

A Word or Two Against Commercial Tour Operations in the Canadian Wilderness

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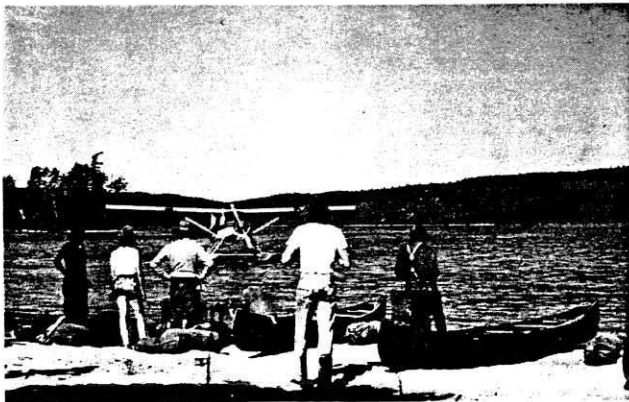
Surely we were in it. By any reasonable definition, "wilderness" lay outward from our camp for hundreds of kilometres across the tundra, the mountains, and the ice-covered sea. For three weeks we had seen no other human beings and just about none of their works. That evening, gulping down a second cup of tea in a cold and rocky place, we had no trouble agreeing among ourselves that what we five Canadians were in was wilderness!

Conversation, though, was running to the topic of some well-known commercial canoe-trip operators from our city of origin, Ottawa. All four of my companions spoke of the operators as friends, people they had shared real-life experiences with, interesting doers and movers.

Mischievously, and with some irritation, I broke in to ask whether my fellows had no reservations at all about the role of commercial tour group operators in the Canadian wilderness. Everyone knows about the good things outfitters do, I said. They take people into the wilderness who do not have the experience or time to organize their own trips, they develop canoeing or other kinds of expertise, they bring together like-minded people, they create a constituency for wilderness. But have they no faults whatsoever?

I was not being malicious. In fact, my gambit did nothing more than rephrase the hard questions other people had put to me a few years before, when an Eskimo friend of mine and I had launched our own modest wilderness-tour operation. Yet it was as if I had uttered blasphemy. None of my climbing and hiking partners saw anything the least wrong with commercial touring in the wilderness.

In this short article I would like to draw attention to a few things about commercial tour operations in the wilderness which may be wrong or harmful. It seems important to do so because those operations are becoming a large factor in the Canadian wilderness and, in my view, threaten it. According to statisticians, over the past decade they have been growing at 10 or 20 percent per annum. Provincial and territorial governments are encouraging them. They have a way of hungrily sniffing out just about every fine valley and range economical to reach by float plane. And wherever they go, they change what they find.



Harm to the Client

We Canadians do not yet know what wilderness means to us, and the conventional wisdom is that we will not know until, as happened with the Americans, we have lost almost the whole of it. But we do have some fine storytellers who have conveyed to us something of what wilderness meant to them: Ernest Thompson Seton, Grey Owl, Raymond Patterson, Earle Birney, A. L. Karras, to name a few.

To all these authors, wilderness was a place which worked certain changes in the mind and character of persons who went into it. It taught the sojourner 'freedom,' 'self-reliance,' 'resourcefulness,' 'determination,' 'perseverance,' 'humor,' 'optimism,' 'patience,' 'calm,' 'discipline,' 'vigilance and watchfulness,' 'sublimity and majesty,' 'courage,' 'self-sacrifice.' Soberly, and in anguish, A. L. Karras reports that, "It was demonstrated quite clearly to me that in the deepest wilderness one could expect, at any time, a visit from the devil."

Touring in a commercial group, in my opinion, fails to teach the participant, the paying client, any of these things, and therefore it fails to change him or her. It fails because the tour leader takes complete responsibility for planning and organizing the trip, for safety and harmony in personal relations, and for seeing the damn thing through. The client takes responsibility for nothing except a rudimentary competence in the outdoors, and reaps commensurate rewards.

To draw an analogy, the touring client is in the position of being second on a rope of climbers. So long as one never leads on the rock, he is using someone else's techniques as a crutch. Always being second has a value; but any climber -- and especially any second who has done a stint of leading -- will tell you just how that value stands in comparison with the value of leading.

In short, the harm suffered by the client is the twofold harm of lost opportunities and delusion: delusion because he is under the mistaken impression that he has "done" the South Nahanni or "climbed" the Matterhorn; lost opportunities, because he can never return to challenge that river or mountain in a state of innocence, and for an indefinite postponement he will come no closer to resembling those admirable heroes of the wilderness described by Canadian writers who had experienced wilderness themselves.

Harm to the wilderness itself, and to other seekers of wilderness

By now it should be clear that as Canadians use the term "wilderness," it refers not so much to an objective reality as to a frame of mind. What is wilderness to one person may be mere landscape, or home, to another. Without someone who can recognize wilderness when he sees it, it does not exist.

One thing about wilderness as a Canadian frame of mind is that all it takes to spoil it is the presence of a very few other people. Such may not be so for the Japanese or Europeans, but for most Canadians it is. Unfortunately, tour operators bring people to remote places in ever-greater numbers.

American national park administrators have studied how many other parties a canoeist will tolerate meeting in a day before the quality of his experience suffers. In the United States it is about three. In Canada, to go by my own experience, it is much lower: zero, in fact. The people I canoed with down the Snowdrift River in 1984 or camped with on the shores of Eclipse Channel in 1985, wanted to encounter not even the memory of other travellers.

Is it elitism to say that only those who have the experience, self-reliance, and courage should be given the keys to the wilderness kingdom? Cries of "elitism" seem to be nothing more than name-calling by those who, aiming to

