



For many Canadians, the North is part of the imagined body. It's an extension of the self, not the rational self but the self that feels. When the North is damaged and we hear about it, we hurt. The twenty-first century will tell us — once and for all, I suspect — how much of ourselves we're prepared to destroy. — Margaret Atwood

Snake River. Photo: Fritz Mueller

Three Rivers: The Yukon's Great Boreal Wilderness

The Wind, Snake, and Bonnet Plume rivers, with their sister tributaries the Hart, Blackstone and Ogilvie, rise in the stunning Selwyn and Wernecke Mountains and flow through the vast Peel River basin on the Yukon's northeastern border, an area that accounts for 14 percent of the territory. Perched at the apex of Canada's boreal forest and the northern end of the Rocky Mountain chain, the Peel watershed also includes some of the unglaciated area known as Beringia. A blend of biomes, it is a distinct and varied land of plateaus and mountains, rivers and wetlands, not yet fully revealed to science.

Here, unbounded and colourful mountain ranges frame pristine taiga forests and subarctic watersheds. Robust woodland and barren ground caribou, free-ranging wolverine and grizzly bear, the threatened Anatum Peregrine Falcon, unspoiled aquatic habitat, and thousands upon thousands of boreal songbirds and migratory

waterfowl occupy an ancient and unfettered landscape that is the essence of wildness.

This is the traditional territory of the Nacho Nyak Dun and Tetl'it Gwich'in First Nations; for generations they were sustained by the plants, fish and wildlife of this region as they traversed its valleys and mountains on a network of travel and trade routes. Today the wilderness of the Peel basin serves as a vital benchmark of untamed nature; ancient and complex ecological processes continue to evolve freely, and the full complement of predators and prey ranges across the landscape. Although fishing, hunting and trapping are still important to the way of life in the region, local people and visitors from around the world also value the watershed as a premiere destination for canoeing, backcountry travel, photography, education, cultural activities and scientific research.



Why is the Peel Important?

In the Yukon we can achieve what has eluded us elsewhere in Canada — to live on the land and draw from its resources while assuring 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 bequest 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. Some key values to protect include:

- 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 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;

Wilderness, or traditional homeland as it is viewed by many aboriginal peoples, is an integral part of the North; it has intrinsic and spiritual value now and for the future. Conservation provides lasting community and economic benefits, supporting traditional land uses such as harvesting, and sustaining cultures and local ways life.

What are the Threats?

Just as the Three Rivers area begins to gain the recognition it deserves, plans for development are compromising its future. The Peel watershed, like much of Canada's North, is vulnerable to the continental hunger for hydrocarbons, including new development schemes for oil and natural gas, pipelines, coal and coal-bed methane. Three consecutive Yukon governments have offered these precious lands to industry at bargain prices.

Others dream of building roads and rails to extract iron ore, copper, and other metals from the remote mountains. And the Yukon government promotes all this activity before citizens have a chance to consider the watershed's future or complete a land use plan. Our governments seem eager to industrialize the Peel before setting aside conservation lands, even though pre-emptive resource development would have an overwhelming impact on the Peel watershed and the ecological health of its major tributaries. As the continental energy and natural resources debate heats up, promoters with their eyes on the Peel are already at work, and the supporting wheels of governments are in motion. After the heavy machinery is gone and tracts of land laid waste, what future would be left for the people, communities and wildlife in the North?



A threatened species in most regions, woodland caribou live on 50% of their historic range in Canada – expanses of mature boreal forest with thick mats of ground lichen. As industrial development moves north, roads and seismic lines fragment these frontier forests. Some biologists use “extinction in slow motion” to describe the decline of this species. The Bonnet Plume herd in the Peel watershed is one of the largest in the Yukon, with its range still intact. Photo: Peter Mather



