

THE DEATH OF WILDERNESS CANOEING?

By Glen Hooper

You know the feelings:

Scenario 1: After spending several days paddling, portaging and working hard to get way back into what you thought was a remote area, around the bend comes a motor boat with tourists gawking at you, as if you were from outer space. “How did you get in here?” they ask.

Scenario 2: After a hard day of running whitewater, portaging, and lining, you are relaxing at a great campsite with the lake glass calm, taking it all in and remarking on the skill levels it took to get here under your own power. Suddenly you hear the drone, and then the motor boat zooms right by your campsite, uncomfortably close. The wake crashes in on the shoreline, and you have to run down to pull up the canoe that was quietly resting on the beach. The fishermen in the boat barely look at you.

Scenario 3: Way back in what you thought was wilderness, you find boat caches at a portage around some rapids no motor boat could ever run. The motor boats with the fly-in fishermen don't have to run it, and it is no longer a barrier to motorized navigation, because they now have boats at either end. They just portage the motors and gas. There will be motor boats and people along your entire route, who don't know and don't care how self-propelled travel works.

Scenario 4: It is late in the day and a thunderstorm is coming as your group searches for a campsite. You spy a potential campsite and paddle quickly towards it as the skies darken and the wind picks up. When you land, you are dismayed to find mounds of garbage strewn about the place. You find fish remains all over the site, from a party of slob anglers who used this site for their fish cleaning and shore lunch. The fire pit is massive enough to smelt iron, and you note the lack of firewood around the site. To make matters worse, a few feet from the edge of the only flat tent sites is an open latrine emanating the stink of human waste.

Scenario 5: After several days of paddling and portaging into an area that the topo maps showed as uninhabited, you are exhilarated by the wildness of beautiful Shield country, complete with lots of bare rock, lichens, jack pine, and black spruce. As you round the bend there it is—the “remote” tourism lodge with its fleet of motor boats pulled up on the shore. The lodge's outhouses are perched on the shallowest of soils, and you wonder when the water will be permanently contaminated with coliform bacteria. You wonder if drinking water directly from the lake is still OK, like it always used to be.

Scenario 6: You are paddling and portaging back into your favourite wilderness lake on the civic holiday long weekend. This takes several portages and you are looking forward to great fishing. When you get there you are shocked to find an army of car campers at a new road access point, several camps already set up, and boom boxes echoing electronic noise through the once quiet wilderness. A logging road has just

been punched through to access some timber, and nothing was done to protect the remote wilderness qualities of this lake. It's over.

Such scenarios of disappointment could go on and on. The fact is that all over Canadian canoe country, wilderness is disappearing at an alarming rate, and being replaced by multiple-use zones with road-based access, or exclusive remote tourism lodges and outpost camps, which come complete with fleets of motor boats.

More and more waters are becoming polluted with human fecal coliform, which means your children may never know the experience of dipping a cup into a pristine lake and drinking the cool, clean waters. The experience of drinking clean water straight from the lake, is perhaps the epitome of the wilderness experience, since the larger ecosystem has to be healthy, and have relatively few people living in the watershed.

Aside from the "remote" tourism camps, which are occupying most of the large lake and river systems now, the logging roads are expanding to cover all of the boreal forest outside of the relatively few parks we have with quality multi-day canoe routes. In Alberta, the logging and oil and gas roads are expanding into the last roadless areas of the province, right up to the 60th parallel. Saskatchewan's roads are expanding past Reindeer and Wollaston lakes towards the 60th parallel. In Manitoba, the forest management units with all their roads are now planned up to the Seal River watershed.

In Ontario, the last of the remote areas within the currently licensed commercial forest are being roaded, and new permanent roads will soon be expanding to open up additional commercial forest. In Ontario, most of the First Nation communities in the roadless boreal forest have stated that they want permanent all-weather roads, which will allow them to build extensive road networks around their communities for new forest management, mining, and tourism development opportunities. These roads will penetrate the last of the roadless forested areas of the Hudson/James Bay watersheds.

In the North West Territories and parts of Nunavut, the Canadian Arctic Railway, with rail lines crossing the Barren Lands, has already been mapped, and is being advertised and promoted. Some government members in the NWT are promoting the roading of all the Barren Lands, with roads to the Arctic Ocean coastline for seaports, in order to service the expanding mining sector, and to make non-viable mines viable by reducing the transportation and power costs.

