

## The Nahanni Trilogy

The Nahanni has long been an icon of the Canadian wilderness. Despite being a household name, for most, the Nahanni is known by reputation alone as few have explored its beauty. The Nahanni river, which stretches 600 km from its source in the heart of the Mackenzie mountains contains stunning canyons, abundant wildlife and the impressive Virginia Falls which plunge a distance twice that of Niagara falls. While the river is often viewed as the focal point in the area, its watershed is becoming increasingly recognized as a unique and fragile area which should undoubtedly be incorporated into the protection of the park. The decision for expansion is of utmost importance due to environmental concerns, corporate interests and the threatened livelihood of numerous individuals. The landscape of the North West Territories is strewn with mines with additional claims continuously being staked. The oil and gas rich lands to the south east of the park operate numerous wells and pipelines while several mines on the outskirts of the park run the threat of additional roads being pushed further back into the watershed. Left unchecked we are liable to loose one of the last intact ecosystem in Canada forever.

It was these complex issues that led Dave Hibbard, outfitter and guide and myself, Heather Dorsey, to embark on a whitewater expedition this past 2005 season, exploring three rivers: The Little Nahanni, The Flat River and Prairie Creek, all of which flow into the treasured and revered Nahanni River. Our mission was this: fourteen days to paddle three whitewater rivers, explore two mine sites and interview big game hunting operations, locals and Parks Canada representatives. Needless to say we were on a tight timeline. All plans and arrangements were made from Nahanni Wilderness Adventure's base in Canmore Alberta. Filled with anticipation we set out in the company's Dakota truck laden with a whitewater canoe, two kayaks and barrels of food and gear. The adventure which we dubbed The Nahanni Trilogy had begun.

Our first destination was to NWA's northern base in Fort Simpson NWT, a drive which took two and a half days and consisted of numerous last minute details and phone calls. Once in Fort Simpson we grabbed additional gear and arranged the last of our flight plans before heading to Blackstone Landing. Here we picked up our driver, Mark Schmidt, who would drive us over 1000 Km to our put in at Tungsten mine, situated at the headwaters of the Flat and Little Nahanni Rivers, and then return the truck back to Blackstone Landing. Mark, a local to Fort Simpson, now working and living in Fort Liard, was a welcome addition to the road trip. Although quiet at first, his humorous and vibrant tales of life in the north made the drive far more bearable as the three of us were packed into the cab for hours on end.

A much needed break came when we stopped for a quick paddle on the Trout River. It felt great to stretch to be out of the truck and in a boat! Following our paddle came the most rewarding night spent at the Liard Hot Springs. The morning however provided the daunting task of packing our gear into our small creek boats. The feat seemed impossible but after much rearrangement, grunting and the removal of foam, we managed to make everything fit...just.

The drive into Tungsten was truly breathtaking. After a drive through the sub-alpine of the Yukon we crossed into a notch in the mountains, descending into the NWT hugging the mountain on one side as a cliff dropped far below on the other. We headed

straight to the mine hoping to ask a few questions and take a look around before we hit the river the following morning.

The Tungsten mine located within the Nahanni watershed 85 km upstream from the Nahanni River began operation in 1962. At this time it was a bustling mining community of almost 800 people. The mine first closed in 1986 transforming the once productive community into a ghost town. Today houses and apartments stand unkept, several shopping carts line the outside of what was once the grocery store and an outdoor swimming pool complete with lane ropes and diving board lays deserted. The mine reopened in 2002 under the management of North American Tungsten Corporation LTD (NATCL) without an environmental assessment or even an inspection. A few weeks after opening 23,000 liters of diesel were spilt, no charges were laid and inspection did not occur until several weeks after the incident. A mere year later NATCL announced bankruptcy and immediately shut down the mine leaving two hundred men without work. Two years later when we arrived the mine was preparing to reopen, with an estimated four years of ore left to mine.

Upon our arrival we met the mine manager, Dennis Bergen, who was somewhat taken aback by our presence. He presented several convincing arguments for the mine's reopening from a mining perspective. Tungsten mine not only provided jobs for several hundred men but also provided economic wealth for Canada as it is one of only a few places in the world where Tungsten is found. It is an essential commodity used in many forms of production from steel manufacturing to wood working and is used daily in light bulbs, televisions, radios and microwaves, items which our society has become dependant upon.

Despite our heavy dependence on Tungsten very little research has been done regarding its impact on an individual's health. However, the effect that the mining process has on the environment is quite obvious as we were to discover as we paddled the Flat River.

