



"These rivers are really the crown jewels" — conservationist Mark Angelo



THE STIKINE DELTA: as nature intended

# Wilderness jewels

## Conservationists plead for spectacular natural heritage

By GLENN BOHN  
Sun Environment Reporter

First of two parts  
MARK ANGELO says British Columbia has some of the most spectacular wild rivers on the planet, but the province isn't protecting this natural heritage.

"I would not give the province a passing grade when it comes to river management and protection," said Angelo, chairman of the Outdoor Recreation Council of B.C.'s rivers committee and an instructor in the fish, wildlife and recreation program at the B.C. Institute of Technology.

Ken Lay, a director of the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, called B.C.'s record "deplorable."

"There's not much to comment on," Lay said.

At least 30 B.C. rivers are already dammed; rivers like the Fraser are dumping grounds for sewage and industrial waste; and everything from dioxins to PCBs have been detected in salmon and other fish species in B.C.'s most polluted rivers.

B.C.'s environmental groups want more protection for our best remaining wild rivers.

They are unsatisfied with a six-year-old provincial Recreation Corridors Program which has only protected rivers that were already protected by parks. And they want B.C. to join the Canadian Heritage Rivers System, a national conservation program that eight other provinces and the two territories have already joined.

Angelo argued that the government should act now to protect B.C.'s wilderness rivers — while it still has the option. He noted the U.S. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act provides excellent protection to free-flowing rivers, but most rivers in the lower 48 states had already been compromised when the law was passed in 1968.

At Riverfest '89, the last annual conference of B.C.'s river conservationists, delegates endorsed a list of 12 rivers they want protected.

They did not have to start the list from scratch. Many have been unresolved land-use conflicts for years.

"These rivers are really the crown jewels," Angelo said. "They're provincially, if not nationally, significant. The Stikine and the Tatshenshini, I would dare to say, are globally significant."

Angelo, 38, an avid paddler for 20 years who has run hundreds of rivers on four continents, has an international perspective.

"I've had an opportunity to paddle all over the world, and I think we have some of its most outstanding rivers," he said.

**RIVERGODS:** Exploring the World's Great Rivers, is a 1985 book by two whitewater enthusiasts from California.

Their top 10 list includes the Zambezi, Euphrates and Colorado. And it includes the Tatshenshini in the extreme northwest corner of B.C., an "exceptionally beautiful whitewater wilderness trip" and a river that is "all but unknown in its own homeland."

In 1985, B.C. government officials produced a list of 21 rivers or sections of rivers to consider for protection. Progress since then has been as sluggish as the Mississippi.

Planning exercises drag on for most of the rivers. The B.C. cabinet has approved just six rivers or sections of rivers for Recreation Corridor status. And all six are in provincial parks or recreation areas, a designation that already prohibits mining, logging and dams.

Why has the B.C. government only protected rivers in parks?