Groundsels. Photo: Juri Peepre

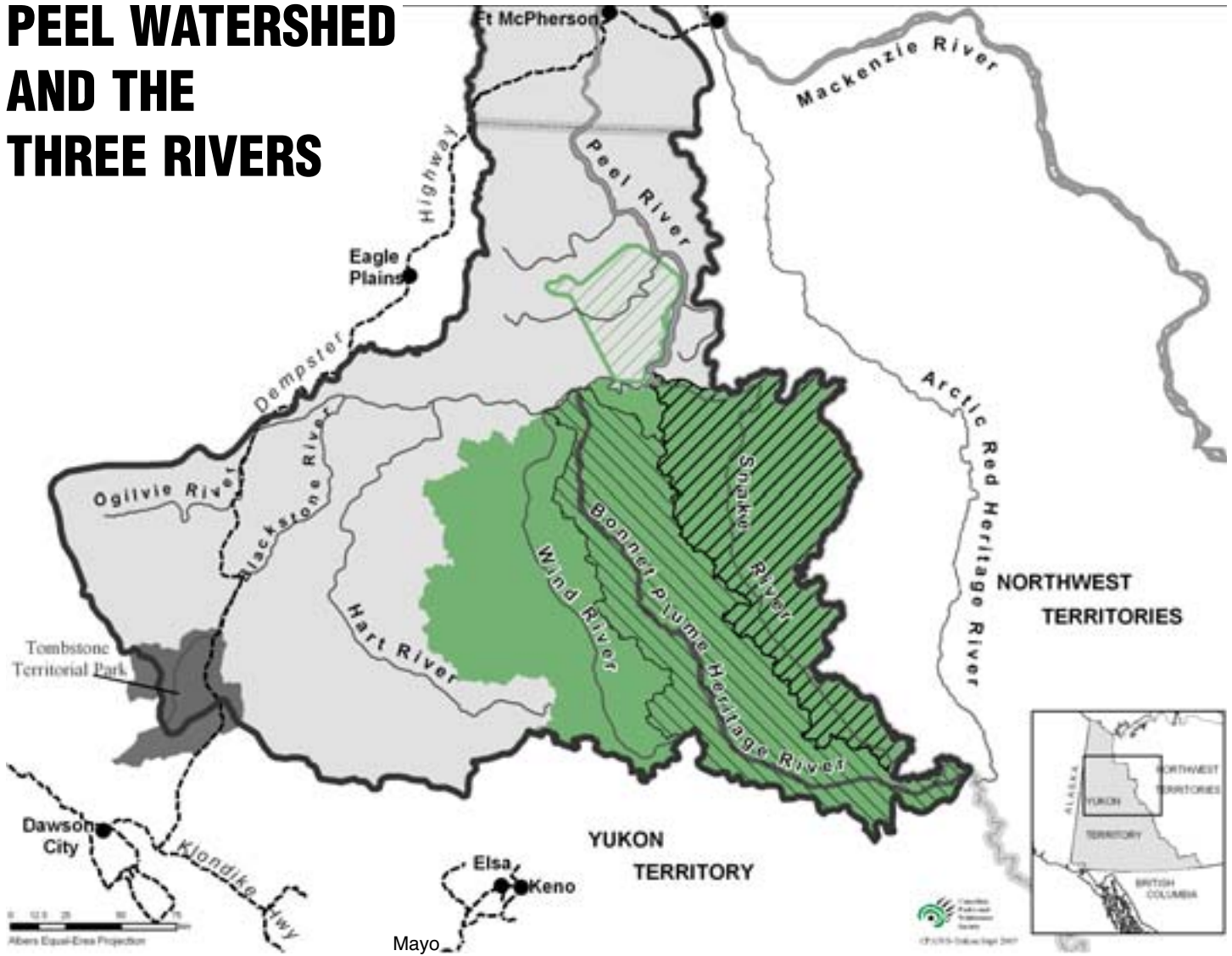


Boreal Owl. Photo: Jannik Schou



Wilderness without beginning or end; wild spaces big enough for a journey of discovery almost beyond the imagination – that's Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume country. Photo: Fritz Mueller.

