

# Peggy protests at the Bala Falls portage

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## Around Muskoka Lakes

By Jack Hutton

Two weeks ago, local residents who turned up for a meet-the-candidates night at the Bala Community Centre were startled to see a film crew that seemed to have no connection with any local TV station or network.

Once inside, the camera crew set up one large TV camera on a tripod, aimed at the front where candidates would speak. Two of the crew moved around the room, getting audience reactions with hand-held cameras.

The biggest story of that night was the mystery film crew. Why? The intense young man directing the film crew was one of North America's most highly regarded documentary film makers.

Toronto-born Rob Stewart, 34, became an international celebrity after his first documentary, *Sharkwater*, premiered at the 2007 Toronto Film Festival, later winning more than 30 awards around the world. His ability to translate environmental concerns onto a big screen has been compared to Steven Spielberg, Tom Cruise, Oliver Stone and Al Gore.

Stewart, who now lives in Los Angeles, flew to Canada two or three weeks ago for a brief holiday with a friend at a family cottage outside Bala. Stewart had no intention of doing anything more than enjoying his cottage view. That all changed one day when he drove into Bala for some shopping.

Here's where the story starts.

Stewart couldn't help noticing signs beside the North



Photograph: Jack Hutton

Peggy Peterson, a Huntsville activist, has been protesting a proposed Bala hydro plant since Sept. 1

Falls and stopped to investigate. That's where he met Peggy Peterson, who had started a one-person protest on Sept. 1 against the building of a small hydro plant. Stewart and Peterson sat down at her camp fire and were still talking hours later. Shopping was forgotten.

Stewart's most recent documentary, *Revolution*,

warns that the world's oceans will "crash" by mid-century or soon after unless global warming and other environmental threats are reversed. Peterson and Stewart soon realized that they on the same wavelength.

I was a skeptic when I first heard about Peterson. Why would a 55-year-old owner of a gardening business in Huntsville show up in Bala to protest the proposed hydro plant just weeks before Swift River Energy Ltd. hoped to start clearing the site to begin construction in the spring.

After half an hour at her camp fire I had questions but no doubts about her principled commitment. None whatsoever. She faces financially crippling fines for taking her stand (\$1,000 a day), but she has held on. Peterson expects to be served soon with a summons asking her to remove her tent and other belongings. Maybe it has happened.

Whatever happens at the portage site where Wahta leaders say their ancestors arrived in 1881, Peterson has certainly made her presence felt. Her environmental diary tells how an endangered Blanding's turtle migrated right in front of her up to the top of the portage. She is visited daily by a great blue heron (Grandfather) and a lone mallard (Judy Lone Duck). One day she watched an osprey soaring far above her.

All this explains why Rob Stewart started filming right after meeting Peterson.

Peterson certainly touched a chord in Bala during her weeks beside the Falls. People brought her food from their kitchens. Others left firewood for her camp fire. A young boy living nearby came every day after school to make sure she was all right.

I don't believe we have heard the last word from Peggy Peterson. As we speak, a young film maker in California is looking at hours of video that he shot here in Muskoka.

Keep watching the big screen.