am able to pass along this story. Now, as we find ourselves face-to-face with dangerous times, I can't stress enough the importance of accurate information. Say what you will about our Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, but, when it comes to his support for local journalism, everyone of us living in smaller municipalities such as those found in North Hastings owes him thanks. Without the Local Journalism Initiative the people of: Limerick, Tudor and Cashel, Carlow Mayo, Faraday, Wollaston, South Algonquin, and every other rural and northern community in Canada might as well be wandering through a dark desert as they seek to understand the time and place in which they live. As the Prime Minister said last week, Bell Media's decision to cut 800 jobs and sell 45 of its 103 radio stations, despite having been granted \$40 million in relief from the federal government is ?garbage.? Trashy as Bell's decision was, there is still a valuable lesson to be learned from their greed. What they have taught us, is that we certainly cannot trust the private sector to do what's in the best interest of the people. In 2023, according to The Toronto Star, Bell Media reported a 22.4 per cent profit margin. Was this not enough to maintain the level of service they were providing when the government stepped in to give them a hand up? These kind of garbage decisions that place profits before people are exactly why we need a robust media now more than ever. Without the accurate information we need to navigate our way into the future, life in such media deserts will only become more perilous as the truth is replaced by disinformation.