

# Wilderness, Knowing, and the Tatshenshini River

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As a Yukon resident I bring particular views to any discussion about the Tatshenshini River. These include my personal perspectives, rooted in the direct experience of canoeing parts of this river. In this sense my thinking is about the river itself: the water, the canyons, the wildlife. Because of the experiences it holds and sometimes yields, I believe that the Tatshenshini River is an important place. However, an essay about this river is, inescapably, about much more than the place itself. For many, the need to preserve wild places like the Tatshenshini River is related to much larger problems concerning behaviour of individuals and societies. I agree. I will thus bring a Yukon writer's perspective to the discussion about these larger problems.

Currently the fate of "North America's wildest river," the Tatshenshini, is being weighed against the desire to develop a "world class" mine at Windy Craggy. We must decide if the region affected is a frontier to be valued for the economic prosperity which it may be able to yield, or if it is a wilderness to be valued for its intrinsic qualities. Much is at stake. The ecologically fragile landscape is threatened and the northern environment is not forgiving. Those who live here will not have the opportunity to reconsider many environmental decisions; the consequences of our actions will be irreversible. Clearly, there is an immediate need to think in an informed and intelligent way.

This paper presents a case for protecting the Tatshenshini River. There are a number of possible approaches to this task. Arguments favouring preservation have been advanced on behalf of biodiversity, ecosystem integrity, and intrinsic value. While these arguments enable us, in many important ways, to understand possible human responses to environmental issues, there is not space here to apply all of them to the Tatshenshini/Windy Craggy issue. I will, however, examine the

role that wild places, including the Tatshenshini River, play in reaching an understanding of human/environment relationships and in fostering social introspection. This argument is largely an epistemological one. In what follows, I will examine the ways we come to know ourselves and our environment and how broadening our opportunities for knowing might assist us as we struggle to weigh the merits of contesting arguments.

It is not uncommon to think of environmental issues as problems. Indeed, it is, in some senses, important that we do so. When faced with a host of environmental crises we must often act (or react) quickly to mitigate damages; we must try to resolve the immediate and pressing problems thrust in our direction. However, it would be a mistake to conceive of environmental issues as simply problems with precise or discrete solutions. Although concentrating on problem resolution can allow people to address immediate concerns, underlying difficulties are frequently overlooked or ignored. In reality, proponents of immediate solutions are often simply managing the symptoms of a much more complex and difficult issue. I will argue that any decision about the Tatshenshini River and the Windy Craggy mine will not represent the solution to a simple problem, but that it involves a much larger issue which tugs at the very foundations of epistemology—our systems of knowledge and understanding. I will argue that we must, at least, re-examine our conceptions of knowledge—how it is acquired and what is to count as knowledge. The protest on behalf of the Tatshenshini is more than a call to protect wilderness: it is also a protest on behalf of knowing.

There have always been, as the author of *The End of Nature* (1989), Bill McKibben suggests, a few rebels who maintain that Western society is trapped in a rut characterized by a particular system of beliefs. The origins of these beliefs have frequently been traced to several sources, including Judaeo-Christian traditions, capitalism, male-dominated hierarchies, and an important shift in what is counted as worthwhile knowledge (see for example: Berman 1984; Evernden 1985; White 1967; and Moncrief 1970). While these four phenomena are arguably linked and contribute to the Western world view, it is the last of these that I wish to examine further.

One useful way to examine present beliefs is to look for their underlying assumptions which are often historically rooted. While the precise antecedents of these beliefs are frequently

contentious, profound changes can be traced to the seventeenth century and the harbingers of the scientific revolution and "enlightenment." Frustrated by the speculative philosophy which dominated thinking through the Middle Ages, philosophers such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon began the process of establishing new foundations for the advancement of knowledge. For Bacon, this meant nothing less than a dramatic change in perspective which would lead from the unchecked use of words and reason to the use of hard data accumulated through the experimental testing of nature. For Descartes, mathematics was the epitome of pure reason. According to his "new" philosophy, accumulation of knowledge required a method of clear thinking which could be applied mechanically and rigorously. The combined effect of their work, the marriage of empiricism and reason, and the marriage of experience and mathematics, resulted in an entirely new approach to knowing (Berman 1984).

