

invade the wilderness with roads, engines, guns, or the determination to have a party, can find no other charge to hurl at those who enjoy solitude and natural beauty for their own sake. For travelling in the wilderness, all one needs is personal qualities, which anyone can acquire by taking the time and making the effort. (Two young New Englanders of my acquaintance regularly make expeditions to northern Labrador on an income barely above the poverty line.) The qualifications for joining a tour group, on the other hand, are nothing more than a high income, or at least money. If anything, the charge of elitism should round home to those who make it.

Some friends of mine recently conducted a ski-mountaineering expedition across the glaciated highlands of Bylot Island, in the Canadian Arctic. For five weeks they pulled heavy loads across a dream landscape of indescribable purity, serenity, and isolation. Their exaltation was like that of an artist creating a masterpiece. Would they have felt the same way if their route had been criss-crossed with the trails of tour groups? Not very likely!

Would they have gone at all if commercial outfits were bringing in people to the finest parts or the whole of that austere island? No; they would have sought out real wilderness elsewhere.

But when the tour operators have carved up the surface of the earth into coterminous fiefdoms of their own, where else will there be to go?

Harm to native people

Thanks to Justice Tom Berger, Canadians now appreciate that what is a northern wilderness to people living in Toronto or Calgary is a homeland to the Dene or Inuit people who live there. Still to be understood is the fact that when tour operators pipe clients into the north, they are treading on native toes in as colonialist a fashion as ever did the arctic oil and gas pipeline consortia.

Most northern native communities are upset about an influx of strangers into their traditional lands. Native people are unused to numbers of wealthy aliens, they are bitter about having to compete with them for scarce supplies at the stores, they resent the way they disturb the game. For many of them, southern tourists disturb the sacred relationship between Dene and Denendeh or Inuit and Nunavut -- man and land, or man, land, wildlife, and spirit world.

For the younger natives, tour-grouping is not intrinsically a bad thing. What is wrong with tour companies from their point of view is that they are owned and staffed by outsiders. For every group to canoe down the Thelon under the auspices of "Great Adventures" or "Mind-Boggling Expeditions," there is another which might have, in a different regulatory environment, gone down with a native guide, learning a little about the culture and history of the First Nations whose lands the river flows through.

What do the clients of tour parties descending the Coppermine learn about Inuit political needs or the Dene world view? How much reason do such vacationers have to feel they are uninvited guests of the original owners of Canada? Why should the tour-client regard native people who are hunters, trappers, or fishermen as anything but a threat to the pristine wilderness -- the pristine wilderness those same Inuit and Indians or their forefathers have lived in and nurtured since time out of mind?

A few suggestions

Nobody would suggest that all guided touring in the wilderness of Canada should come to an end. The positive

features of this institution are far too many for that. So what is the point of making strictures? What does the critic propose?

First, in my view, special-interest organizations such as the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society should endeavour to persuade each federal, provincial, or territorial jurisdiction in Canada that commercial group-touring kills wilderness. (Such persuasion will not come easily, because most provincial politicians and land managers have no idea of what wilderness as a concept or as an experience means, much less why it should matter if it were to die.) Following from recognition of the effect touring has on wilderness, some portions of remaining wilderness in each jurisdiction should be set aside for those who wish to experience a canoe or hiking trip in the mind-changing, ensorcelled north without help in doing it and without constantly running into the paying customers of back-country escort services.

Secondly, group-tour operations should be subject to restraints in each catchment territory they make use of. As in the American national parks, their exploitation of a public resource for private gain is legitimately subject to planning, control, and rationing. There ought to be limits, decided on through public discussion, on how many paying customers can be brought to a river or valley. In the case of some famous rivers, a portion of the open-water season should be reserved for the independent traveller.

Thirdly, like other businesses in the north, tour-group operators should be pressed, or obliged, to hire and train native people and to form joint enterprises with them. Native people have a legal and moral claim to the natural landscapes which are the drawing-cards for tour businesses in the north, they are virtually the only permanent inhabitants of those landscapes, and they feel a spiritual responsibility for these tracts of what southerners perceive as "wilderness." Reasonably, then, they may assert a right to participate in and benefit from any commercial guiding done on their traditional lands.

Although few Canadians realize it or care, we are living in the last days of wilderness in its older sense of lands beyond the frontier of settlement and economic activity. Within five or ten years, if present trends continue, nowhere in Canada will one be sure of being alone and of seeing wildlife unaccustomed to people. Even where the miners and drillers and road engineers have not yet arrived there will be tour operations, the hookers and their johns, in the final retreats of silence and that which owes nothing to mankind -- unless those who love wilderness for its own sake begin lobbying now, and lobbying hard.

The wilderness which my tea-drinking friends and I were in as recently as this past summer was a fool's paradise. About 100 kilometres away the tour operators had already been experimenting with landing wheeled Twin Otters on the tundra. When they returned to the city, members of our own group were pumped for information that could be converted into plane-loads of customers and at least a few dollars.

Next year the tundra and mountains and sea will still be in that distant spot. I am not at all sure about the wilderness.

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