"Viva la Magpie"

By Mark Sundeen
May, 2005

"If the dams are built, it will be like Glen Canyon. People for generations will be wishing they'd seen it before it was gone."

- Mark Sundeen, National Geographic Adventure

We're floating down a big North American river, the kind that flows for days with no signs of civilization. Each day without fail more rapids pour off the horizon, black granite lines the banks, and thick stand of fir trees crowd the canyon. But here's the strange part: Nobody from my 11 years as a white-water guide knows this river, much less has paddles a boat down it. And even though it's late summer, when the days are long and the water temperatures is mild, we have the place all to ourselves, tearing down rapids so seldom visited they've never been named.

Phoca PDF

The obscurity of the river isn't the only thing that's unusual about this rafting trip. For starters, most of our party speaks French and smokes Players. And they keep ducking behind boulders to yap into satellite phones.

We beach the rafts, and the 51-year-old environmental attorney bounds across the talus toward us. He shakes the hand and asks the names of a gaggle of reporters and conservationists- then heads for a picnic set upon a granite slab. Food is served, sat phones are unpacked, and live from the middle of nowhere radio interviews and dictated newspaper columns shoot back to the offices in Montreal.

This little-known place, and the cause of all the commotion, is the Magpie River in eastern Quebec, specifically a series of Class III, IV, V, rapids that rolls down from Lac Magpie (Magpie Lake) and empties into the St. Lawrence River. East and west of its banks is some of the most remote country in southern Canada, a road less and nearly uninhabited wilderness of dense forest. Those hearty enough to carve out a life in these parts- not many – congregate in the string of tattered villages along the St. Lawrence or in the town of Sept-îles, about 90 miles west of the mouth of the Magpie. Even though its mild summer conditions and continuous white water are characteristic of rivers in the lower 48, a raft trop on the Magpie feels remote, wild, more like an Alaska expedition than a guided float some 550 miles northeast of Montreal.

But for all of its one-of-a-kind attributes, the Magpie is, like many spectacular stretches of white water, threatened by a series of dams that would flood its rapids. In response to a governmental energy development initiative, the Montreal power company Hydromega has proposed a dam and generating facility, which as we paddle is under review by Quebec's Bureau d'Audiences Publiques sure l'Environnment. Kennedy ran a portion of the Magpie with his family three years ago with Earth River on a regular commecial trip and was so taken by it that he has returned in the hopes that his celebrity and his record of river defense (he's the president of the Waterkeeper Alliance, an international water protection group based in Tarrytown, New York) can help reverse what appears to be a done deal. And so, the thrill of seeing a pristine place is met with the dread that we could be some of the last ones to do so, at least over the portions we're traveling.

If a destination's popularity is measured by convenient flights and cute boutiques, it's clear the Magpie has yet to be discovered. To get within floatplane range, I had to link north-bound Air Canada flights to Montreal and then to a weather-beaten town on the St. Lawrence River, Sept-Îles (Rhymes with "wet eel") is Canada's second largest port, the principal interest of which is a massive aluminum smelter on a peninsula nearby. The downtown is a grid of storm proof boxes wrapped in sheet metal, many of them shuttered and closed to business. The night I arrived, I walked down the lonely main drag until I reached a fish-and-chips joint where, trotting out a few tourist phrases in French, I ordered a plate of friend goodies on Styrofoam, listened to the news on French television and watched the rain fall.

Sept-îles and the economically stagnant settlements closer to the Magpie are the kinds of places where power dam proposals are well received. According to Hydromêga president Jacky Cerceau, the Magpie dam will be a boon to the redion, producing 40 megawatts of power that will be used locally and sold on the Quebec grid. Cerceau says that the dam will provide two years of construction work as well as "more than $15 million [U.S. $12 million] in direct financial

Phoca PDF

contributions to the eight municipalities of the region." Dispersed among 6,000 or so residents over 25 years (after which, says Cerceasu, the dam would be transferred to Quebec's government), those contributions compute to about $100 (U.S. $81) per person a year. Hydromega's promises secured the support of the mayors of the local villages, and pending approval from the provincial government, construction could begin as early as this spring.

Perhaps the only folks who don't applaud the dam are the few who have actually seen the free-flowing river from a boat. Chief among them is Eric Hertz, 49, founder and co-owner of Earth River Expeditions, who has been guiding rafting trips on three continents for 33 years from his home base in New York's Hudson Valley. When our group met in the lobby of the Hotel Sept-Îles, he look harried, having just driven 15 hours in a mud-splattered pickup truck loaded with coolers of food, four guides and his 12-year-old son, Cade. He began by ordering us to pack lightly, only bringing what was on the list.