Our first order of business was to stash our canoe at Divide Lake where we would return in a week to paddle the Flat River. Our put-in for the Little Nahanni was Flat Lake situated just north of Divide Lake. After dropping our gear at an old hunting cabin where we would spend the night, we discovered we had stashed our canoe in the wrong location and returned to find it in use. A native family from Watson Lake had shot a moose and was busy ferrying the meat across the lake to their truck. We quickly jumped in to help and were rewarded with two full steaks.

Our introduction to the Little Nahanni was not the pristine one I had envisioned. We discovered Flat Lake to be littered with fuel drums, both floating in the water and on the shore. Once on the river however the true beauty of the remote whitewater of the NWT shone. Complete with rock gardens, canyons, continuous whitewater and an unexpected encounter with another paddler. The river is seldom paddled and Steve White, hailing from the UK, was just as surprised to run into us. Ironically, Steve was meeting friends from the flight which would bring us back to Tungsten and so we finished the river together, paddling by day, fishing and sharing stories by night.

Our flight returning to Tungsten provided exquisite views of the Cirque of the Unclimbables and surrounding glaciers and peaks. Upon reaching Divide Lake we ditched our kayaks with our twin otter pilot Jacques Harvey who would return them to Fort Simpson and quickly organized our gear for the Flat River. After battling overgrown

thrush and beaver dams for several hours we arrived back at the mine and began to see the environmental threat first hand. An immense tailings pond downstream from the mine containing toxic heavy materials and tungsten run the risk of poisoning large sections of the Flat and Nahanni if a breach were to occur. A waste rock dump also contributes to the threat of contamination as it contains rock which is acid generated. We found contamination from the mine as far as 15km downstream, which may be attributed to the old mining practices Dennis described of pushing mineral waste directly into the river; practices which are fortunately no longer in effect.

So what is the fate of the mine? With the ore reserves estimated to last for only four years who will be held accountable for the cleanup? As the mine has changed hands several times over the years it is unclear who will be held responsible. It is estimated that the costs of reclamation are \$49.3 million dollars, and currently there is a mere \$900,000 or less in place to fund this process

The paddle down the Flat was a mixture of big whitewater; boulder chokes which we were unable to paddle through, log jams and slow meandering sections. We pulled in at Seaplane Lake above the Cascade of the 13 Steps, where most begin their journey down the Flat River.

We had now been paddling for 10 days and were starting to slow down. We caught a flight back to Fort Simpson, arriving late at night, catching a few hours of sleep before packing our gear back into our kayaks and catching a flight with Wolverine Air to our last destination, Prairie Creek. The pristine Ram Plateau flashed below us as we flew west. As we approached the mine site we were provided with a much different view as scars from roads snaked across the mountain sides. As the plane steeply banked and descended into the final approach to the mine I glimpsed a big yellow school bus trundling along the road from the mine to the airstrip and knew this was going to be no ordinary mine tour. As the kayaks were unloaded the bus approached and out hopped the mine's only inhabitants: Dave Hart, mine manager, Leon Conasenta, mechanic and jack of all trades, and the two cooks. Our original plan had been to begin paddling immediately as we were short on time but when we were offered food, hot showers, a bed and tour of the mine our plans quickly changed.

Being at the mine was like stepping into a time warp. Much of the machinery was old and outdated. First exploration began in 1928 with development occurring in 1980. The mine has changed hands several times over the decades and is now under the ownership of Canadian Zinc Corporation who has found deposits of zinc, lead, copper and silver. The mine is a mere 15km from the Nahanni Park Reserve. The mine has never gone into operation as there is no way for the ore to be transported; the mine is only accessible by air. A winter road was built between the Liard Highway and the mine in 1980 under the ownership of Cadillac Exploration Ltd. and financed by the infamous Hunt Brothers. However, 1983 brought a collapse in silver prices and ultimately the bankruptcy of Cadillac Exploration Ltd. and the road was never used. Today the road cannot be used as it has been washed out in several areas and in need of serious repair. In 2005 the NWT Supreme Court issued that an environmental assessment would not be required to re-open the winter road despite the unanimous decision passed by Deh Cho First Nations leadership opposing the re-opening of the road stating "the Prairie Creek winter road would have significant environmental impacts in the Nahanni Watershed and greater Nahanni ecosystem."

