

DEVELOPING THE LANGUAGE FOR CANOE ROUTE PROTECTION

Environmentalism: Depending on who you are, the word, concepts, and practices could mean anything from composting kitchen waste in your back yard, to hurling Molotov cocktails at world trade meetings. I think the media and politicians have abused the word so much, that now it is essentially meaningless.

Wilderness may be turning into one of those words too. The word is used these days to refer to anything from tiny woodlots in the heart of urban metropolises, to vast un-roaded landscapes such as the arctic tundra (Barrenlands). It certainly is now used as a major marketing term in the tourism industry and various parks programs, to sell a wide variety of services and experiences, many of which have nothing to do with true “wilderness,” at least in the way I think of the term. I like the term and I think we can pack a wallop of meaning into it, but we need to define it better than we do.

Many of us are concerned with what we perceive as the ever-shrinking “wilderness” on the planet, especially with respect to wilderness canoe routes here in Canada. In the summer 2001 issue of Nastawgan, an essay was published where I presented what I see as a crisis in the amount of loss and accelerating rate of loss of wilderness canoe routes in Canada. In the present essay I am going to focus on our own paddling community and propose some ideas for objective and consistent ways to define and discuss just exactly what we want for canoe route protection, so that we can get our messages consistent, and so that the politicians and bureaucrats will “get it.” Without a common set of objective terminology, I don’t see that is it possible to develop that critical wilderness canoe route policy outside of the few parks we have, which grow ever more crowded.

Right from the outset, it is important to lose most of the emotional and subjective terminology and baggage that goes with the word “wilderness.” Nothing makes the eyes of a politician or land use planning bureaucrat glaze over faster than long emotional letters or speeches about how beautiful everything is, and can you just leave it alone as Mother Nature intended, etc. Don’t get me wrong, passion is important. However, in any land use issue, reaching solutions to conflict gets down to answering the questions of:

- 1) How does the position being presented relate to existing or proposed government policy?
- 2) How can I draw it on a map, and what are the actual values being protected? (And what criteria did you use to define those ‘values’?)

This is the hard, cold reality. If you don’t have any objective words for government policy writers about what values are being protected, using what criteria, and you don’t have lines on a map, then no matter how elegant the

argument is, it will not likely go very far, because it is not addressing the way decisions are made in this country. One other thing: Don't rely on park creation. Wilderness has this annoying habit of being full of valuable minerals and vast forests. The people of Canada and people running the New World economy (most of whom are not like us wilderness paddlers), will not tolerate the locking up of these resources. However, you may also want to do an inventory of what your gear is made of, how you travel to and from the put-in, take-out, and what this essay is printed on, to assess how massive park creation may affect your lifestyle too.

The lucky thing for us wilderness paddlers is that we don't necessarily have to re-invent most of the wheel. We can borrow heavily from two different types of models, which already exist.

The first type of models are the so-called "remote" tourism, or "resource-based" tourism policies that already exist in most provinces and territories. For example, in northern Ontario, where I live, fishing lodge owners of both fly-in and drive-to lodges and outpost camps have been amazingly effective in getting what they want on Crown Land. There are hundreds of lodges and outpost camps, many of which have exclusive use of entire lakes, and to which a permanent road will never be built, so that remoteness is maintained. The road-based access question is at the heart of the issue.

The policy document In Ontario, which is used in the land use planning process, defines access and the type of lodge and waterway, as: "remote," "semi-remote," or "road-based access / drive-to." These lodge owners define the very nature of their businesses with these commonly understood terminologies, and the communication is effective. The remote or semi-remote businesses live or die based on the client's perception of remoteness, or "wilderness." The exclusive use of one outpost camp to one-water body also ensures outstanding fishing, which is one of the business criteria necessary to success. Fisheries management, logging roads planning and management, and even mining interests also feed into the process, and what emerges is an objective system of communication and planning for a remote or semi-remote tourism experience for a specific type of clientele. We paddlers should take a lesson from this model.

The second type of model we can borrow from in our communications efforts is the way government parks planning systems define, quantify, or qualitatively describe user experiences. From these desired outcomes they develop experiential management objectives and eventually policy for parcels of land, which range in size from tiny parkettes to landscapes a million or more hectares in size.

