Saving the Magpie

By: James McBeath
April, 2006

The phone rang on an early August afternoon. It was a rather distraught Eric Hertz.

Before we even had a chance for hellos, I heard him says, “They’re going to dam the Magpie!”

Eric and his company, Earth River, have long been running the Magpie with their high-end clientele. Eric has also partnered with Robert Kennedy Jr. on a number of occasions to foster the awareness and legislation to protect of some of the worlds most spectacular whitewater rivers. The Magpie is their latest challenge, and one they seemed to be taking seriously. Indeed, as soon as Eric heard of the dam plans, he ran a Magpie trip with Kennedy and leaders from many Canadian eco-organizations. To the dismay of dam planners, his trip made front-page fodder across Canada.

The mysterious Magpie River was suddenly beginning to catch my attention. Why ?such a fuss?

Truth be told, Eric only runs the elite rivers of the world like the Futaleufu, Yangtse and Colca. I didn't think the Magpie was even on the radar with these… or was it? It had always been a mystery to me that Eric ran such a little-known river – one I never took the opportunity to investigate. But, the rivers Eric had picked up the gauntlet on before were all well-known whitewater gems like the Bio Bio, and Futaleufu, so I decided to trust his judgment.

"How can I help?" I asked.

"Do you think you can get some well known Kayakers onto the Magpie… say, in a month from now?" he asked. "We'll pay for the flights and food." Sooo, free food, flights – I'm in!

The Magpie River sits near Sept Illes and just North of the town of Havre St Pierre, Quebec, Canada. It runs from James Bay to the St. Lawrence where it empties out after hundreds of miles cascading whitewater. There are two main sections split by Magpie Lake, the upper section is a class IV/V+ section that is hardly run (if ever), and the lower section is a 55-mile stretch of class II to V whitewater. It's this lower section I was tasked to run with a group of paddling greats.

The area in this part of Quebec boasts of some of the most scenic driving, incredible whale watching and some of the nicest folks around. Its business culture is driven by your standard fare of fishing, logging, tourism, mining and, unfortunately damming. Where many are blaming the local towns on this rampant development, it's simply their business environment. They know of no other alternatives; revenue is not easy to find. No, the real blame goes to the current hydro policies set up between the governments and hydropower's biggest player, Hydro Quebec.

Quebec has a unique hydro-electrical market in that, due to mandatory demonopolization actions, Hydro Quebec must purchase the first 25 years of business for any hydro producer who has the startup money. Needless to say, the chase is on and, depending on which government is in power, rivers are either up for sale or taken off the market. Five years ago, for example, 32 rivers were open for bids from private dam companies, today there are none… but there are loopholes to crawl through. The Magpie, for instance, has an existing structure (one foot high dam) on the river and is therefore deemed outside of the current government's moratorium on private dams. Hydromega, a dam producer partnered with a local municipality group, has

jumped through this loophole and has dam projects slated to begin as early as January 2005. It was only when they launched a bid and publicly entered the approval process that the projects came to light.

With some funding from Liquid Skills, Earth River and Riot Kayaks, the Magpie expedition was a go. We immediately found out that Steve Fisher, Brendan Mark and Tyler Curtis were in. Pretty soon word of the trip spread and the phone was ringing every hour. World champions, national champions, local Quebec padding dignitaries and international paddling stars all climbed aboard the Liquid Skills bus in Ottawa and Montreal for the long drive to the Magpie. Our job: head to the Magpie, run it and let our voices be heard with a carefully planned press conference afterwards in Montreal.

The bus trip was an overnight, non-stop trip through the winding foothills of Quebec. We followed the St. Lawrence from Montreal up to Sept Illes. After the first 3 hours of the 14 hours drive, we started counting the dams. The highway that leads to Havre Ste Pierre had well over fifty rivers crossing its path, dumping into the St. Lawrence. Many of these rivers bore some sort of structure, be it a dam, weir or fish ladder. We were amazed that so many potentially classic runs were already dammed and blocked from passage. When we pulled out a map to look closer at this watershed, we decided then and there that this province was paddling paradise lost.

As it happened, our arrival in the Magpie region was marked by a 58-foot waterfall on the Riviere des Rochers. When the boys saw it spilling under the highway, there was a collective should of “stop!”. To my amazement, instead of running back to take a closer look at the falls, they all went directly to the trailer and started pulling out the boats. I was content with eating my share of wild blueberries while the experts hucked the roadside falls. It made me wonder if we would be able to keep them occupied on the Magpie.

Every one of us pitched in as we prepped for the flight into the river. The vehicle of choice was the Beaver floatplane. Two of these classics were waiting for us at a bog lake in Havre St. Pirerre. We shuttled all paddlers and gear up to Magpie Lake with four flights in each plane. The planes were flying from the break of dawn until a bit after noon.