The road would cause significant environmental impacts as it winds through the karst lands of the Ram Plateau which are among the most unique in the world. The karst lands are an extremely fragile landscape that develops from water sinking underground through soluble rock like limestone or gypsum and forms sink holes and caves. Parks Canada has identified it as an area they would like to see protected in the expansion process.

Dave Hart points out that there is another side to the coin. The cost to cleanup the mine would be astronomical to the tax payer in addition to the fact that the mine would need to be bought out. Most importantly he notes a road would be required to transport all of the equipment, a road being the very reason why the mine would be shut down.

Prairie Creek was by far the highlight of the Trilogy. It has continuous steep creeking, tight whitewater moves, multiple canyons and sensational scenery. It was not until we reached the Nahanni that it sunk in that we had actually pulled it off, we had successfully paddled 3 rivers in 14 days and explored the mine sites at their headwaters. Our final stop was Nahanni Butte where we would catch our last flight to Fort Simpson and drop in on a big game hunting operation run out of the town.

Nahanni Butte Outfitters is operated by the Lancaster Fontana Hunting Company. The company is at risk as it currently operates within the watershed area which is within expansion plans. Jim Lancaster pointed out that they are one of the only renewable resource companies in the area. Their company supports 3 families and provides the community with additional tourism.

So why must Nahanni National Park be expanded to include the watershed? It is a critical time and the opportunity exists as Native groups are in support and the federal government has committed to expansion over the next 5 years. Wildlife studies show that the current park does not protect the territory inhabited by bears, caribou and sheep which occurs largely in the watershed. The fragile karstlands have been discovered to be among the most unique in the world and yet they are threatened by construction. Only 14% of the South Nahanni Watershed is currently protected while the remaining is threatened by current and future mining activity as mineral staking continues. However there are many issues that need to be ironed out before final decisions can be made. Mining activities are already in place and the costs for buy out and reclamation are astronomical. The livelihood of big game hunting operations which provide income for multiple families and communities is in question and many locals fear that they will reap no benefits from the expansion.

The Nahanni Trilogy was successful in shedding light on these issues and obtaining first hand accounts of mining activities. I was shocked to discover that many individuals opposed to the mining in the watershed had never seen the mines or been in contact with representatives. Although the expansion of the park is a vital decision one must remember that there are many factors on both sides of the argument. After all, we are all guilty of using tungsten, silver, zinc and copper on a daily basis. The Nahanni on the other hand is one of Canada's last remaining wilderness areas that is not crisscrossed with roads and dotted with resource development sites. The elders of the local aboriginal groups have called for the Nahanni watershed to be preserved for all time. Expanding the Nahanni National Park would accomplish this. Is it not time we listened?

The Nahanni Trilogy was written by Nahanni Guide, Heather Dorsey from Canmore Alberta.

2007 Update:

Since the trip Heather has been working towards completing her degree in nursing at Mount Royal College in Calgary. David continues to operate Nahanni Wilderness Adventures from his home office in Canmore. In 2006 he returned to Tungsten to paddle the Flat River with a group of guides. The mine was busy in production mode. The workers on site were speaking optimistically about the mines' future as a large body of tungsten had been discovered earlier that year. Canadian Zinc Corporation has continued to pressure the NWT government for permission to rebuild the winter road. We understand that permission has been granted. On a more positive note Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a trip to Fort Simpson and Virginia Falls in July 2007 to announce that 28,000 square kilometers of the Nahanni watersheds 30,000 square kilometers would be set aside for park expansion. We are now at a critical point along the road to park expansion. Towards the end of October 2007 the Nahanni Working Group will be holding a number of public open house meetings in Deh Cho communities and in Ottawa to present boundary options for park expansion. Public comment and support is very important at this time. Please consult the following website for full information on how you can become involved.

[http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nt/nahanni/natcul/natcul1g\\_e.asp](http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nt/nahanni/natcul/natcul1g_e.asp)

David Hibbard continues to be the most active guide and outfitter working the Nahanni with close to 60 trips notched into his paddle. Future trips are planned for clients on the Little Nahanni and Flat River as part of his Nahanni Rendezvous campaign to draw attention to the recreational value of all the rivers and mountain ranges found in the Nahanni watershed. Please consult [www.nahanniwild.com](http://www.nahanniwild.com) for the details.

A solo 600 kilometer upriver canoe trip from Lindberg Landing to the Moose Ponds is in the planning with the same objective. Stay tuned for more information on, "Going Against the Flow".