Wind River panorama at Mount Royal. From the Three Rivers Journey, Summer 2003. [FM]

introduction to the peel watershed

The Peel River is one of Canada's most striking and pristine mountain river watersheds, collecting the waters of well known tributaries such as the Ogilvie, Blackstone, Hart, Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume. These rivers form the heart of a great mountain ecosystem with a long cultural history, clear flowing waters, free-ranging wildlife and a rugged northern beauty.

The greater Peel River watershed takes in about 14% of the Yukon. The Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume watersheds, along with the Hart to the west make up one of the largest roadless areas in the Yukon. When combined with the Arctic Red River to the east, and other rivers to the south, these rivers anchor a natural area of global importance.

One of dozens of beautiful waterfalls in the region. [CA]

First Nations Traditional Territories

The eastern part of the Peel River watershed, including the Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume, have been used by Tetl'it Gwich'in and Nacho Nyak Dun for generations and contains many important traditional and spiritual places, and historic trade and travel routes. The upper Peel River watershed lies also within the traditional territories of the Tr'on dëk Hwëch'in and Vuntut Gwitchin. For generations, the plants, wildlife and fish of the region have provided sustenance for people.

Today, First Nations people still travel the region to hunt, fish or trap, although some of the more remote reaches of these rivers are less visited now. The Tetl'it Gwich'in use the lower Peel River extensively, with numerous family fishing and hunting camps located in the river valley. Trap-lines are located throughout the greater region. The continued hunting, fishing, trapping and guiding in the watersheds contributes to the regional economy and supports a way of life. Several guide-outfitting concessions use these watersheds. Local people have also participated in past and on-going oil and gas and mineral exploration work in the region.

The Variety of Life

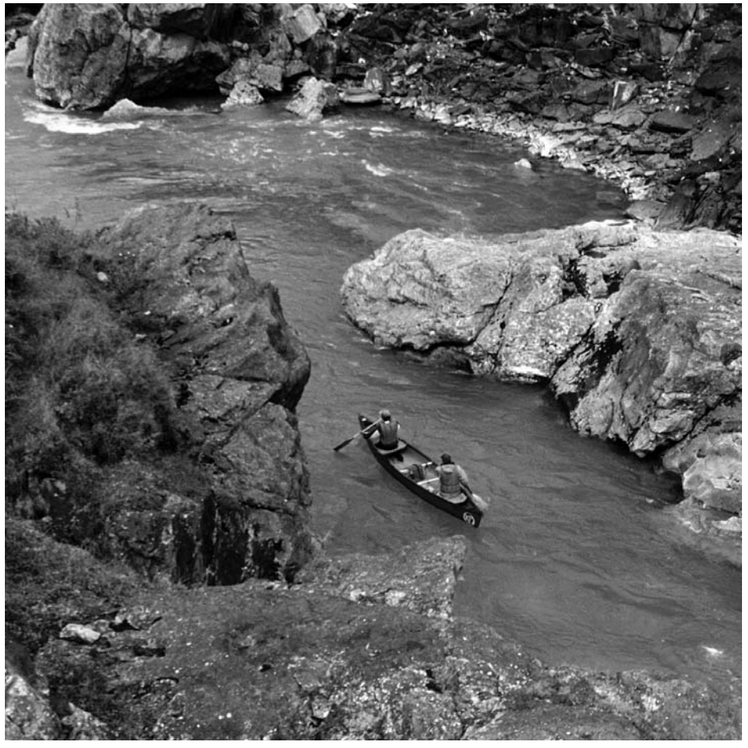
The Peel River watershed is part of a vast northern boreal forest ecosystem, essentially intact, with natural processes operating largely unimpeded by human intervention. The eastern part of the watershed is one of the Yukon's largest roadless areas and this inaccessibility has helped protect both the wilderness and diversity of life.

The high diversity of landforms in the watershed has resulted in a great variety of plant life. Beringian, sub-boreal, boreal and arctic species as well as plants of special interest, such as the bearflower, certain orchids and the larch, all can be found in the watershed.