Inextricably tied to this shift in epistemology was a change in the kinds of questions that were asked. Whereas scholars of the Middle Ages were increasingly concerned with "why" questions, the new philosophers were increasingly concerned with "how." The former scholars had been concerned with understanding why particular phenomena and relationships existed and to what ends such understanding should be directed. The new approach to scholarship held that to know about something was to know how it functioned, how to control it, how to use it. This form of knowing increasingly required rigorous application of the new science; to know something was to reduce it to its constituent parts, quantify it, and recombine it. Less important were the old questions about why an object or phenomenon existed. Also less important were questions about why one should behave in a particular way or what one "ought" to do in a given situation. Newton, for example, limited his task to the quantification of phenomena; "I have measured it: that is enough" (in Berman 1984, 33).

As Berman observed, European philosophers of the seventeenth century hammered out a new way of perceiving reality: to know something was "to ask 'how' and never get entangled in the complicated underbrush of 'why'" (1984, 33). In this way natural phenomena were stripped of their immanent purposes. Epistemological currency was measured by its instrumental value; knowing was circumscribed by instrumental rationality.

It has been frequently observed that the dominant epistemology of the twentieth century bears the same stamp as that forged during the scientific revolution. Reason is often reduced to function. Knowing is bereft of values save those related to expediency, profit, and efficiency (Evernden 1985; Berman 1984). Conspicuous by their absence are the "why" questions—questions about purpose and questions about ends. The results are neatly summarized by Christopher Manes in his provocative book *Green Rage* (1990), in which he says "rational space," (or our ability to know, to understand, and to think clearly and critically) "is marked by 'aesthetic confusion, ethical poverty and a disturbing degree of dependence on technical expertise,' all of which diminish important aspects of our existence" (220). This is our rut. Contemporary thinking appears trapped by restricted modes of knowing. Aesthetic, ethical and, I would add, experiential knowing have been diminished and confused by the preeminence of technical knowing.

Now, as we are asked to weigh the merits of both mine development and protection of the Tatshenshini river, we are again confronted with an avalanche of scientific and technical information. Further, most of this "knowledge" is intended to demonstrate either how the Windy Craggy mine could be safely constructed or how, if built, it would not be safe. In contrast to this "how" kind of technical knowledge, this paper examines some "why" questions: why wilderness, including the Tatshenshini River, is valuable, and why this mine should not be built.

In asking why we should preserve wilderness, I am asking a question about the way we view ourselves and our society, and how accurate these views might be. I am tentatively examining the relationship between knowing, society, and the environment. In this paper I am inviting the reader to join me in challenging the precepts upon which these relationships are built. Contemporary writers such as myself are not, however, the first to raise such a challenge. Those rebels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the "Romantics," stoutly resisted the newly "enlightened" scientists. As environmental writer and thinker Neil Evernden (1985) argues, the dissonance which stirred the Romantics was the widespread and inappropriate acceptance of scientific assumptions. The problem was that those rebels still saw them as assumptions only, and therefore highly suspect.

For example, the stripping of purpose from natural processes, the pursuit of clear thinking unfettered by emotion, and the dogged quest for measurable truth led new scientists like Descartes to assume that the universe was a vast machine wound up by God to tick forever. Further, Descartes' belief, that the absence of rational soul distinguished animals from humans, led him to consider these brutes to be nothing more than mere automatons, incapable of feeling pain (Descartes 1969, see also Berman 1984). In contrast, the Romantic poet William Wordsworth rejected these mechanistic assumptions and the scientists' "meddling intellect":

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man;  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things  
—We murder to dissect.