PEEL WATERSHED AND THE THREE RIVERS



Our Goal

Our goal is to protect and conserve the wilderness of the Three Rivers and the ecological integrity of the greater Peel watershed.

To achieve this CPAWS proposes wildland areas in the Three Rivers watersheds, including territorial park protection for the Snake River drainage. We call for special conservation zones in the remainder of the Peel watershed to protect critical wetlands, sensitive river corridors and other important biological and cultural features.

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.

This focus on wildland conservation within the Peel watershed reflects many of the protected area proposals put forward during the past 20 years by First Nations, territorial governments, local renewable resource councils, and non-government organizations such as the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS).



It is also consistent with the Canada-wide effort to conserve the boreal ecosystem and protect key landscapes within the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative.

The proposal protects a representative part of distinct biomes in the Peel watershed – boreal forest in the western cordillera, Beringia, sub-arctic plateaus and plains; and embody the Mackenzie Mountains and Peel Plateau Ecoregions which are not yet adequately represented in the Yukon protected areas network.



Lynx. Photo: Jannik Schou

In North America, the boreal forest stretches across all of subarctic Canada and interior Alaska. Taken as a whole, the boreal forest is like a green banner draped around the entire northern hemisphere. It is the world's largest expanse of intact forest, covering nearly 11 percent of our planet's surface, far larger than the Amazonian rainforest and equally significant as an environmental treasure. - Richard Nelson

The Science Behind the Proposal

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. 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. (Visit www.cpaws.org or www.borealcanada.org)

We propose a conservation strategy that includes core protected wilderness areas in the Three Rivers watersheds, along with special conservation zones in the Greater Peel watershed to protect critical wetlands, sensitive river corridors and other important biological and cultural features. The core wilderness area is approximately 30,000 km², a sufficient size to support species and ecological processes that depend on intact ecosystems.

The conservation strategy would:

- conserve a globally important mountain boreal ecosystem both for its inherent value and as a benchmark for more developed ecosystems elsewhere;
- allow for appropriate new economic and community development compatible with maintaining a healthy ecosystem;
- ensure continued robust populations of woodland caribou, grizzly bear, wolverine, wolf, Peregrine Falcon and a host of other species;
- protect the pristine headwaters of the Peel, large intact tributary watersheds, aquatic ecosystems and critical wetlands of territorial importance;
- protect one of Canada's finest arrays of wild mountain river watersheds, supporting existing tourism and service businesses, and attracting new investment;
- protect a northern Canadian cultural landscape, and support continued traditional activities and harvesting throughout the Peel watershed;
- help meet Yukon's commitment to complete a territorial network of protected areas, and meet its obligations under the international convention to conserve biodiversity.

Community and Economic Benefits of Conservation

Conservation and protected areas are a proven way to develop local and regional economies through public investment; training, education and research; tourism and related services; transportation, facilities and infrastructure; conservation management; increased visitor spending and investment from outside the region.

The value of abundant clean water and air, plentiful fish and wildlife, can be measured as ecosystem services of direct benefit to the community. The social and spiritual values of wilderness are well known, yet harder to estimate in economic terms.

Examples of Potential Conservation-based Economic Activities in the Peel Region

- Continued traditional harvesting, trapping and other cultural activities;
- Wilderness guiding and outfitting for: canoeing, rafting, hiking, horseback travel, photography, art, writing, research, education;
- Guided hunting, fishing, lodge-based recreation and nature or culture appreciation;
- Wilderness tourism services: air charters, ground transportation, supplies, operating recreation facilities, food and accommodation;
- Research, monitoring, education, rediscovery by local people;
- Professional services: web-based businesses, natural and cultural sciences consulting;
- Art, photography, local crafts, cultural activities, development of local businesses;
- Resource and wildlife management, with public investment;
- Enforcement, conservation stewardship, river guardians programs;
- Development of tourism and recreation infrastructure
- Increased resident and visitor spending in the region.