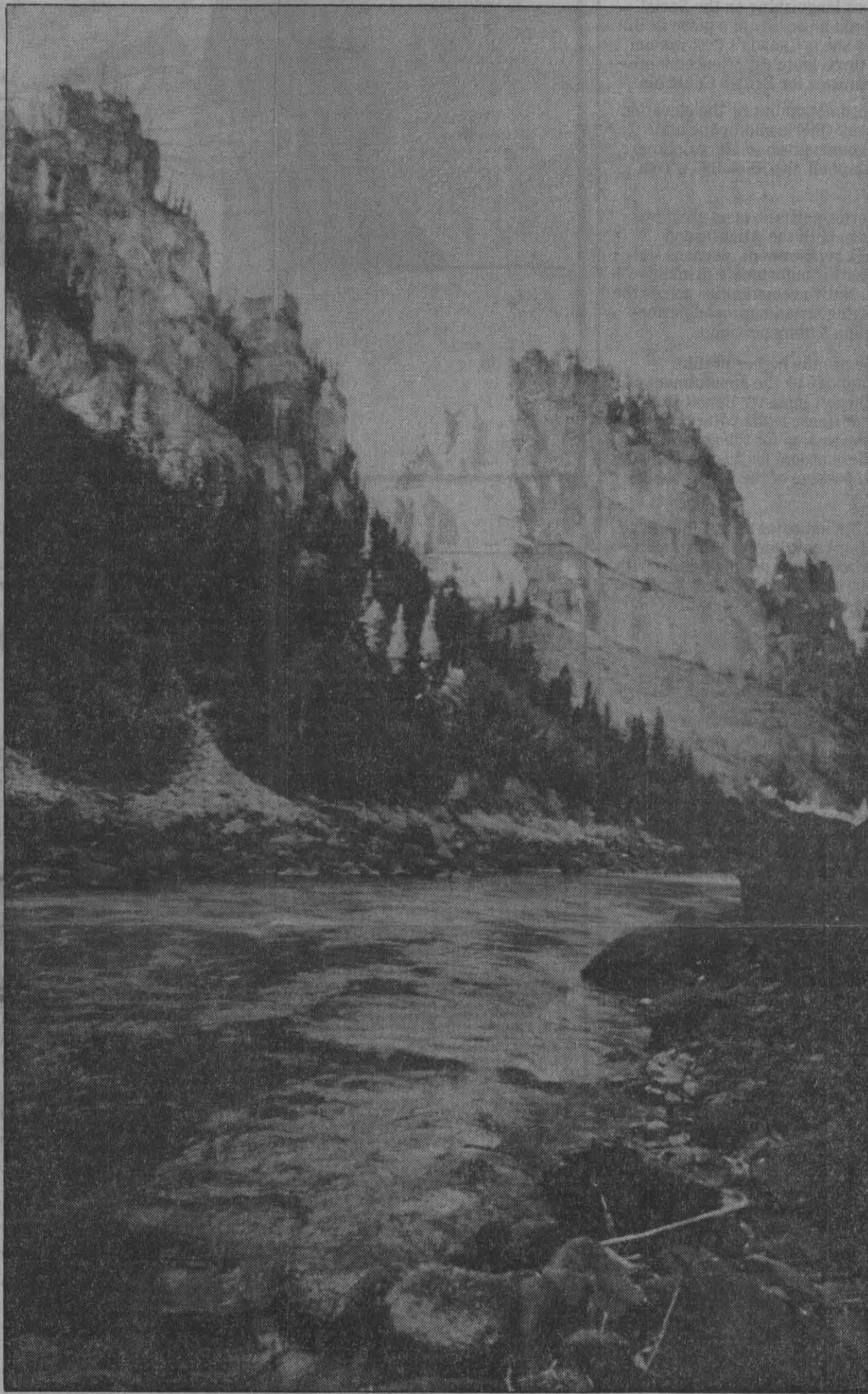
"The system is very new," replied Derek Thompson, the B.C. parks ministry's director of planning and conservation services.

"The Recreation Corridors Program only dates from late '84, so it's clear that it's going to take time for some people to understand and use the system. Areas outside (parks) take more time."

Angelo doesn't blame overworked, lower-level bureaucrats, because he said they haven't been given the manpower or budgets they need.

"There's been much talk but little accomplished, because there hasn't been a political commitment or desire at senior government and political levels," he said.

Bob Peart is executive-director of the Outdoor Recreation Council, an umbrella group that represents 520 outdoor clubs — includ-



STIKINE RIVER: hailed as "globally significant" by Mark Angelo

ing kayakers, canoeists and river rafters. The clubs' total membership: 115,000 people. ORC could be called B.C.'s largest environmental organization, but it is one of the quieter ones.

Peart dismissed the govern-

ment's recreation corridor program as an "inadequate" conservation tool.

"The major rivers, like the Stikine, the Tatshenshini and the Fraser, haven't got adequate protection," he said. "They don't

necessarily all have to be in parks, but we need clear management plans that will protect them."