Every major barren lands river has been studied for hydro development, and the presently remote mines are asking for the damming of rivers for new hydro development, in order to offset their winter road costs for hauling diesel fuel for power generators. And in Quebec, of course, most people are familiar with the massive plans Hydro Quebec has on the books. All of the major hydro developments include permanent roads.

All of the powerful hunting and angling organizations in the country are of one mind when it comes to roads: They want more and more roads, with full public access to all

Crown Land by motorized vehicles. They have a well-developed lobbying industry, and have multi-million dollar support from their trans-national sponsors, which manufacture trucks, powerboats, all-terrain-vehicles (ATV's), and snowmobiles.

Many of our canoeing parks are maxed-out with visitors, well past the point of over-crowding. Canoeists, many of them inexperienced and not knowledgeable about no- or low-trace travel in heavily used areas, are themselves now responsible for garbage despoiling of campsites, and the faecal contamination of many waterways. Many parks do not have pit toilets in the interior, which accelerates the pollution problem. Many of these popular parks now require reservation bookings months in advance, and there are line-ups at the put-ins and portages. Encounter rates are high, and there is daily stress to find good campsites before they are taken. Overcrowded and polluted parks, and the requirement to book months in advance, is counter to the entire spirit of travelling through wilderness.

Interestingly, there are other canoeing parks which have very few users, but as the word spreads, these will quickly be filled up too. There is an insatiable demand for quality wilderness experiences from millions of urban-bound Americans, Europeans, and Japanese tourists with money to spend. The hoards are coming—make no mistake. Those countries have no wilderness left for canoe tripping (other than parts of Alaska), and they will be coming to Canada. As the world eco-tourism industry explodes in growth, the popular routes in Canada will become crowded, especially in the few canoeing parks we have.

Wilderness canoeists need to wake up and get politically active, because the last of the wilderness canoe routes on Crown Land outside of parks are being destroyed, or are in planning process to be destroyed. The routes will still be paddle-able, but they won't be wilderness or "back-country" anymore. They are being converted to "front-country" multiple-use management. Not one major political party is committed to the protection of a significantly expanded wilderness/back-country canoe route system on Crown Land. Politicians respond to public pressure. Have you ever asked your political candidates or representatives to protect more wilderness canoe routes?

In the boreal forest, the forest management planning process drives most of the road building. Often this is done without any detailed land use plans, so the roads continue to creep, based on resource extraction criteria. Even if there are detailed land-use plans, the fact is that wilderness canoe route protection is seldom a "use management strategy" for roads. Governments often make no distinction between back-country and front-country routes. In fact, they convert back-country to front-country routes on a daily basis without any recognition or reporting that this is happening.

There are many things we, the wilderness canoeing community, can and must do to halt this trend and save many wilderness waterway routes for future generations. However, we must get organized and speak with one voice! Ontario, where I live, with the largest population in Canada, and with a huge portion of canoe-able Canadian Shield, represents perhaps the most pathetic

example of wilderness canoeist apathy. There is no Non Governmental Organization (NGO) which speaks effectively and authoritatively for wilderness canoe route protection. Canoe Ontario, which many of us thought spoke for route protection, in fact does not have this mandate and never did. (Besides, Canoe Ontario is at present largely ineffective because it is fighting to overcome great financial difficulties.)

Canada-wide, the Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association (CRCA) publishes a fine magazine, and does some lobbying, but it is spread way, way too thin. The CRCA is also in the midst of a process of re-organization, and we cannot expect them to do tough government lobbying in every province and territory. They do not dare risk losing their magazine advertisers, since advertising is what keeps the magazine alive. I am not sure if they receive government grants, but if they do, then they cannot be politically active.