"The Magpie is the greatest multi-day white-water river east of the Mississippi," he told me. "But that doesn't say it all, because when you think about it, there are no great multi-day rivers east of the Mississippi? It's probably one of the top two or three whitewater river trips in all of North America, after the Grand Canyon. I'd even rank it higher than the Midle Fork of the Salmon."

Hertz was the first person to take a raft down the Magpie and began running commercial trips on the river in 1990. Intrepid canoeists have known about it for decades, but most are confounded the whitewater and by the expense of getting to Sept-Îles and hiring a floatplane to the put-in at Magpie Lake. The only other way in is to take a northbound train to the headwaters of the Magpie Quest (West) but this approach makes for an additional one-week descent of the 114-mile run, with its numerous Class V rapids, just to get to the standard launch. So in 1989 when Hertz chartered a small plane to take him looking for raftable white water, he believed he had, in the Magpie, discovered a world-class river. His first float confirmed this, but he liked the undiscovered nature of the river for his guests and decided not to advertise it too much. "Earth River has never made much money on the Magpie," he told me. "But I love it. It's one of my favorite rivers." For the past 14 years, he has been the Magpie's only outfitter, running just two or three weeklong trips a year. He estimates that fewer than 300 people have ever floated it.

Just a week before departure, after Kennedy confirmed his slot, the number in our raft party swelled from 25 to 38 members. So now Hertz was struggling to lighten the load in the baggage boats, one shirt at a time. As he gave instructions to us, he was on the phone hammering out logistics with drivers and pilots who didn't necessarily speak English. Kennedy was out on a book tour and would be two days late, so Hertz had to coordinate a mid-trip meeting point with the helicopter pilot. Oh, and as long as he was at it, couldn't the pilot dovetail the Kennedy drop-off with a quick gear haul that would save the team a two hour portage?

It was near dusk when our floatplane landed on Magpie Lake, where four of Hertz's guides were waiting for us at our first night's camp. In the morning, we paddles across the lake following a faint current that grew and grew until we were running through the Magpie's first chute, our raft spinning between boulders, the warm water splashing onboard.

The rapids came one after the next, without a guidebook outlining the run. The only other

Phoca PDF

boaters we saw in five days were a crew of four very hearty and somewhat beleaguered canoeists who, like us, had heard about the dam, and wanted to see the Magpie while they still could.

By day three we're under the Magpie's spell. The paddling's great. Kennedy is in the mix. Our spirits are running as high as the white water.

From our picnic spot on the granite slab, Kennedy surveys the river. "Damming this is like finding the 'Mona Lisa' in your basement and painting over it," he says to me between bits of a sandwich. "It's the unbroken wilderness of the Magpie," he says, "that makes it a superior experience to the Middle Fork of the Salmon.There are no bridges, buildings, and airstrips." Then, abruptly, he stops talking, cocks his ear toward the forest, and says, "I hear an osprey."

Though he's here on business, Kennedy can't wait to get started on the priority stuff: catching fish and instigating water fights with his son Bobby III, 20, and his daughter Kick, 16. That night, when we make camp, he breaks out a fishing rod and recruits a pair of boys from the group. They cast their spinners into an eddy and, with nearly each toss, reel in miniature brookies.

When Hydroméga proposed the dam in 2002, Hertz's first tactic was direct action. He and his son drove up to Quebec for a public hearing where Cade testified that he'd run the river six times, that is was his favorite, but that he wasn't allowed to run the Class V rapid at the bottom until he was 13. If it was flooded by a dam he'd never get the chance. Soon Hertz decided that the only way to save the river was to publicize it. He partnered with Alain Salaszius, 46, of the Quebec river advocacy group Foundation Rivières, who had recently appeared on the cover of Sèlection du Reader's Digest, the French language version of Reader's Digest , as "The Man Who Saves Rivers." The two men then brought out the big guns and recruited Kennedy.

While the Canadian press may have cared little about some dam on some distant river, Hertz knew they would pay attention to a famous, idealistic American with an iconic last name. (When Kennedy touched down is Sept-Íles , he was met by reporters from the local paper, as well as a handful of well wishers toting old photos of Kenedy's late father and uncle: Senator Robert. F. Kennedy and President John F. Kennedy.)

Hertz's argument is pretty straightforward: The river is worth more as a recreational draw for tourists than as a power generator. Hertz estimates that sometime in the future about 5,000 people a year could float the Magpie. According to the trade group Aventure Écotouisme Québec, this amount of traffic would create $3 million (U.S. 2.4 million) in annual income, which, as Saladzuis points out, is a much larger economic benefit that the promise of 40 megawatts. "If someone promoted its values," Kennedy says, "this river would produce more revenue and a lot more jobs that building a dam that would make a few people rich by impoverishing this landscape forever."

