

HALLOWEEN IN THE DEAD ZONE

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Imagine paddling across three drainage systems and two geological provinces. Imagine 70-metre lookouts, steep rock walls, sand dunes, and marshes. Then squeeze your trip into less than 16 kilometres and keep it within municipal boundaries. Sounds good? Now imagine a chemical desert, and run your route through the worst of it. Trick or treat!

I spent the last weekend of October kayaking through the Dead Zone south of Coniston, Ontario. I wanted to see the effects of 10 million tons of sulfur dioxide. In addition to effluent from several other smelting operations in the region, smelting operations in Coniston emitted over 200,000 tons of sulfur dioxide per year between 1913 and 1972. The resultant acid rain, coupled with heavy metal particulate fallout, killed much of the surrounding area.

My late afternoon put-in was below the Coniston Generating Station, at the confluence of Coniston Creek and the Wanapitei River. The station is one of Ontario's oldest. It was built in 1905 by the Wanapitei Power Company as one of three stations on the Wanapitei River. The Hydro-Electric Power Commission (later Ontario Hydro) purchased the Wanapitei Power Company in 1930, and is still operating the stations. The Coniston dam was replaced in 1938, but the stone powerhouse looks the same now as it did eighty years ago.

Before setting off, I climbed a 60-metre hill west-southwest of the put-in. From its peak I looked west over the Coniston heap roasting beds, remnants of Mond Nickel Company operations. In the early part of the century, alchemists proffered burnt offerings to the gods. In return, they magically received ore which they could smelt. The process involved the sorcery of fire and brimstone. The alchemists laid down 40 rows of cordwood, dead pine, and tinder, each row 40 metres long by 11 metres wide by 30 to 45 cm deep. Then they laid almost 2000 tons of coarse ore onto each row, and buried each pile with 1000 tons of fine ore. Next, they

lit the tinder. The wood burned for about 60 hours, but the brimstone continued to burn slowly for 3 to 4 months while the gods reduced the smoking pyres. Shades of transmutation? No, but the burning brimstone was rather noxious. It killed most plant and aquatic life downwind. Shades of Hades.

The first leg of my trip was down the Wanapitei to the outflow of Alice Lake. For the first kilometre, 60-metre walls of magmatic gneiss rose above me. The rock was 0.9 to 2.5 billion years old, and had been turned black in the last 80.

One kilometre south of the put-in, a CN bridge crosses a narrowing in the channel. There were noisy, very short class I rapids under the bridge running directly into the culvert and weir of the Coniston smelter's pumphouse. The pumphouse was built by INCO in 1958 and closed in 1974, but the ruins still make a nasty, but easily avoidable, obstacle. Keep to the left of this legacy, especially in high water.

After the pumphouse, the channel widens and drops sediments onto its banks and shoals. One kilometre downstream of the pumphouse I passed under two major Ontario Hydro transmission lines. The river enters a flood plain and begins to meander. The soil is extremely sandy, but scrubby maple, aspen, and oak are holding their own.

Halfway through the second 180 degree bend, I paddled up a small channel on river right to an abandoned bridge foundation. The bridge is part of an old tote road from Coniston to Dill Siding. There was almost no trace of the road. If the bridge foundation had not remained, I would have mistaken the small dike for an old beaver dam.

The stream up to Alice Lake was too low to navigate and was surrounded by marsh, so I portaged north through small sand dunes to a small unnamed lake that was just deep enough to float my boat. I followed beaver canals west to a

