

**Wilderness Tourism Association of the Yukon: Blaine Walden  
Presentation to the Peel Watershed Planning Workshop October 29, 2008**

The Peel River watershed is an internationally significant wilderness area, which is critically important to wilderness tourism in the territory. It has characteristics not found anywhere else in the Yukon, and quite possibly the world:

- wild and undeveloped landscapes
- intact ecosystems
- healthy wildlife populations
- high water quality
- wilderness river systems
- little sign of industrial development

There has been continuous growth of wilderness tourism in the past 20 years although there are reports of canoe groups traveling the rivers as far back as the early 1960s. There are currently between eight to 10 canoe and raft guiding companies operating in the watershed. There are also five rental companies providing equipment to self-guided travelers and the watershed has become a popular destination for Yukon backcountry enthusiasts as well.

The future tourism potential of the Peel River is huge. There are definitely indications that river trips will increase as the Peel becomes better known. There is plenty of room and potential for other tourism activities such as hiking, horseback trips, First Nations tourism, learning tourism and possible wilderness lodges. Right now there are no lodges, except for the hunting companies, which is because the government is not accepting backcountry commercial land applications. It is our understanding that the Yukon government is moving ahead with the development of a policy, but it will likely be years before applications will be accepted. We expect there will be significant interest once a policy is in place.

What we have also seen is an increase in the number of private and recreational parties, which are not guided, in the Peel watershed. Ten years ago guided trips far outnumbered self-guided but now it is estimated that there are three times as many self-guided trips compared to guided. The recreational travelers used to be mainly Yukoners, but now groups are also coming from other parts of the country and the world to travel in the Peel.

It should be noted that a study on recreation features of the North Yukon done by Yukon Parks said this region, the Peel River watershed, “stands out in the assessment of the Yukon as a whole as an area of exceptional recreational opportunity having the greatest concentration of high values of any other region of the territory.”

## Issues and Recommendations

One of the biggest concerns to our industry is the development of road access, which would alter the region forever and negatively impact wilderness tourism along with wildlife populations. Mitigations are not possible as a road would be permanent and lead to more access and road development. There is no turning back once you start putting in roads. Roads are never reclaimed as evidenced the Wind River trail which was built 50 years ago without any environmental reviews or permitting and is still considered by the government to be a legitimate access route.

The application by Cash Minerals in 2007 to upgrade the Wind River trail, build numerous fuel caches and helicopter landing sites in the river corridor, in addition to a two-kilometre-long airstrip at the confluence of the Bear and Wind River, would have had disastrous consequences for wilderness tourism on the Wind River. In short, it would have spelled the end of the Wind River as a wilderness canoeing experience.

If, at some point in time a viable mine or oil/gas project justifies road access, a route should be carefully considered and planned so that it does not impact wildlife, tourism and the other values of the region.

Exploration is highly speculative and companies come and go depending on the markets, often leaving huge environmental damage behind. The last thing the Peel needs is a road development for a short-term exploration project.

Another concern of ours is that if the land use plan does not give clear guidelines and directions to proposed development, it will not be dealt with under any other process. It is clear that YESSA only makes decisions based on the narrow scope of a project application and needs a strong land use plan to follow to help it make its decisions. YESSA does not deal with cumulative effects.

We urge the commission to establish large protected areas to preserve the wilderness of this region where no industrial development would ever be allowed to take place. Tourism and the wilderness upon which it depends need large intact ecosystems. Fragmenting off little pieces here and there will mean the end of the Peel as a true wilderness area.

Our most critical recommendations are about the river corridors and the need for them to be protected. Under the environment act, wilderness management areas can be established. This may be an effective management tool for the Peel River watershed. These corridors are not only critical for tourism and also for wildlife, fisheries and many other values.

More specifically, we think the two canyons on the Peel deserve special protection – Aberdeen Canyon and the Peel Canyon (below the Bonnet Plume). The Tetlit Gwichin have also proposed the Peel canyon be designated as a national historic site. There have already been two or three oil and gas proposals that have threatened these two areas.

This is the last chance for a wilderness area of this caliber in North America. It has economic, environmental, and cultural benefits just as it is. We need true protection for the Peel watershed. Too often in the Yukon the wilderness tourism industry does not get the same consideration as other industries. It is a stable, sustainable industry that with proper control will have little impact on the watershed and can continue to support the economy of the Yukon.