

Conservation Group Calls For Protection of Yukon's Three Rivers Wilderness

Whitehorse. The Yukon Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society today announced its bold recommendations for conservation and new protected areas in the northern Yukon's Peel River watershed. The Society presented its conservation proposal to the Peel Watershed Regional Planning Commission, which is now accepting public comment on the future of the region. For more than a decade, CPAWS-Yukon and its partners have worked on conservation assessments, raising public awareness about the awe-inspiring wilderness of the Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume watersheds, known as the "Three Rivers".

This week CPAWS-Yukon launches a new book celebrating the Three Rivers, featuring stunning photography, art works from the traveling national exhibition, and essays by local authors and prominent Canadians such as Margaret Atwood, John Ralston Saul and Brian Brett. *Three Rivers: The Yukon's Great Boreal Wilderness*, (Harbour Publishing, November 2005, edited by Juri Peepre and Sarah Locke) will be available in bookstores across Canada.

"Our goal is to protect and conserve the globally important boreal wilderness of the Three Rivers and to keep the greater Peel watershed healthy," said Jim Pojar, Executive Director of CPAWS. "Yukoners value free ranging caribou, the majestic grizzly bear, and the privilege of living in the midst of one the world's great remaining wild places, and we need the foresight to protect entire watersheds such as the Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume."

To achieve this goal, CPAWS proposes a wilderness area in the Three Rivers watersheds, including territorial park protection for the Snake River drainage. The Society is calling for conservation zones elsewhere in the Peel watershed to protect critical wetlands, sensitive river corridors and other important biological and cultural features.

"For too long the Yukon Party government has ignored what many Yukoners value most – clean water, plentiful wildlife and protection of our magnificent wildlands. Day after day, we hear only about grandiose schemes for more roads, railways and pipelines - but on the topics of conservation and protected areas, so vital to our economic future and well-being, the government is silent," added Juri Peepre, the Three Rivers Project Coordinator.

“Successive Yukon governments have sold off resource development rights in the Peel region at bargain basement prices – all in advance of land use planning. Even with the Planning Commission up and running, the government proposes to open the entire watershed for oil and gas exploration at the discretion of industry. We think its time to counter this lopsided thinking with a bold and even-handed conservation vision that safeguards our inheritance. We look to the Land Use Planning Commission as the best hope to achieve that goal,” said Pojar.

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Background Information

Why are the Peel Watershed & Three Rivers Wilderness Important?

In the Yukon we can achieve what has eluded us elsewhere in Canada— to live in our natural environment and draw from its resources while ensuring the entire living community remains whole. As wildlands and mountain rivers such as those of the Peel watershed become increasingly rare in North America and around the world, we have a profound responsibility to bequeath these wonders of nature to future generations — both for humanity and for their intrinsic value.

Why Protect It?

The Peel watershed and Three Rivers wilderness are globally important, and vital to northern conservation:

- intact mountain watersheds and wilderness on a vast scale, with fresh clean waters, rare in the world;
- pristine mountain boreal ecosystem, a benchmark of Canadian significance, with a full complement of predator and prey species;
- largest intact woodland caribou herd in the Yukon, a species vulnerable elsewhere;
- 25% of Yukon's threatened Peregrine Falcons breed in the Peel watershed;
- large critical wetland areas, of territorial significance, used by waterfowl for staging and nesting;
- refuge for large carnivores such as grizzly bears, wolves, wolverine, species that require large wilderness to survive.
- conservation provides lasting community and economic benefits, supports traditional land uses such as harvesting, and sustains local ways life, while allowing new industries and job opportunities based on wildland conservation to flourish.

The Science Behind the Proposal

The CPAWS proposal is consistent with the Canada-wide effort to conserve the vast boreal forest and protect key landscapes within the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative. The

proposal would protect representative parts of the Peel watershed, including boreal forest, rugged highlands, Beringia, sub-arctic taiga plateaus and plains.

Even though industrial development is outpacing conservation in many southern parts of Canada, the northern boreal forest is still one of the largest intact ecosystems left on the planet. In Canada, about 70 percent remains in a natural state, 30 percent is tenured for industrial uses, and 10 percent is protected. In the Yukon the amount protected roughly matches the 10 percent national average, but is far short of the 50 percent protection goal recommended by scientists and conservation organizations such as the Canadian Boreal Initiative and CPAWS. (See www.cpaws.org or www.borealcanada.org)

CPAWS proposes a strategy that includes core protected wilderness areas in the Three Rivers watersheds, along with special conservation zones elsewhere in the greater Peel watershed. The core wilderness area is approximately 30,000 km² - big enough to support species and ecological processes that depend on intact ecosystems, and accommodate the drama of climate change.

Taken as a whole, the Peel watershed is an exceptional candidate for a “biosphere reserve,” where conservation supported by local communities can contribute to a lasting economy that respects the region's way of life and is sustained by an intact ecosystem. Canada has 13 biosphere reserves, including Waterton Lake in southern Alberta. (for information on biosphere reserves, see www.biosphere-canada.ca)

The CPAWS proposal is similar to the conservation lands in the Muskwa-Kechika country of northern BC, and is in line with the conservation plan the Deh Cho First Nations have proposed for their territory in the Nahanni region of NWT.

For more information on the Three Rivers Project, the national art exhibition, and the new book, visit www.cpawsyukon.org and follow the Three Rivers links.