Enough of science and of art;  
Close up these barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives. (Wordsworth 1959a, 195)

Here Wordsworth rejects the idea that animals and other elements of nature should be thought of as unfeeling machines, which after all, "we murder to dissect." He suggests that the dominant conception of what counts as intellect is meddling, somehow missed the mark, and fails to deal adequately with moral questions. This intellect fails, he hints, because it is narrow—only a limited range of experience has currency. On the other hand, Wordsworth places great value upon the lore, or knowing, which first hand exposure to nature brings.

Wordsworth is not unqualified in his assessment of experiential knowing. All types of experience are not judged as equal. For him, ideal experiences are those found in nature—pure and innocent experiences untainted by human influence. It is through experiences as in "a vernal wood" (rather than in a mine) that he finds understanding of goodness and evil. Experiencing relatively wild places himself, Wordsworth was inspired to passionately promote the importance of encounters with nature for the moral development of individuals.

While Wordsworth wrote evocatively about natural phenomena, it would be a mistake to think of him and other Romantic poets as simply nature writers. As Evernden (1985) suggests, they were social critics who challenged not only conventional beliefs but also the processes by which those beliefs were formulated. Further, the demands of their self-appointed task frequently led them to wild places. There, in the relative absence of social structure, these poets were best able to examine society. This was where social conventions were least plentiful, "the environment least hostile to their project" (Evernden 1985, 32). Just as the Lake District of England provided Wordsworth an inspirational environment, few places can equal the wilderness of Northern Canada for providing a vantage from which to examine our present environmental and social mess.

It is clear from the above lines that Wordsworth found knowledge, as defined by the sciences and the arts (technical skills), impoverished. It failed to account for the kind of knowing he had accumulated through direct and personal contact with nature. His experience told him that there was more to know, and that the accepted view of reality deprived humankind of the opportunity to know more about the most important aspects of the world. We see in these lines that Wordsworth found such experiential learning agreeable: "sweet is the lore which nature brings." However, for him, encounters with nature were, as suggested earlier, also a source of moral understanding, and ethical grounding.

Evidence of Wordsworth's belief in the experiential grounding of moral systems can be found in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey. . .":

Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,  
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being (Wordsworth 1959b, 203).

Clearly these lines, written at the end of the eighteenth century, are a protest on behalf of knowing and the absence of moral grounding. Wordsworth is convinced that knowing acquired

through wilderness experiences is real and morally inspirational. It is the "anchor" of his "purest thoughts" and the "soul" of his "moral being."

Romantic poetry is not unique in this regard, and we can find more recent affirmations of these sentiments. The twentieth century conservationist Aldo Leopold was convinced that the presence of wilderness prompted an ethical relationship with the land. Like Wordsworth, he felt that "raw wilderness" provided a moral foundation or "a single starting-point, to which man returns again and again to organize yet another search for a durable scale of values" (Leopold 1949, 279). More recently Bill Devall and George Sessions argue that the foundations of "Deep Ecology" (a popular, rapidly-growing environmental movement) are "the basic intuitions and experiencing of ourselves and Nature which comprise ecological consciousness" (1985, 65).

The forms of knowing and understanding described by Wordsworth, Leopold, Sessions and Devall are not merely sentimental, and cannot be dismissed as a mystical attachment to the balance of nature as some critics would claim. It is important to realize that there are uses of the words "knowledge" and "understanding" where notions of feeling, emotion, and empathy are involved (Barrow and Woods 1988). We can *know* what it is to experience beauty, sadness, joy, frustration, wonder, awe, ecstasy, and other emotions. Associations of such emotions with experiences in a particular context or situation will certainly inform us and allow us to know more. We come to know that the experience can illicit emotions to which we may attach varying degrees of value and concern.

Furthermore, understanding is often dependent upon shared experiences. To say that we understand someone else's emotional response will be dependent upon our having shared a common or similar experience and thus having the same knowledge. For example, if a person had never experienced the splendour of mountain scenery, animals in their natural environment, or the wonder and awe inspired by wild places like the Tatshenshini River, that person might not entirely understand the emotions and associated values inherent in those experiences. In this sense, "knowing" refers not to some impersonal body of knowledge, but to the comprehension of a set of personal and shared experiences.

