

# YUKON NEWS

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Couple recounts dramatic rescue near Haines Junction

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Tetlit Gwich'in team up with German conservationists for new film

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Yukon soccer team posts best-ever finish at Canada Summer Games

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Sarah Lewis Photography/Team Yukon

Yukon's Chad Williams drives to the rim against P.E.I. at the Canada Summer Games in Winnipeg on August 2. Both Yukon basketball teams went winless this week. See games coverage on pages 19-22.

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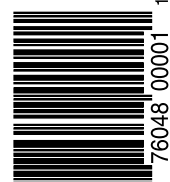
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## ENVIRONMENT

# Paddling for the Peel

Jackie Hong  
News Reporter

The short film opens with a sweeping bird's-eye view of tree-covered mountains, peak after peak stretching far into the distance. The camera glides into a valley and reveals an impossibly blue river carving its way through the rugged landscape, untouched wilderness, with not a single road, cabin or telephone pole in sight.

The breathtaking video is part of the latest project aiming to raise awareness about the Peel watershed and the importance of preserving it. A collaboration between conservation group Wilderness International with Tetlit Gwich'in of Fort McPherson, N.W.T., the as-of-yet unnamed project saw 11 German members of Wilderness International, a Tetlit Gwich'in elder and five Tetlit Gwich'in youth paddle down the Snake River for 11 days, documenting the landscape as well as Tetlit Gwich'in stories and traditions with photos, videos and a blog that will be published online.

"This one is the largest mountain wilderness that we have left on this earth," Wilderness International western arctic project coordinator Henriette Wessel told the *News* after returning from the trip.

"As wilderness areas are vanishing all over the planet, I wouldn't see it as a national issue, it's rather an international issue we all need to worry about."

The fate of the Peel watershed — a roughly 68,000-square-kilometre area in northern Yukon — has been the subject of numerous legal battles for more than half a decade now. The controversy started in 2011 when, following a seven-year planning process, the Peel Watershed Planning Committee delivered a report to the Yukon government recommending 80 per cent of the watershed be protected. However, the then-ruling Yukon Party ignored the recommendation, instead releasing its own plan that would open almost the same amount of land to development.

The move angered First Nations, as well as conservationists, who brought the issue to territorial court. Both the Yukon



Duo Lakes near the Snake River in the Peel watershed. A new video is the latest project to raise awareness on the importance of the watershed.

Ronny Scholz/Wilderness International

Supreme Court and Yukon Court of Appeal ruled the Yukon government broke rules by releasing a dramatically different plan than the one recommended by the committee. However, while the Yukon Supreme Court ruled the government could not change the amount of protected land nor build new roads or access ways because they hadn't been discussed in enough detail at an earlier stage, the court of appeal later ruled the territorial government could make those changes as long as everyone was properly consulted with.

First Nations and conservationists disagreed with the appeal court ruling and brought the issue to the Supreme Court of Canada, where the case was heard March 22. A ruling is expected sometime in the three to six months following the hearing.

For Tetlit Gwich'in Chief Wanda Pascal, a way of life, and a lifeline, hangs in the balance with the Supreme Court of Canada ruling.

"The Peel River Watershed is so important to our community and surrounding communities...



A grizzly in search of food.

Ronny Scholz/Wilderness International

Most of us still live off the land, on fish and wildlife, berries, traditional medicine, water," Pascal said in a phone interview.

"A lot of our people are buried up all through that watershed, there's lots of unmarked graves all the way up, so we always be careful when we travel out on that land, we be careful where we set camp, where we have fires or anything. It's really important."

Pascal said she was contacted by Wilderness International in early January, and with the Supreme Court case looming, thought the collaboration and raising awareness in the North and beyond about the issue was a good idea. The trip was also immensely inspiring for the five youth who went, she added.

"They want to do more training and guiding so

they can do more trips there to educate our young people.... They were saying it's so nice up there, so clear, the water's so clear, it's just so calm and peaceful, they just totally enjoyed it," Pascal said. "And I told them to get out there and start talking about it, start educating people out there and how important it is to you."

Discussions between

Tetlit Gwich'in and Wilderness International for another trip next summer are already underway, Pascal said.

Even though July's trip was his third time paddling the Snake River, Wilderness International CEO Kai Andersch said he wouldn't hesitate to do it again. On top of environmental and conservation concerns, Andersch said he's a prime example of what the Yukon, and the world, has to lose if the Peel watershed isn't protected — European tourism.

"Europeans love travelling, we love the Yukon ... and the one reason we come, quite honestly, is nature," he said. "Like of course, it's the people and these couple of historic sites, but no German comes to look at old gold-digging machines. We've got enough culture at home, so what we come for is unspoiled nature ... and once this resource is damaged, people just won't come for it anymore, it's quite simple."

With files from Ashley Joannou

Contact Jackie Hong at [jackie.hong@yukon-news.com](mailto:jackie.hong@yukon-news.com)