The flight was eye opening in a number of ways. The bog and rolling spruce forest landscape was veined with rivers and pocketed with lakes. This confirmed our earlier suspicions of the vastness of this area’s watershed. There was, quite simply put, more water than land. Sadly, we

knew from our drive, many of these rivers, especially to the south, ended in some form of manmade structure. Another sad note was the amount of clear cutting being done. Many pockets of spruce trees were leveled by forestry. Add the famed Spruce Bud Worm damage from the 70s and 80s and there is quite a bit of forest devastation.
By the time the last group arrived we had the trip ready to go. With a final stretch, a photo session and a quiet moment, the trip began with a classic Steve Fisher question, “I wonder what all the rich people are doing right now?”

Day one on the river settled our nerves and brought the familiar sound of boats cutting water, river talk and the squeak of oars. Just around the corner from out setup beach the water started moving; we settled into a current that wouldn’t let up for days. At this point, the river was the perfect class III – IV- warm-up. None of the rapids were significant. A novice paddler could run any and all sections. As a trip developer I saw the potential for a great warm-up day where generic skills could be covered with light intermediates. Even more importantly, there was no fear factor for those a bit hesitant… just a gentle float through spruce forests. As one of two intermediate paddlers on the trip, I was happy, but I began to worry about Fisher and the boys. I hoped it would get a bit more exciting for them on day two.

After an afternoon of play and slow, gentle progress through the first few miles of rapids, we stopped at our first camp. It was a beach that provided a perfect casual camp for that perfect casual day. The camping on the Magpie is plentiful. Around most corners there are either sand or rock beaches, tons of driftwood for the perfect fire and a good bit of shelter from the elements should you need it. More surprising to us was the absence of insects. It seems that September is the time to run the Magpie! Many of us slept out in the open air.

Day two saw an increase in difficulty. Lisa Utronki, our filmmaker, was quite happy as the action started to build. With cameras rolling all through the trip, she, too, was worried that this trip wasn’t going to provide excitement. From here on down, the river often split or narrowed into multilevel drops. The good news for the intermediate paddlers was that there was usually a class IV route for them. The good news for the experts was that many of the splits conveniently provided a class V drop. The only two drops without a class IV run could be walked in 30 seconds. The entire river to this point was pool drop. The entertainment factor skyrocketed as the experts and creek boats were put to good use. While we intermediate paddlers ran the fun waves and played, the power boaters were setting up throw ropes and cameras on the other side of the river. Double drops were the order of the day in the class IV+ - V sections. The typical rapid was a single falls with a big burly hole at the bottom. There were a few wrong-way Charlies, but everyone made it out safe. Watching the experts set up and plan their run was a good part of the show. Guys like Steve Fisher, Brendan Mark, Tyler Cutis, the Hitchins boys and our Quebec lads all had a go at most of these rapids. All of them had that burn in their eyes as they scouted and big grins as they popped up at the bottom of all the drops. Most importantly

they were challenged. With the intermediate boaters happy with the big waves and the fun play and the world champs happy with the falls, I became a bit more at ease.

Camp two was on the rocks of the Magpie. Rain began falling as we slept. The next morning we awake to dripping skies and soaked gear. It was at this camp I tried trout fish. I hadn't fished for freshwater trout since my boyhood days at my uncle's place in Newfoundland. The fishing here was good- a bit too good. Ten minutes in, I had amassed a pile of eight fish. This confirmed that the river was still unspoiled. A warm breakfast later and we were in the water for another classic Magpie day.

Day three saw more of the same as day two. There were classic big drops with fun sneaks for light intermediates. We lined, we carried gear and we enjoyed the scenes the Magpie brought us. It had rapids that combined the Ottawa with the Seven Sisters of the Rouge. The wildlife- including birds, fish, deer, and moose- all seemed to be unaware that humans existed. It was this day I was at my most relaxed and began to really take it all in. I was on the trip of a lifetime!

For the rest of the trip I was focused. The focus was the result of my newfound realization and the fact that we were approaching the sections of the river where dam planners envision three major structures, the first of which were to start this January.

After a night of sleeping in still-damp bags, we awoke to one of the most amazing days of paddling I have seen. The sun was hot by 8am, the food was a perfect hash of all our leftovers, the scene was awe-inspiring and the anticipation was high as we were facing the biggest set of drops on the trip. This meant lining rafts, portaging gear and running waterfalls.

We quickly came to the first falls, Magpie Falls. The river opened wide, dug down deep into Nature's soul and sent forth one of the most magnificent shows of natural might I have ever seen. The Magpie falls are simply spectacular. Even if the deafening roar had been muted, there would still have been that silence amongst us paddlers as we sat in awe on the rocks watching the show. A permanent rainbow arched over the falls; the sheer power was jaw dropping. Most of us seal-launched into the base of the fall and sat amongst the giants as water crashed down around us in a crescendo of God-like fingers. It was hard to pull ourselves away from this scene… the scene of the third planned dam.