Biosphere Reserves

The greater Peel watershed is a good candidate for nomination as a Biosphere Reserve. Biosphere Reserves conserve landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic diversity, while fostering economic and human development that is culturally and ecologically sustainable. They are recognized by the Man and Biosphere Program of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Biosphere Reserves promote solutions for the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use. Each biosphere reserve provides for: landscape and biodiversity conservation areas; appropriate development activities that are culturally and ecologically sustainable; and support for research, monitoring, education and information exchange.

Biosphere Reserves are modeled on land use plans that identify core protected areas, buffer zones where compatible development can take place, and a transition zone that may allow for a variety of economic activities. For info on biosphere reserves, visit: www.unesco.org/mab



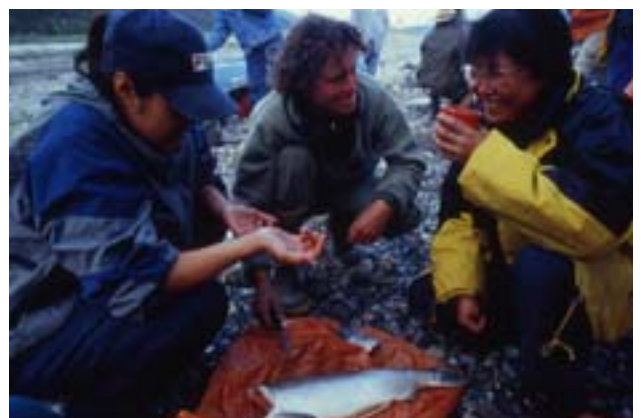
Taking pack-horses into the Wind River. Photo: Fritz Mueller



Drying whitefish Photo: Juri Peepre



Guided wilderness canoe trip on the Wind River. Photo: Fritz Mueller



Whitefish for dinner. L to R: Elaine Alexie, Jill Pangman, Gladys Netro. Photo: Cathie Archbould

THE SNAKE RIVER

There are no reptiles in the North; *Gyûû dazhoo njik*, the Gwich'in name for the Snake River, translates literally as "worm hairy river." According to legend, in ancient times a giant worm came out of the ocean and travelled up the Mackenzie and into the Peel River, swallowing huge boulders as it went. To this day this worm remains hidden either inside a riverside lake or within a mountain near the river's headwaters.

For more than 150 kilometres, the Snake River surges past layered and serrated ridges streaked with rust, ochre and maroon, while lofty glacial peaks like Mount Macdonald tower above it. The swift-flowing upper Snake is one of the most stunning wild rivers in the Canadian North, and its many side valleys invite exploration. There, amid alpine meadows profuse with arnica and arctic lupine, live woodland caribou, Dall sheep, grizzly bear, moose and raptors. Where the lower Snake slows and cuts deep into the Peel Plateau, giant poplar trees and stands of tall spruce provide perches for bald eagles.

THE BONNET PLUME RIVER

One of Canada's premier whitewater canoeing rivers, the Bonnet Plume is famed for its long and turbulent canyons, powerful falls and rocky portages. Although known to the Gwich'in as *Tsaih Tlak Njik*, River of Black Sands, it was later named after a Gwich'in man, Andrew Flett Bonnetplume, who was the main translator for the Klondike stampeders who travelled up the Peel and Wind Rivers on their way to Dawson City.

Near the headwaters of the river, Bonnet Plume Lake is set among sharp peaks and steep alpine meadows. Its aquamarine waters empty into the river through the apron of a massive rockslide before entering a valley of deep green spruce and feathermoss forests that sweep away to the mountain slopes. In its lower reaches the braided river flows through plateaus dotted with wetlands as it rushes toward the Peel River canyon.

THE WIND RIVER

Even in a land of clear-flowing rivers, the translucent blue-green waters of the Wind stand out. Flowing over a never-ending carpet of cobble rocks and sand, the Wind River passes between gnarled limestone ridges intersected by twisted creek canyons that beckon hikers, and slides past huge alluvial fans and dryas meadows offering idyllic camping. Dall sheep can be seen at the mineral licks next to the river.