It's unclear, however, if the Magpie could accommodate the numbers envisioned by Hertz. Swarms of black flies might deter visitors in June, leaving about a ten-week season from late July through September when the bugs are mild. To reach the $3 million mark, 70 passengers would need to depart from Magpie lake each day, a spike in usage that could require as many as 15 daily floatplane runs. If the weather turned bad - you'd get a bottleneck of delayed clients

Phoca PDF

back in Sept-Íles. ?In any case, Hertz says it would be great if many of the outfitters on the Magpie were Quebecers, not only Americans and claims that his business interest is secondary. “I’d walk away from it in a minute if they told me they would turn the Magpie into a park even if Earth River wasn’t allowed to operate here,” he says, noting that Earthriver split the cost of our conservation awareness trip with a generous client who had done the river and fell in love with it the year before. “I’d still come up here on my own, just without clients. You couldn’t keep me away.”

The last morning we paddle up to the Magpie’s finale, a 25-foot waterfall just above a Class V rock garden that has a couple of really nasty holes. A few weeks after our trip Earth River sponsored a trip with a small film crew and a group of world renowned kayakers including Steve Fisher to bring an awareness about the river's plight to the kayaking community. The kayakers named this final falls, “Les Chutes d’Eau Eternelles,” or “Eternity Falls,” because it’s the Magpie’s climatic and most menacing drop, and it’s the rapid that would be lost forever beneath the dammed waters.

We line the boat around the falls and then scramble along the bank to scout. A hard rain begins to fall for the first time all week, and coupled with the fog and the foam spraying off the torrent, it feels ominous.

“One time we flipped here with a boat full of lawyers,” Hertz says. "So we jokingly refer to the rapid as Litigation Falls". Nobody responds.? To be safe, we’ll run just one craft at a time. A second guide will paddle in each boat, for more control and the other guides will wait at the bottom with rescue ropes.

Hertz’s crew is first. They climb down a slippery granite slab to the raft, which is roped in place in a swirling eddy. When everyone’s seated, Hertz reviews the route, reminds them which way to swim if they end up in the river, then gives the signal to release the rope. The paddlers take a few strokes into the mist and float irreversibly toward a tiny chute above the froth. With a quick forward command from Hertz, they dig in their blades. The raft drops over the horizon, buckles, and its gone. We hurry down the banks to watch the boat as it’s buried beneath the foaming crest of a wave, stalls, and then finally emerges, swamped. The crew lets out a celebratory whoop and paddles safely to shore. ?One by one we launch our boats, paddle to the brink, then tear down the narrow chute, skirting big, growling pour-overs on either side and exploding into the wave train below. Everyone has a safe run. Soaked to the skin, we celebrate on a flat rock at the bottom, teeth chattering but bodies shot with adrenaline, then load up for the Magpie’s final mile.

Our trip ends at the proposed dam site: a derelict hydroelectric generating station where the Magpie runs under Route 138 before its confluence with the St. Lawrence River. Hydroméga points out that its dam would affect just one mile of the river and the company’s Web site predicts that “the raising of the water level will not prevent sport enthusiasts from enjoying their sport, but rather will improve the access to the area… with the construction of an access ramp along with various paths.”?While Hertz and Kennedy admit that this first dam would leave many miles of free-flowing river, they can’t risk it.

“Once the first dam is built,” warns Kennedy, “The next one comes along and you can no

Phoca PDF

longer argue that it will destroy a pristine river. And then you've lost the fight."

In the months after our trip, the battle has simmered on. The Gazette in Montreal issued an editorial condemning the dam. The mayor of Havre-St.-Pierre, a village near the mouth of the Magpie, attacked Kennedy and Hertz and their "little gang of environmentalists" for meddling in Quebec's affairs, while Canadian conservation groups have launched a Web site (www.magpieriver.com) to organize boaters and activists. Saladzius has been hard at work crafting a new dam proposal that would use the existing structure at Route 138 and not change the river's flow. Support for this plan, though, has not taken root. In January the mayors of the eight local villages reaffirmed their endorsement of Hydroméga's dam. Ultimately, the fate of the Magpie is in the hands of the Quebec Ministry of the Environment, which at press time, was at a standstill. A decision is expected this spring.

Whether the result is preordained or not, Hertz believes the Magpie is worth the fight. "This is a river that changes people," he says. "When they see such a beautiful place and are able to enjoy it with their kids, they are going to want to fight to protect it."

If the dams are built it will be like Glen Canyon. People for generations will be wishing they'd seen it before it was gone.

Phoca PDF