Whenever a new environment or parks minister is appointed, river conservationists renew their polite lobbying efforts. The new

## MONDAY

Conservationists list a dazzling dozen for protection — from the pristine Tatshenshini to the mighty Fraser which supports one of the richest natural salmon runs in the world but is also a sewer.

ministers are asked to endorse the Canadian Heritage Rivers program.

**T**HE PROGRAM began in 1984, "to give national recognition to the important rivers of Canada and to ensure long-term management that will conserve their natural, historical and recreational values..." Eighteen rivers, or 4,000 kilometres of rivers, are now in the system.

Don Gibson is assistant secretary to the Canadian Heritage Rivers Board, which oversees the national program.

B.C. and Alberta are the only holdouts, and Gibson said there are some signs that Alberta will join.

Gibson, a Powell River-born man who now works in Ottawa, emphasized a participating province "doesn't surrender anything" in terms of resource ownership and control, unlike provincial Crown land that is transferred to the federal Crown when a national park is created. There are also no "quotas" on the number of rivers a province has to designate as heritage rivers.

**T**HE CARROT is some money from federal taxpayers. Parks Canada, a wing of the federal environment department, pays half the cost of management plans for heritage rivers, up to \$45,000.

Why hasn't B.C. joined the national program?

"I don't sit at the cabinet table while they make those decisions," Thompson of the B.C. parks ministry noted.

But he added: "We feel B.C.'s recreational corridor program is broader and more comprehensive; that (the heritage rivers program) would be an expense to B.C. with no great benefit to British Columbians or Canadians."

Angelo said the real reason is the provincial government doesn't want B.C.'s most spectacular rivers to get more recognition, because that would make "development" more difficult.

Peart said the government is "fearful that, if they join, that will raise the profile of rivers and the public perception that rivers will be taken care of. It would harder for them to do what they want with the rivers."

## Bridge threatens to scar 'North America's wildest river'

**T**HE TATSHENSHINI River has carved its way through the mountain range with the highest peak in the province.

At points, the deep-blue glaciers of the St. Elias Range are so close they tower over the river's edge. In summer, when rafters are running the river, massive chunks of ice fracture off and plunge into the water, sometimes creating a dam and temporary lake.

Sockeye, coho and chinook swim up these cold waters; grizzly forage on its shores; Dall's sheep scamper along the cliffs; sprays of wildflowers burst with color during the brief, northern summer.

And nowhere has man left a permanent mark on this 250-kilometre-long river system in the extreme northwest corner of B.C. There are no bridges; no roads; no settlements; no mega-projects.

So far, Johnny Mikes, a rafting company president who has done the 12-day trip down the "Tat" perhaps 30 times, says the Tatshenshini is "our best remaining pure wilderness river."

"We don't have another long-distance river in B.C. where you can put in and float out to sea without passing by any bridges or signs of humanity," Mikes said.

The well-travelled whitewater enthusiast had just returned from guiding jobs this winter in Tanzania and Ethiopia. He didn't hesitate to call the Tatshenshini "the best wilderness mountain river trip in the world."

"If we lose the Alsek and Tatshenshini, British Columbians will have to go to other

places in the world to have a similar experience."

The "Tat" is just one of the wild rivers that conservationists want protected in its natural state. They want to save a dozen rivers from the fate that has befallen rivers like the Fraser, whose waters are a dumping ground for human and industrial waste.

B.C.'s river conservationists fear the "Tat" will be the next river to lose its pristine character. The perceived threat: a massive open-pit copper mine on Tats Creek, a tributary of the Tatshenshini.

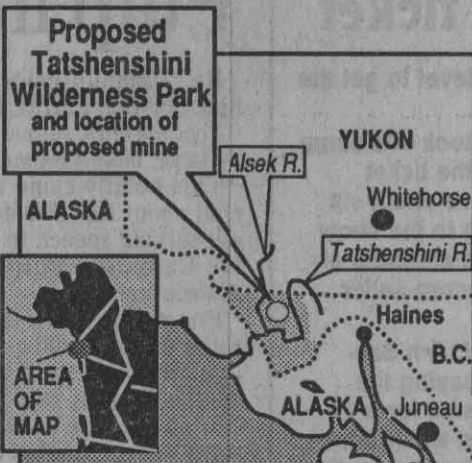
The proposed mega-project is not a glint in a penniless prospector's eye. Toronto-based Geddes Resources has already spent \$36 million on its exploration program in the remote, ice-clad Tatshenshini region.

