

what is the future of the thelon game sanctuary?

David F. Pelly

"... the federal and territorial governments will review resource utilization in the Thelon Game Sanctuary with the object of ensuring the widest range of activities compatible with the original goal of musk-ox protection."

Northern Mineral Policy (Dec. 1986)

With these words, the federal government rang the warning bell for the end of the Thelon Game Sanctuary. Although the paper cited above was published over a year ago, it only really "hit the streets" for consumption by the public in the fall of 1987. What it means is simply this: the governments are jointly considering opening the Sanctuary to mining exploration and (implicitly) development.

The Thelon Game Sanctuary is sixty years old. It was established by Order-in-Council on 15 June 1927, the only one of its kind in Canada -- no one, not even Dene or Inuit, was permitted to hunt inside the boundaries. Since then the size and boundaries have been changed slightly, so that it now encompasses 55,439 square kilometres, stretching from the Back River south to Dubawnt Lake. The original purpose -- some say it grew out of a proposal submitted by J.B. Tyrrell -- was to protect the mainland musk-oxen which had been hunted almost to extinction. Numbers of that animal have indeed increased, but how stable the population is, is unknown. The last survey of musk-oxen in the Sanctuary was several years ago (the mid-60s come to mind, though I cannot be certain).

Today the Thelon Game Sanctuary is still a haven for musk-oxen. But more than that, the Sanctuary is a breeding ground for tundra swans, peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, arctic loons, and many more winged species. Great flocks of Canada geese use the river during their moult period when they cannot fly. Barren ground grizzly, arctic fox, wolves, and many more species make their homes in the area. Every spring and late summer the 300,000-strong Beverly herd of Barren Ground caribou migrates through the Sanctuary. In some years, as in 1987, their calving ground includes part of the Sanctuary near Pelly Lake on the Back River.

At present, all sub-surface and surface rights have been removed by the Order-in-Council. One outcome of the joint government review now underway, to consider the proposals of the Northern Mineral Policy, could be the removal of that Order-in-Council. If that happened, the Thelon Game Sanctuary would be open to exploration and development.

The Policy states clearly that "the federal government is committed to maximizing the land area available for mineral exploration and development while ensuring that unique and representative natural features of the land, cultural and wildlife resources are protected." One wonders if these are compatible aims.

For canoeists the Thelon is more than a game sanctuary. Encounters with wildlife are undeniably an important part of the Barrenland canoeist's experience on the river. But



equally important is the total absence of encounters with technological interlopers.

I am reminded of an occasion on the Thelon in 1985 when, just days after leaving the Sanctuary, I was carrying a canoe across the tundra and suddenly heard a helicopter overhead. The ***! ***! pilot landed his machine right beside me, hopped out, and said: "We don't see many folks out here, so just thought we'd come down and say hello." We felt like telling we'd seen no one out here and thought that was just fine, thanks very much. We did find out we'd somehow lost a day in our count whilst in the Sanctuary removed from the rest of the world, and realized we didn't really care. Donna commented to me afterward how fortunate we had been throughout most of the trip not to have been bothered by such encounters. They are, or were, impossible within the Sanctuary, of course. That pilot was from a mining exploration camp just west of Baker Lake.

But if the Thelon Game Sanctuary is opened to mining exploration, as proposed, we may all enjoy the pleasure and convenience -- as we paddle down this wilderness river -- of having a helicopter pilot drop in to let us know what day it is... when we didn't really care.

It sets you to wondering, does it not, just how old Mr. Musk-ox is going to feel when our friendly pilot comes calling at his favorite willow thicket.

WCA-member David Pelly is a freelance writer whose articles on the North appear regularly in many Canadian magazines, including Canadian Geographic, The Beaver, Nature Canada, etc. For several years he wrote a regular column in Nastawgan entitled "Arctic Journal."



Photographs by Donna Barnett.

ESCAPE

Great canoe so sure of track
You take me to the lands I love and you bring me back
Through rolling waves and fast water flowing
You safely guide me through them always knowing
To eddies calm through haystacks curling
Whitewater currents with wavetips curling
Take me to where only the strong ones dare
To the lands of the wolf and the polar bear
Of forests deep with tall trees growing
Ancient myths of legends knowing
Lands of the Indian, a race wise and strong
A place where I was meant to belong
Oh great canoe so sure of track
You take me to the lands I love and you guide me back

Michel Bouwhuis