The Gwich'in regularly travelled the Wind and knew it as Tr'inlintr'ali Njik, "always blowing creek." In 1899 they helped a group of Klondike-bound goldrushers who spent a winter on the banks of the lower river. The ill-fated Lost Patrol of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police came to grief in this country.



Massive boulder in headwaters of the Snake River. Photo: Marten Berkman



Canoeists tackle the Snake River rapids. Photo: Juri Peepre



Bonnet Plume canyon Photo: Juri Peepre



Mount Royal, landmark on the lower Wind River. Photo: Fritz Mueller



Gyrfalcon watches over its hunting territory in the Snake headwaters. Photo: Jannik Schou



A young grizzly bear foraging in willow thickets. Photo: Juri Peepre.



Moose in rut. Photo: Jannik Schou.



Forget-me-nots in the high country. Photo: Juri Peepre

What You Can Do



Become a CPAWS member and support our vision. Visit:

www.cpawsyukon.org

Visit the CPAWS Boreal Action Centre for ways to Take Action:

www.cpaws.org/borealaction

Write a letter in support of conservation to Yukon Premier Dennis Fentie or contact your Member of the Legislative Assembly:

Yukon Government
Box 270, Whitehorse, YT, Canada Y1A 2C6

Participate in land use planning by attending public meetings held by the Peel Watershed Planning Commission. Send a letter to the Commission expressing your support for protecting the Three Rivers watersheds.

201, 307 Jarvis Street, Whitehorse, YT Y1A 2H3
Phone: (867) 667.2374 Fax: (867) 667.4624

Learn more about this landscape and support the work of CPAWS-Yukon – get a copy of, *Three Rivers: The Yukon's Great Boreal Wilderness*, available in local bookstores and on-line from CPAWS at www.cpawsyukon.org. Check out the CPAWS on-line store for books, Three Rivers posters, videos and more.

Attend a CPAWS public event on the Three Rivers or other boreal conservation work. Join CPAWS-Yukon and ask to be put on a Three Rivers mailing list. Visit www.cpawsyukon.org for details.

Phone: (867) 393.8080, Ext 1.
Write: PO Box 31095, Whitehorse, YT Y1A 5P7
Email: info@cpawsyukon.org

For more on travelling the wild Yukon with first rate guides and services, visit the Wilderness Tourism Association of the Yukon:

www.yukonwild.com



Snake River Suite • A stunning boxed set of fine art prints by nationally known realist painter, Ron Bolt. Limited edition of 30, only 25 for sale.

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Ron's works are touring nationally in the "Three Rivers: Wild Waters, Sacred Places" exhibition. Ron will donate half the proceeds to CPAWS-Yukon's work in the Peel.

ORDER from www.cpawsyukon.org, e-mail info@cpawsyukon.org, or call 867.393.8080 ext.1. \$3,000 CDN. GST not included. Two weeks for delivery.

The Three Rivers Project

How does one celebrate and protect a vast boreal mountain wilderness area unknown to most people? The Yukon Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) took on this challenge by bringing to life the ambitious Three Rivers Journey Project in the summer of 2003, when we invited eighteen nationally prominent artists, writers, journalists, and photographers to join people from the Yukon and Northwest Territories in simultaneous journeys along the remote Wind, Snake, and Bonnet Plume rivers.

In August 2003, after 18 exhilarating and arduous days, the Three Rivers Journey ended at the confluence of the Snake and Peel rivers. Here, members of the Tetl'it Gwich'in First Nation greeted the 37 paddlers – artists, writers, filmmakers, scientists, conservationists and First Nation community members – with traditional gun salutes and a chorus of cheers, welcoming them to an elders' feast held on the banks of the Peel. More than 100 people participated in this gathering, the majority having travelled upstream by riverboat from Fort McPherson—a trip of at least eight hours. We feasted on fresh moose meat and grayling and listened to elders and First Nation members speak eloquently about the importance of the land, wildlife and waters of the Peel basin. Elaine Alexie, on behalf of Gwich'in youth, said:

"We, the youth of the Tetl'it Gwich'in, a generation of tomorrow, are here today to express our profound concern for the well-being of our sacred and ancestral lands within the Peel River watershed and our right to maintain our cultural way of life."

