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NUNAVUT'S RIVER HERITAGE



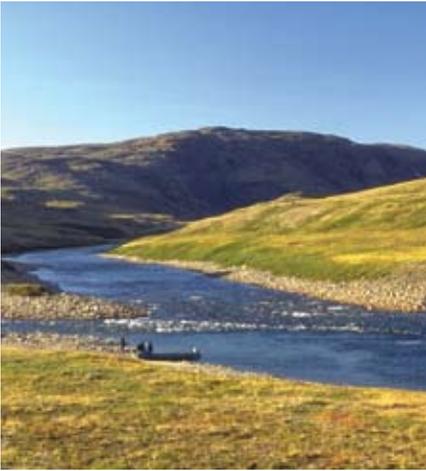
“Somewhere there’s a land, where the sun brightly shines, and across the tundra, slow rivers wind; where love lives forever, and dreams never die...”

Susan Aglukark’s *Song of the Land* evokes the spirit of the land, a spirit brought to life by the many and varied rivers of Nunavut. From unnamed small rivers tracing their braided courses from mountain heights to the Soper, running through **Katannilik Territorial Park**, and magnificent rivers such as the Coppermine, Thelon, and Kazan, stretching for hundreds of miles across trackless terrain, the rivers are an integral part of the image of Nunavut. River adventures are a major part of the varied experiences offered in this territory.

The watersheds of Nunavut’s rivers remain, for the most part, unaltered by man, and they drain some of the most isolated wilderness on the planet. Their shores are home to huge herds of caribou and the prehistoric muskox, relics of the Pleistocene. Peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, rough-legged hawks and golden eagles nest on cliffs where the rivers cut through rocky outcrops, and loons, geese, swans, and ducks feed in areas where the current slows, and nest in nearby lakes or ponds. Predators – foxes, wolves, wolverines and polar and grizzly bears – hunt the slopes along the rivers, and some seek fish in the rivers themselves.

These rivers were occupied by Inuit who followed the river valleys inland to hunt the teeming herds of caribou, hunting from kayaks at the traditional crossing places for the great herds. Signs of this occupation still remain, as the people used the stones of the land to assist in their hunting or to

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listen to the land
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create structures that enabled them to live more comfortably. These included storage caches for dried meat or fish, rows of lonely stone cairns along the ridges, used to guide the timid caribou into places where they could be killed by hunters crouched in crescent-shaped hunting blinds (*taluit*) and using bow and arrows.

Some Inuit still travel the inland rivers in summer to hunt caribou or pick berries, using traditional campsites for precious time away from the bustling communities, to experience the peace of living on the land, and to listen to the land as their ancestors did.

Throughout history, the rivers were also roads into the heart of Nunavut, providing travel routes over unmapped lands by winter and easier travel by canoe and boat in summer for those who sought to explore the north. Travellers like Samuel Hearne, Franklin, and the Tyrrell brothers used the rivers as highways, exploring for minerals, routes to the Arctic coast and the Northwest Passage, and the wealth of the fur industry.

Today, others come to experience the land as well, people from around the world who appreciate the value of wildness, and seek the beauty of an unspoiled land. Many of them travel by canoe or raft, and experience “*katjaqnaaq*” by immersing themselves in the beauty of Nunatsiaq, “the beautiful land”.

In honour of their rich cultural and natural heritage, three Nunavut rivers have been designated as “Canadian Heritage Rivers” – the Thelon, the Kazan, and the Soper. A fourth, the Coppermine River, has been nominated as a Canadian Heritage River. The process of completing requirements towards its full designation is underway, and is expected to be completed in 2008.

Nunavut’s three designated and nominated Canadian Heritage Rivers are premier rivers, each of which has played a major role in the development of Inuit culture through the centuries.

THE THELON RIVER

Westernmost is the Thelon River, originating in the country east of Great Slave Lake, and winding across the barrenlands to drain into Hudson Bay via Baker Lake and Chesterfield Inlet. The Thelon and its tributaries flow through or skirt the Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary, established in 1927 to protect the shrinking herds of muskox from overhunting. As a result of this protection, the wildlife along the upper Thelon is rich and varied, and for the most part less shy and more easily observed than in areas where regular hunting is allowed. The muskox populations have fully recovered, and these intriguing animals are frequently seen.