Knowledge gained through personal experience can illuminate situations, heighten sensitivity, disclose new possibilities,

and increase understanding. Understanding both environmental issues and the passions of those who seek new relationships with the non-human world will require a knowledge of the pleasures and the despairs gleaned through firsthand experience. As John Passmore said in his book *Man's Responsibility for Nature*:

Only if men can first learn to look sensuously at the world will they learn to care for it. Not only to look at it, but to touch it, smell it, taste it. As we said, Plato — like every other authoritarian . . . severely condemns the sensuous man, the lover of sights and sounds. And one must grant to him that a purely sensuous life, in which sensuousness is never kindled into love, love with the responsibility and care it brings in its train, is impoverished, sub-human and incapable by itself of solving ecological, or any other problems. But, on the other side, the attempt to be 'super-human' by rising totally above the sensuousness issues . . . [is] no less impoverished, no less sub-human, and is utterly destructive, into the bargain, of man-nature relationships (1974, 189).

In this passage Passmore challenges the limitations placed upon the scope of Western knowing. He emphasizes the need for broad learning experiences which include direct personal, or sensuous experiences: how we think will be determined at least in part by what we have "felt."

As dwindling wilderness plays a smaller and smaller part in peoples' lives, it becomes increasingly difficult to comprehend the knowing acquired through personal experiences in wild places. Whether or not wilderness experiences will ultimately provide humanity with a moral base, or the foundation of an environmental ethic, is a subject for on-going debate. However, it would be irresponsible to preclude access to forms of personal knowledge which may indeed assist our understanding these ideas and their possibilities. While one might argue that experiencing a mine at Windy Craggy might provide important learning opportunities, we surely have ample opportunity elsewhere to experience the "meddling intellect" at work. The few areas left to us, such as the Tatshenshini River, are under increasing threat of encroachment. Humanity is faced with decreasing opportunities for encountering wild places and for knowing through these experiences. We must not destroy these remaining possibilities.

Bill McKibben, in his somewhat apocalyptic book *The End of Nature* (1989), paints a grim picture of a planet on which nature has become irreversibly compromised. He argues that "we live at the end of nature, the moment when the essential



character of the world we've known since we stopped swinging from our tails is suddenly changing" (175). In arriving at this conclusion he acknowledges the pervasive effects of human behaviours on environments previously thought pristine. In the North we have our own examples of the insidious spread of human influences: we have been warned of PCBs in Inuit diets, contaminants in burbot from Yukon lakes, and radioactivity in the Arctic Ocean. On a grander scale still, McKibben argues that human actions have altered atmospheric conditions and changed the earth's weather. This, he claims, is the ultimate form of meddling. With the advent of human-created weather, pristine nature ceases to exist.

I do not fully share McKibben's gloom; I prefer to hope for a better future. However, my optimism relies on the willingness and ability of men and women to consider thoughtfully what the loss of wild places and nature might mean. Understandably people worry about health risks and dangers to themselves and their families. Others may have an almost aesthetic response: nature as a work of art has been irretrievably damaged (McKibben 1989). These are immediate and important responses. Beyond them, however, there are other profound concerns.

McKibben suggests "we are used to the idea that something larger than we are and not of our own making surrounds us" and this is "the world of nature" (1989, 85). But how will the loss of this "world of nature" alter the way men and women come to know their world and how will it affect their ability to shape its future? For McKibben, manipulating nature deprives it of independence and is fatal to its meaning. Implicit in our understanding of the word "nature" is this independence and freedom from the burden of human interference. While McKibben's conclusion, that nature is now at an end, may seem extreme, it is abundantly clear that large and pristine wilderness areas are increasingly threatened. Should this trend continue, it seems possible that there could soon be few, if any, places free from the "scats" of human societies. What effect might this have on our ability to know our environment and to know ourselves?