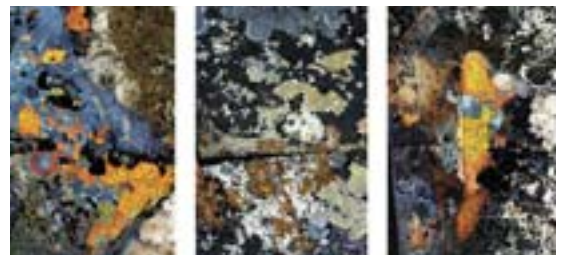
Later, in return for sharing in the Three Rivers Journey, many of the participants created art and literary works that responded to this wild and mystic landscape. These artistic explorations of northern Canada's primeval origins and cultural heritage were then embodied in a national touring art exhibit as well as a literary anthology. The sumptuous new book *Three Rivers: the Yukon's Great Boreal Wilderness* honours one of the world's finest wild mountain river systems and highlights the threats to its integrity. Through visual art, imagery, essays, stories and poems, this book aims to present conservation essentials that will help safeguard this vital wilderness. It poses questions and sets out an alternative vision to the imminent decline of the North's wild heart.



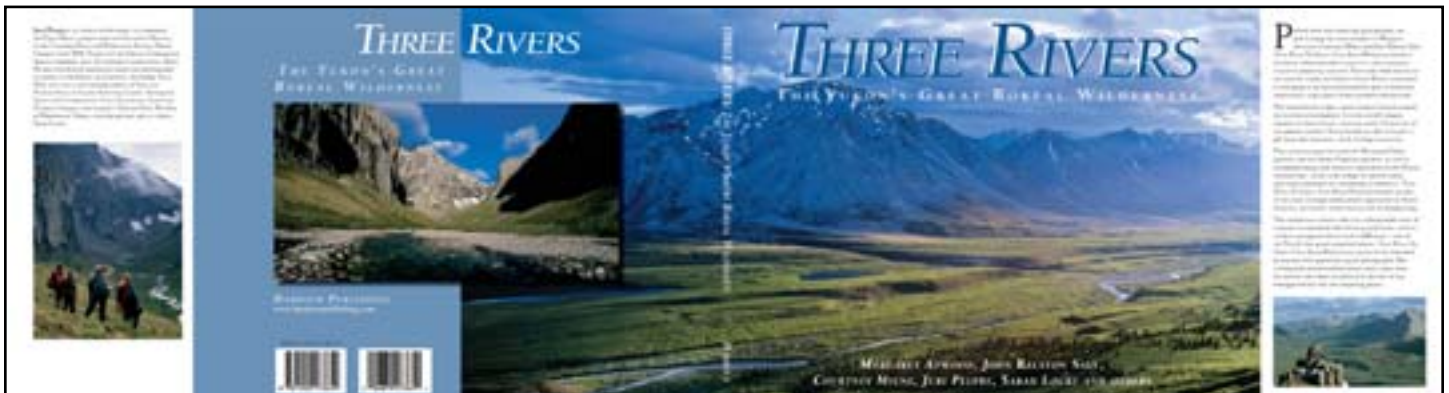
"Ode to the Wind", Joyce Majiski. Photo: Cathie Archbould



"Vessels" by Haruko Okano. Photo: Cathie Archbould



"Yukon Micro" by Ron Bolt.



Three Rivers: The Yukon's Great Boreal Wilderness features essays by Margaret Atwood, John Ralston Saul, Richard Nelson, Brian Brett and more; photos by Courtney Milne, Fritz Mueller, Marten Berkman and more, and the artwork of the Three Rivers: wild waters, sacred places, nationally touring art exhibition. Compiled and edited by Juri Peepre and Sarah Locke. Published by Harbour. Available from www.cpawsyukon.org and local booksellers.