Animal life in the Peel River watershed also reflects the variety of landforms, but shows the importance of the expansive, wild character of the region. One of the Yukon's largest woodland caribou herds, the Bonnet Plume herd, ranges throughout the eastern part of the watershed and into the Northwest Territories. Grizzly bears are more abundant in the mountainous parts of the watershed, while black bears are more commonly seen on the plateaus and in the lowlands. The Wernecke Mountains provide critical habitat for thinhorn sheep. Mineral licks throughout the mountains are especially important for the sheep populations.

A healthy population of Peregrine Falcons, which are good indicators of ecosystem health, make the Peel River area their home. Wetlands and lakes in both the mountains and the plateaus provide critical habitat for thousands of waterfowl and shorebirds.

The Peel River and its tributaries host many fish species, from arctic grayling to Dolly Varden char to pygmy whitefish. The watershed's unique glacial history has interesting implications for the fish that occur here. During glacial periods on at least two occasions the Peel River was diverted into the Yukon River system. As a result of this diversion, there are now at least six different fish species that live in the Peel system which are genetically distinct from those in the rest of the Mackenzie River system.



[Canyon on the Snake River. [JP]]

Special Features

A full catalogue of special features would include many pages of description, beyond the scope of this atlas. Among the most striking special features in the Peel River watershed is the Mount MacDonald massif with its towering limestone walls. The Mt. MacDonald region's hanging glaciers, tarns, vast alpine meadows, waterfalls, weeping walls and resident caribou and sheep populations, are of national and territorial significance for their scenic beauty and ecology.

Other noteworthy features include the large and scenic mountain lakes such as Bonnet Plume and Pinguicula Lakes, as well as the important wetlands associated with Chappie and Turner lakes. Massive landslides, canyons, rapids and waterfalls as well as dinosaur bones, mineral springs, historic routes and trails, and the abandoned gold rush camp at Wind City are all special features that need special attention.

Perhaps the most important special feature on a Canadian and global scale is the Peel watershed's wilderness, intact predator-prey ecosystem in a mountain river setting, and abundant fresh clean waters.

These values are increasingly rare in the world.

Wildlife, Wilderness and the Economy

The value of wilderness to aboriginal people and northern society is recognized in the *Umbrella Final Agreement* with Yukon First Nations. The *Yukon Environment Act* also recognizes wilderness as a resource with intrinsic, ecological and economic value. Conservation of wilderness was identified as a key objective of the Yukon Protected Areas Strategy. Wildlands are also known as one of our most valuable assets by the tourism industry, and as a continuing heritage by people who rely on the land for a way of life.

The wilderness and wildlife values of the Peel watershed, such as in the Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume river valleys, are internationally recognized today. Each year local people and a growing number of visitors enjoy the unspoiled beauty of these watersheds. The economies of Ft. McPherson, Mayo, Dawson City and the Yukon Territory as a whole benefit from this activity, although the full potential of community benefits from these land uses has not been developed yet.

CPAWS Research and Community Trips

Between 1995 and 1999, the Yukon Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, in cooperation with First Nations and the World Wildlife Fund, completed several biological surveys in the Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume Rivers. The Tetl'it Gwic'hin Council, Ft. McPherson Renewable Resources Council, Nacho Nyak Dun First Nation and Mayo Renewable Resources Council participated in the survey work, and the Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board provided matching funding for field research and habitat mapping work.

In July, 2000 CPAWS produced a report with recommendations to move forward on conservation and land use planning in the Peel Watershed, with a conservation focus on the Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume Rivers.

For the past several years CPAWS-Yukon toured the northern communities to present slide shows on the Peel watershed. Meetings were held with First Nations and RRC representatives. In 2001 & 2002 CPAWS hosted community raft and canoe trips on the Snake and Wind Rivers, with people from Ft. McPherson and Mayo. The Three Rivers Journey took place in the summer of 2003, with 7 communiy delegates joining more than 30 paddlers from across Canada and the U.S.

[Upper Snake River valley is broad and braided. [CA]]