Parks planners define access types (e.g. "road-based," "fly-in," "hike-in," "paddle-in," etc.). Parks are also zoned internally for various levels and types of development, human traffic, and even the class of experiences desired, though it may all look the same to the untrained eye. In Algonquin Park for example, you can paddle from a wilderness zone to a natural environment zone and not see any difference in the forest or the water appearance. However, there may very

well be significant differences in “encounter rates,” or “motorized” traffic, drinking water, trail maintenance, fish and wildlife management, and forest management. Park planners will define pieces of geography where “back-country” experiences are the objective, versus “front-country” experiences with amenities or services, and higher human and motorized traffic levels.

There is one other aspect to developing a lexicon and subsequent land use policies, of which there are no models to borrow from, and which we need to start using objective language for. The language comes from the ecological science and social science of **roads**. Roads and access management is at the heart of all land use planning, for wilderness canoeists and for everyone else who uses the land. Ecologists are using terms like “road density,” “roaded,” “unroaded,” “roadless,” and “functionally roadless,” to predict large-scale ecological effects on the land, water, and wildlife. For example, you can predict with high confidence the presence, absence, or health of populations of certain area-sensitive species by a simple measure of road density. Some species disappear as road densities reach a threshold level.

“Functionally roadless” is one of the most important concepts. What it means is that a road has been built, usually for some resource extraction activity, but that there is no public access; or, after the resource has been harvested (e.g. mature timber), the road is closed and motorized access is prohibited or made impassable through bridge removal, grading, or other decommissioning methods. In the realm of social science and land use planning, the presence or absence of roads, and the type of roads, has a huge effect on the way the land is used, and how people’s expectations form and evolve for land and waters. The phrase “if you build it, they will come” is an understatement. In fact, roads breed roads. Wherever a road is built, it sets up a chain of events, changing the entire social and economic dynamic of an area. Eventually the change is so intense that the road is extended, or it becomes a major artery which spawns sub-arteries, etc. Especially in vast unroaded remote areas like the Arctic Barrenlands, as soon as those fly-in mines get a permanent all weather road to them, then mining activity will explode across the mainland Arctic. Mines that were not economically viable will overnight become viable, because their largest costs—transportation and power—will have been massively reduced. The damming and diversion of rivers for hydro will also explode in the area, because road-based transportation will vastly reduce construction, maintenance, and transmission line costs. The roads trigger massive feedback loops of one industry sustaining another. Human expectations for land use change overnight, and change forever.

I thought that the easiest way to approach this communications effort is to define and differentiate two distinct canoe route values, with their own sets of criteria. Think of this perhaps as the first and most critical branch in a descriptive key: back-country / wilderness, and front-country.

1. **BACK-COUNTRY / WILDERNESS CANOE ROUTES:**

- _ Roadless or functionally roadless, and remote.
- _ Very low human encounter rate.
- _ Routes provide many days of travel.

- No or minimal motorized traffic.
- Clean drinking water and campsites.
- Healthy, self-sustaining fish and wildlife populations of all native species.
- Mining and forest management on the landscape are compatible, when done soundly with the highest of standards and while sustaining the above criteria.

2. **FRONT-COUNTRY CANOE ROUTES:**

- Often road accessible—no controls.
- Moderate to high encounter rates—no solitude.
- Routes provide few days of travel.
- Motorized traffic is common.
- May be “multiple use” or used by several tourism lodges / outpost camps.
- Natural aesthetics and natural ecosystem function may not be the primary land and water management focus.
- Drinking water often requires treatment; campsites quality (cleanliness, degradation) is variable.
- Area-sensitive species may no longer occur, or be a vestige of the natural state (e.g. Barrenground caribou herds, salmon migrations).

The above is a very simple preliminary list, and no doubt can be expanded with sub-categories. It is important to recognize that the front-country routes are also a “value.” The criteria for front-country may sound negative from the back-country / wilderness perspective, but look again: The terminology is objective. Many people who canoe, but who are not die-hard back-country types, want a weekend front-country experience, not far from a road. Wilderness canoeists have been accused of being a selfish, elitist crowd that wants exclusive use. I don’t believe this characterization for one minute, but it is a common perception with many resource planners. Therefore, we wilderness back-country types need to be careful to acknowledge the values of other users, and perhaps form some alliances, while still working towards protecting more routes as true back-country / wilderness. I believe it is possible and politically feasible to greatly expand the network of protected wilderness canoe routes in this country on Crown land, outside of the parks system. Canada has an obligation to do this, not only to its own future generations, but also to the people of the world who likewise value wilderness canoeing in a northern land. Canada alone has the vast network of clear, clean interconnected lakes and waterways on spectacular Shield and Arctic landscapes. The wilderness canoeists of the world are depending on us. We need to communicate more effectively and use the language of the land use planning game, and make our voices heard.

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