After the Magpie falls came one of the trip's many highlights: a runnable, 25-foot waterfall. With a hidden approach and many barely-runnable lines, the experts hit this drop from all angles... highlight reel fodder for sure! The team dubbed this falls Eternal Falls in hopes that it will remain eternal for future generations to enjoy… not to be flooded by the dam project.

The grand finale was what all the intermediates and experts alike will remember for a good while: a big meaty class V- rapid that saw intermediates and experts running together. With the natural increase in skill level and comfort over the previous three days, the intermediates were ready for a final challenge. This was by far the longest rapid on the river and was highlighted by wave after wave, lots of break and a few moves. It was an amazing ending to the trip of a lifetime. The smiles and the high-fives at the bottom of the run said it all.

So now it was back to reality. This entire last day would be wiped off the map by the planned dams. The first dam would flood the final section as well as much of Eternal Falls. Future dams at Eternal Falls and Magpie Falls would create a lake over some of the fantastic, diverse whitewater upstream. These dams- even just one- would ruin all of the great final day experiences for future Magpie trips.

As equipment was being loaded I saw listening to Lisa Utronki interview Greg Smith, our "on-loan" guide from Earth River. He said that the Magpie was the rare river that challenges him as a raft guide. It wasn't just the whitewater, he pointed out, but lining rafts, cruising around rocks and big hydraulics and setting up camps on rocky cliffs.

His words made me realize that with proper leadership, this trip can be a classic for all paddlers. Everyone will come off a Magpie trip challenged, from light intermediates to experts. Even Greg, a guide that has seen Peru, China, Chile, Ecuador and most of the major rivers in Canada and the US, is challenged by the Magpie. It's a quiet hardworking type challenge, not the big adrenalin-rush type challenge… though you can find that as well if you want.

I later asked Eric Hertz a question that I should have asked long before he called me: "With the Zambezi, Nile, Yangtze, Futaleufu and others under your belt, how does the Magpie stack up?"

"Top five, he answered immediately.

Top five. Here I was setting up trips all over the place, only to find that I have a top five run right here in Canada. The reality of the damming situation hit me like a ton of bricks. The clarity in Eric's plea made complete sense. Water all summer long (spring to winter), continuous pool drop rapids runnable for class III - IV paddlers and challenging enough for Steve Fisher and all only a 2 hour flights away from NYC, Ottawa, Boston, and Chicago?

"Holy crap!"

"Yup."

The 2004 Magpie kayak expedition ended with a press conference back in Montreal. The conference was organized by Foundations Rivieres and was attended by dignitaries from Sierra Club, Greenpeace and other organizations. I think most of us were still in shock. It was surreal to come from such a quiet, pristine environment to Montreal morning traffic, cameras, microphones, busy questions, hidden agendas and politics. We sat in our places, the lights came on and both Steve Fisher and I spoke about the experience and what we found. When it was over, it was difficult to say whether or not we got our message across. You simply had to be there; you had to have been on the river with us. You can't see the shame in damming the Magpie without actually running the river, carrying the gear over rocks, holding your hands up to the mist at Magpie falls and feeling the surge as you pop through the last big hole on day four. As I looked to those in the audience who hadn't been there and as I spoke to them individually I was at a loss to recognize whether or not they truly understood. Probably not. But it made a good story.

Well the word is out. After the initial trip by Kennedy and the press coverage that followed and after our trip and subsequent lobbying by Hertz, Kennedy and others, it was left in the hands of the legislatures. The dam producers, Hydromega and those hoping to benefit from the dam were shell shocked by the attention. Hertz with his press savvy, Kennedy and his attention-getting power and our trip of paddling dignitaries all combined to make tensions high. As due process, the BAPE commission of Canada had to do an impact study. The looked at both sides and came back with recommendations- for the government to consider. The BAPE commission obviously heard our cry. Thanks mostly to Eric and groups like Rivieres Fondation, Greenpace and the Sierra Club, they saw the potential for developing adventure tourism instead of hydropower. They recommended that only one structure be added on the existing dam. They also recommended stops taken to encourage adventure activity in the area. This, I guess must have been a bit of a blow to the planners. With the initial goals of building multiple hydro

sources farther up the river, being limited to one dam is less appealing. But, alas, this was just a recommendation.

Today is January 19th. The first phase was supposed to have started this month. It has not. Instead there is another plan to build a smaller structure on the existing dam. Talks continue. This new plan will reduce the damage significantly, but may still set a precedent that we cannot allow. The saga continues.

The best thing for this river and this area is visitors. We need to show that the region can make money from tourism. If we spend our dollars in hotels and restaurants, the local economy will depend less on the revenues from dams. Run this river, sleep on its banks, keep it safe and clean for others... let your voices be known! Long live a free Magpie.

An award winning documentary film from this trip is available at www.magpieriver.com Proceeds from this DVD will go to Fondations Rivieres, who keep the fight going for the Magpie and other rivers in Quebec.