For many activists the natural world should stand as a limit to human manipulation, and preservation of wild places can represent limits to a world view dominated by scientific and technical thinking. However, the natural world can also provide a kind of "outside" which allows people to see the "inside"

(Manes 1990, 221). Like Wordsworth and other writers of the Romantic period, we need to be able to escape social conventions (to the extent that we can) to see ourselves more clearly, and to assess a society which appears to be failing. We need to be able to see and appreciate the contrast between the world beyond us and the world we have created. "Once wilderness is gone, once there is no longer a reference point outside the manipulations of culture, the state, corporations, or other powerful interests will be able to shape and form citizens the way they want" (Manes 1990, 221). It is disturbing to realize that once wild places are gone we will have lost an important means of knowing and understanding.

In the case of the Tatshenshini/Windy Craggy issue we must again weigh the merits of wilderness preservation against the economic advantages of mine development. While the Tatshenshini River is but one of many remaining wilderness areas, the number of such places is decreasing. Without wilderness areas such as this, we lose the ability to see how far we have gone in manipulating our environment. In so doing we lose the ability to assess the present in order to shape the future. The richest values of wilderness lie not in the past or the present, but in the future (Nash 1982). The short-term economic advantage is simply not worth the price. We must resist attempts to encroach upon the last great wilderness areas on earth.

I have argued for the need to protect wilderness on largely epistemological grounds. I have claimed that experiential knowing is unique and essential to our ability to thoughtfully shape the future. But what are we to make of the intense international pressure directed towards the preservation of the Tatshenshini river? While many people will never see this river there appears to be a mystique surrounding it that has fired the imagination of activists throughout North America (Down 1991). We have seen this phenomenon before. Great efforts have been made on behalf of Meares Island, South Moresby Island, the Carmanah Valley, and the Stein Valley in British Columbia and now pressure is growing to protect Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

It appears that people feel the need for pristine places even if they do not intend to visit them. Those places still matter to us. It matters that they still exist, substantially unaltered by humans (McKibben 1989). But why?

One answer might be the force of personal desire, for there can be a kind of vicarious enjoyment associated with contemplating the existence of wild places. Further, while many will not visit the Tatshenshini River, imaginations are fuelled by experiences similar to those who do. They can relate to the issue. Another force driving people to protect wild places may be their sense of guilt for the betrayal of natural processes which are so often truncated by human manipulations. There is an ever-present sense that we have “screwed-up” (McKibben 1989). In spite of the ability of technology to shape our lives, there remains a feeling that humans are a part of a much larger whole, that we are but small entities in a large and complex world. In this sense, wilderness preservation might be thought of as “a disclaimer of the biotic arrogance of *homo americanus*. It is one of the focal points of a new attitude—an intelligent humility toward man’s place in nature” (Leopold in Nash 1982, 199). These are significant forces which compel people to advocate the preservation of wilderness areas such as the Tatshenshini River and they should be considered in any attempt to weigh the merits of such decisions.

It is also possible that protests against the Windy Craggy proposal are also protests on behalf of values—the rejection of the instrumental rationality we have been conditioned to endure. Many of us, like Wordsworth and other earlier rebels, can no longer accept the correctness of a world view conceived in the seventeenth century and born of the scientific revolution. In rejecting this world view “we bring the weight of our own experience to bear against the model of the world proposed by science” (Evernden 1985, 33).

The apparent mystique which surrounds efforts to preserve the Tatshenshini may be more than an expression of vicarious pleasure or of guilt born of past indiscretions. It also seems to be a focal point for new and changing attitudes. The campaign to preserve this great wilderness area symbolizes rejection of a world view defined merely by technical “how” questions. As such it is of tremendous metaphoric importance. Preserving the Tatshenshini River thus reinforces our ability to *know* that things can be different and to *know* that another order of questions is important—the “why” questions. By the same token, failure to preserve the Tatshenshini would serve to reinforce the dominance of instrumental rationality. We must ask: Ought this to happen? We will not have the opportunity to reconsider.

This northern environment is rare and fragile. It is not forgiving and much is at stake. The Tatshenshini river is a source of joy, of knowing, and of understanding. Ultimately it is a source for recognizing who we are and who we can be. We destroy such wilderness at our peril.

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