Caribou from the Beverly herd pass through the Thelon area, so large numbers of caribou can often be seen along the river or crossing it. Moose are also common on the upper Thelon. The terrain is varied and interesting, ranging from coniferous forest through taiga into tundra, and features cliffs with nesting raptors, winding sand eskers, rolling tundra, and even ice-cored pingos.

THE KAZAN RIVER

The Kazan River flows north from the Nunavut border to join the flow of the Thelon through Baker Lake. These two rivers have been vital to the development of the Caribou Inuit culture; through the centuries they have offered superb hunting and fishing and have sustained the people by providing access to caribou as well as fish. During the past two hundred years, they have formed major travel routes for the people in their annual migrations and their shores offer ample proof of Inuit and Dene occupation. The Qamanuriaq caribou herd migrates along the Kazan, and caribou are often seen by river travellers. In addition, this river and lakes in its watershed support populations of very large lake trout, and offer some of the best trophy lake trout fishing in the north.

THE SOPER RIVER

The Soper River is a much shorter river located in the south end of Baffin Island. It flows across the Meta Incognita Peninsula from near Iqaluit to the community of Kimmirut, and has also been a major migration route for the people of Baffin Island. Caribou are common along the Soper, and cliffs along the river offer a superb nesting habitat for raptors, including peregrine falcons and gyrfalcons. A variety of different rock outcrops make this river a paradise for geology enthusiasts.

THE COPPERMINE RIVER

The Nunavut portion of the Coppermine River has been nominated as a heritage river, and the process is underway. This major river flows from the taiga forest near Lac de Gras through the treeline, and winds down from the highlands of the central barrenlands to flow into the Coronation Gulf at Kugluktuk. Paddlers on this historic river pass many signs of Inuit occupation of the land, as well as very scenic country. Wildlife includes caribou, muskox, arctic and red foxes, wolverines, wolves, grizzlies, and a variety of birds including nesting raptors, peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, rough-legged hawks, and golden eagles.

Canada's network of rivers is vast and diverse. Canadian Heritage Rivers are its gems, beacons of our natural and cultural heritage. The Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS) is Canada's national river conservation program. It promotes, protects, and enhances Canada's river heritage, and ensures that Canada's leading rivers are managed in a sustainable manner.

It's not easy to become a Canadian Heritage River, as the process is rigorous and lengthy. Guidelines exist to ensure that candidate

rivers meet the selection and integrity criteria that define Canada's leading rivers. A river must be proven to possess the requisite natural values, historical importance, and recreational potential. Strong public support for its nomination must also be demonstrated, and it must be shown that sufficient measures will be put in place to ensure that those values will be maintained.

Establishing Canadian Heritage Rivers is a two-step process of nomination and designation. In Nunavut, Nunavut Parks works closely with communities in nominating rivers that both meet the requirements of the program, and are in keeping with community goals. River nominations are presented to the Canadian Heritage Rivers Board, and this board makes recommendations to the responsible federal minister, who approves the designation only if it meets the CHRS criteria.

A nominated river becomes designated once a management plan or heritage strategy is lodged with the Board by the government that made the nomination. The development of the management plan or heritage strategy is based on public consultation and



consensus. All protective actions on Canadian Heritage Rivers depend on existing laws and regulations, and respect the rights of aboriginal peoples, communities, private landowners, and other stakeholders.

All four of Nunavut's nominated and designated heritage rivers offer major recreational opportunities in unparalleled wilderness settings. They are paddled by groups from around the world and offer not only the excitement of good whitewater, but also solace and peace in wild and beautiful surroundings. Each river is part of the migration pathway of a different caribou herd, and each offers different terrain and different levels of whitewater.

See separate accounts for each of these rivers, and, for assistance in planning a trip on any of these rivers, check the Nunavut Parks website at www.nunavutparks.com, or the Canadian Heritage Rivers site at www.chrs.ca. Or, call Nunavut Tourism at 1-866-NUNAVUT to request the Nunavut Travel Planner, which lists all licensed tourism operators, accommodations and services that apply to each river. ■

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