

German visitors share sad story of vanished wilderness

LIFE

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News Reporter

For German visitors, the Yukon wilderness is a time machine back to a forgotten age on the European continent.

At one time, just as the Dominion of Canada was taking hold, Germany was itself home to hectares of sweeping, misty forests.

But decades of mines, power plants and acid rain would all take their toll, transforming German forests into industrial parks, German valleys into Autobahns and German glaciers into nothing.

By 2008, environmentalists estimated that the country had only 0.5 per cent of untouched natural land left.

"Don't do what we did" is the global message of German-based environmental group Wilderness International.

Headquartered in Dresden, Germany, Wilderness International is dedicated to preserving and protecting pristine, untouched areas around the world.

With a spate of highly successful rainforest preservation programs ongoing in Guyana, Wilderness International has already set its sights on the Three Rivers Watershed north-east of Dawson City.

Home to breathtaking vistas, clear mountain water and hectares of pine trees — the region is also the site of future plans for full-scale uranium mining.

"Mining needs to occur. But it shouldn't be within pristine environmental landscapes," said Kai Andersch, CEO of Wilderness International.

"When you open up an area towards industrial development ... you take away the spirit of the place," he said.

"Once you sever (this spirit) from a landscape, it will never return back into its original form," added Hwiemton, Wilderness International Edmonton-based cultural coordinator, and a Cowichan from Vancouver Island.

"If we sever an arm off ourselves, it will never grow back," he said.

Unlike similar ecological organizations such as Greenpeace or the David Suzuki



Johanna Diehl/Wilderness International

ON THE RIVER... From left, Karl Schiebe, the river guide, Janelle Wilson and Jennifer Greenland rafting the Snake River in July. Below, a group picture at Duo Lakes at the headwaters of the Snake River.



Foundation, Wilderness International does not employ pressure tactics in its attempts to preserve industrially threatened land.

"Pressuring the residents of the Yukon territory probably wouldn't help at all, because in the end they have to decide," said Andersch.

"It's their land and they are the stewards of this land. All we can do from abroad is share our experiences."

Sharing experiences was the goal behind this summer's ambitious 12-day wilderness expedition to isolated areas of the Three Rivers Watershed.

Bringing along a photographer, videographer and a German freelance journalist, the Wilderness International expedi-

tion also included a multinational group of teenage students — nine from Dresden, Germany, and nine Teet'it Gwich'in First Nations youth from the town of Fort McPherson.

By bringing youth right into the bosom of the Three Rivers Watershed, Wilderness International hopes to bring increased attention towards the oft-neglected beauty of Arctic Canada.

"This makes a big difference in my mind in the way young adults approach conservation issues: Getting involved themselves, not just talking about it or hearing about it but actually getting active," said Andersch.

Traversing the Yukon by helicopter, floatplane and canoe, the combined group of students

grew remarkably close considering the notable differences between their two cultures.

"A duality of worlds," said Hwiemton.

"You have a very natural world and a very sterile world. (In Germany) everything's pre-packed, sterilized, processed, where you have to go to a supermarket to get it," he said.

"(In the Yukon) out there is the supermarket — fish, caribou, moose," said Hwiemton, gesturing to the surrounding woods.

As with hundreds of Germans who annually board the Frankfurt-to-Whitehorse Condor flight, the German students were dumbstruck by the awesome beauty of the region.

"Here, you fly for two hours

and see no houses. In Germany, everywhere a house," said Josef Kaiser, 16.

"We've never seen so much forest," said Jakob Winter, 15.

Visiting the Fort McPherson homes of their Gwich'in counterparts, the German students came face-to-face with different social standards and customs.

"Everybody knew everybody, it was like a big family," said Winter.

Many of the German students couldn't even provide the names of their apartment-block neighbours.

Surprisingly, surrounded by the rich fruits of nature, the Arctic also demonstrated a notable lack of adequate environmental standards.

Perhaps because their country has lost its wilderness, Germans have achieved a reputation for good environmental stewardship, with revolutionary programs in alternative energy, recycling and carbon reduction initiatives.

Because they come from a landscape pocked with electricity-generating windmills, the oil-fired electricity generated for Fort McPherson came as a shock to the Germans.

"They drill oil in the Arctic Ocean, and then they get it down to the United States for refining — truck it up to Whitehorse, put it on a plane and then fly it to all the communities in the Arctic to fire up diesel generators," said Andersch.

"One windmill would easily be enough," he said.

Of course, the Germans did not want to preach.

"Since we destroyed a lot of our wilderness, it's not really just to come here and tell you what to do," said Andersch.

In future, however, Andersch sees roundtable co-operation as an essential part of balancing economic development with environmental preservation.

"If you're a mining company, you don't want to invest in an area where you'll potentially run into huge trouble ... Let's say (a mining company) spends \$10 million finding uranium, but because of an international outcry they can't mine it," said Andersch.

"So it's a huge loss on all sides," he said.

Wilderness International plans to release educational videos in Germany and Canada detailing the trip, as well as a spate of still photos to be exhibited on an upcoming website.

"Now we just take the results (of the trip) and bring the word out," said Andersch.

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