Geddes president Gerald Harper said it will cost a hefty \$400 million to put the mine into production but he expected the ore body will produce \$5 billion worth of copper at today's prices. Six hundred workers are to be employed during the mine's 20 to 40 year life span.

Harper said this "new wealth" far exceeds the benefits of leaving the Tatshenshini region untouched.

But to the Western Canada Wilderness Committee and a new environmental group called Tatshenshini Wild, the Tat is "a world wilderness treasure" which is "imminently threatened by the construction of a road to the proposed Geddes mine."

The groups have produced 100,000 copies of a tabloid-sized publication to launch an



"international conservation effort." They propose a "Tatshenshini provincial wilderness park" that would encompass the region and the mine site. The park would link up with existing parks in Alaska and Yukon.

Harper reacted to the park proposal by noting the B.C. government would have to compensate Geddes Resources for the value of minerals it could not mine.

The "Tat" begins in B.C., flows north to Yukon, returns south to B.C. where it meets the Alsek River, then flows west to Alaska and the Pacific Ocean.

In Yukon, the Alsek is protected by Klane national park and designated a national heritage river. In November, the Yukon government asked for a ban on new mineral claims within five kilometres of its section of the Tatshenshini—a request that

angered the mining industry.

In Alaska, the Alsek-Tatshenshini system is in Glacier Bay national park and reserve and Tongass national forest.

"Only in B.C. is the river unprotected," Tatshenshini Wild notes. "For long term survival, big game wildlife populations need the large contiguous wilderness that the preservation of the Tatshenshini area would provide."

In 1986, the B.C. government-appointed Wilderness Advisory Committee recommended that the Tat and Alsek rivers be designated a "recreation corridor" and be managed by the B.C. parks ministry, "to ensure their wilderness qualities are retained."

The Social Credit cabinet gave the committee's recommendations "approval in principle" but failed to designate the river a recreation corridor — a status that could prevent the construction of roads and bridges.

A government document indicates that studies are still "underway" and mentions a caveat: "Mineral resources access issue to be resolved first."

In December, B.C. Mines Minister Jack Davis announced that taxpayers would contribute up to \$50,000 for road access planning studies for the proposed Windy Craggy mine.

A mines ministry release said the access road would be 100 to 140 kilometres long, depending on the route. It would follow the Tatshenshini River for about 25 kilometres. Halfway down the raft trip to the Pacific, the river would be a spanned by a bridge

large enough to support massive ore trucks.

Tatshenshini Wild predicts the access road and bridge will "permanently scar what is now North America's wildest river."

And Jack Goodwin, the B.C. government-licensed guide-outfitter for the Tatshenshini region, fears the mine and access road will harm the grizzly and Dall's sheep populations.

Goodwin also has a financial interest in a wild Tatshenshini. He charges about \$4,000 a hunt.

His clients shoot six grizzly a year, and he fears that an access road will have a "major impact" on the grizzly and Dall's sheep populations. Roads encourage more legal and illegal hunting. Goodwin said there are many grizzly dens along the proposed route of the access road.

"Our tourism association in the province keeps advertising that we have a green B.C.," said Goodwin. "I have to ask myself how much long we can continue this way of thinking and still tell tourists that we are green, when in fact we are letting this province be destroyed by things such as mining access roads and exploration for the sake of stock promotion over in Toronto."

Goodwin, whose family has guided in the Tatshenshini region for 20 years, said B.C. will get "nothing but a big hole in ground" when the Windy Craggy mine is abandoned.

"Is it worth losing our wilderness?" he asked.

— GLENN BOHN