Most importantly, wilderness canoeists have to become knowledgeable on how resource management planning (or lack thereof), works. For example, it is quite possible to plan fully sustainable forestry operations, complete with temporary roads, and harvesting just as much wood, but with access restrictions and active physical road abandonment. Access restriction planning is routine practice today for the creation of roadless “doughnuts” to protect the business interests of expensive fly-in “remote” fishing and hunting lodges, with their fleets of motorboats. This common management strategy provides exclusive, non-road accessible, high-quality fishing rights and the facade of wilderness for a relatively few motorized fishermen, many of whom are foreigners. Sometimes strategic bridges are removed after forest harvesting, so that roads are inaccessible, and don’t require the politically difficult decisions to post “access prohibited” signage. If the fly-in fishing industry can obtain what is called “functional roadlessness” road access restrictions, then why can’t wilderness paddlers obtain the same thing for remote wilderness canoe routes?

Throughout Canada there are aircraft-supplied and winter road-supplied mines. However, some mines can only be economically viable with service from permanent all-weather roads. But again, where there is a conflict with remote value protection, these mining roads could be regulated with no-access restrictions except for mining industry personnel.

It is interesting but depressing to know that there are no policies on Crown Land (that I know of) to protect the interests of the self-propelled wilderness travellers who fly-in, or paddle and portage into remote areas and travel the landscape, nor for the outfitting industry which supports it. The mechanisms to protect wilderness routes could be exactly the same as for the lodge-based tourists, without impacts to the resource extraction industries, but somehow this is seldom considered.

For those paddlers living isolated in the big cities in the south, you may be very surprised that we have had laws on the books for many years which give provincial governments the ability to prohibit access on various roads on Crown Land, in order to protect the remote resource-based tourism industry while allowing resource extraction. These controlled-access areas are not parks. This is a good use of the law, because it can protect remoteness, while allowing full resource extraction for societal economic benefits. However, governments also exercise another mandate to increase motorized vehicle and road-based recreational opportunities on Crown Land, which means more roads, boat caches, and boat launches on many waterway systems. These issues are highly contentious, but most of the decisions are made locally, and so the cumulative effect of these decisions is a continuous landscape-level erosion of functionally roadless wilderness.

Governments also decide, based on public opinion or lack thereof, on the disposing or disposition of Crown Land for cottage and commercial tourism developments. (When people or governments talk about disposing of land, it indicates how they value it.) Once Crown Land is sold to private interests, development rights are granted, and that often leads to pressure for developing permanent roads. Human settlement nodes with permanent roads then cause a feedback loop effect which produces local pressure for real-estate development and expansion.

Many regions of Canada do not have effective land use planning processes in place for Crown Land, which is most of the wilderness canoeing area left in Canada. Land development is instead driven incrementally by industrial development demands. Look at any province or territory: governments are always under pressure to create jobs, and they react to these demands by opening up more public lands for resource extraction jobs, ignoring the eco-tourism job opportunities which already existed. The forest management planning processes, that are occurring all over boreal Canada, are the prime drivers of land development. In the Barren Lands, mining demands are driving the development of roads and hydro developments. First Nations are also flexing their political muscle and demanding economic development opportunities based on modern industrial development models, i.e. more roads, mines, and big-scale forestry.

Wilderness canoeists are not on the radar screen of government land use planners. If we don't get organized nationally and provincially, wilderness canoeing is dead. The mechanised tourists are going to win out, and the few canoeing parks we have will soon be overcrowded if they are not already. These parks are not going to satisfy the wilderness paddling demands in the near future. The creation of more parks is also not a viable option because most voting public will not stand for the locking up of timber and mineral resources. In northern Ontario where I live, most stakeholder groups are vehemently opposed to more parks. Land-use regulations using thoughtful zoning strategies for

wilderness route protection, while allowing for resource extraction, is the only practical solution I can see. Creating more massive parks would be nice and I would vote for it, but I don't think it will happen.

The only organization I see out there, which has a national wilderness paddling experience in its membership, who are well-travelled and educated, have seen much of this country, and whose organization is not beholden to governments, is the Wilderness Canoe Association. I am throwing out the challenge to the WCA to become the lead NGO in Canada, to start a sustained and effective lobbying campaign to develop wilderness canoe route protection policy and plans in every province and territory in Canada. It has to be by province and territory because Constitutional powers in these matters rest with these jurisdictions. It is a huge job. But if the WCA does not lead this process and recruit partners, it will soon be too late. No one else is stepping up to the plate.

What is it going to be?