

The Magnificent Nahanni: The Struggle to Protect a Wild Place

By Gordon Nelson. 2017. University of Regina Press. 304 pages, 34.95 CAD, Paper.

Most of us have seen images of the Nahanni River region, of the Rabbitkettle tufa mounds, Virginia Falls, canyon walls towering over rafts and canoes, or the jagged peaks of the Cirque of the Unclimbables. While Gordon Nelson's *The Magnificent Nahanni* includes

a few excellent photos (30) of these icons, this is neither a coffee table photo book nor a guidebook. But if you are looking for a comprehensive history of the four-decade struggle to protect this biologically and culturally rich area, then this is the right book.

The book is separated into three parts, each of which has two to four chapters. Those are followed by two appendices (one a note on sources and the other a list of traditional place names in the Dene language), 21 pages of chapter-by-chapter notes, 15 pages of references, and an index. Fifteen maps of various scales were appropriately chosen. Nelson brings a scholarly approach to his subject, having published numerous papers, reports, and books in the fields of land use, environment, and planning, with special emphasis on national parks. However, his writing style is mostly very approachable. Interestingly, although he has been involved with the area since the early 1970s (at that time he was president of the National and Provincial Parks Association, precursor to the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society), Nelson did not do a Nahanni River trip until 2013!

Nelson begins Part I with a brief introduction to the natural wonders of the Nahanni area (expanded upon in Chapter 2), introducing the reader to Raymond Murray Patterson, a young Englishman who trapped and prospected in the lower valley in the late 1920s and much later wrote *The Dangerous River: Adventures on the Nahanni* (George Allen and Unwin), first published in 1954. Patterson was the first person to propose conservation of the area, and Nelson refers to Patterson's observations throughout the book. After setting the wild stage, Nelson does a rather abrupt segue to discussing the prevailing concept of wilderness being pristine, uninhabited land, which left First Nations out of early park discussions, and their recent involvement in park expansion. In the early 1970s there were two fundamental policies to creation of a national park: that the federal government should ultimately own all the land in the park, and that it should be planned and managed as "pristine", i.e., devoid of past or present human activity: both policies led to indigenous opposition. The formation of the small core area as a national park reserve in 1976 indicated postponement of the ownership question until settlement of aboriginal land claims by the Dehcho and Sahtu First Nations. In Chapter 3 Nelson outlines the 30-year struggle to expand the park. Changes in the field of ecology, with new concepts in biodiversity, landscape ecology, conservation biology, and population viability, made it possible to better understand, plan, and manage wildland ecosystems. On-the-ground research involving radio-telemetry showed that Grizzly Bears (*Ursos arctos*), Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), and Dall's Sheep (*Ovis dalli*) were all undertaking seasonal movements that took them well beyond the boundaries of the small reserve. New park concepts of ecological integrity, the idea of "inhabited wilderness", and a shift from top-down to co-operative management with First Nations were also fundamental to the expansion of the reserve in 2009 to include most of the Nahanni River watershed.

In Part II ("Why and How the Natural Qualities of the Nahanni were Conserved in the Past"), Nelson goes back in time to explore the impacts of the 19th-century

fur trade on the First Nations and wildlife of the Nahanni region, setting it within the context of broader activities in northwestern North America. The First Nations of the Nahanni region were already linked to an extensive native trade network through the regions we know as Yukon, British Columbia, and Washington, as well as to the Russian fur traders in present-day Alaska. While the local First Nations did not seem to be as involved or interested in trading furs as those in some other areas, the competition among incoming traders did reduce the number of fur-bearers, and local game populations (e.g., Moose [*Alces americanus*]) that were previously relied on by indigenous people for food. Nelson's reliance on scholarly research material led him to extrapolate local First Nations' historical use of resources from those of peoples in the Yellowstone area and Alaska; I would have thought there would have been more relevant local traditional knowledge that he could have referenced. By the early 1900s, with the fur trade gone, there were sporadic searches for gold in the Nahanni Valley. By the 1930s individual prospectors were replaced by companies and corporations more capable of financing the search for, and development of, mineral resources. There was even a proposal to build a dam at Virginia Falls to provide power for mining companies. Through the roughly 200 years of fur trading and mining, the difficult terrain, harsh climate, uneven distribution of resources, conflict and competition with rivals, and changes in markets or economic and political conditions, inadvertently conserved the ecological integrity of the Nahanni.

Nelson looks to future challenges and opportunities in Part III ("The Struggle Continues"). He lumps the challenges into two groups: those that mostly affect the natural diversity and ecological integrity of the watershed, and those that mainly relate to the indigenous people in the protected area. Foremost in the first group is a zinc mine on Prairie Creek, a tributary to the Nahanni, that is surrounded by park reserve. It was approved in 2011 over considerable shortcomings in the environmental assessment and stated opposition by environmental groups and First Nations. If developed the mine could significantly affect the aquatic ecosystem. On the opportunity spectrum is the possibility of the park becoming a centre for indigenous culture and learning, youth education, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge research. In the final chapter, Nelson wraps up his case study by looking at the significance of co-operation in research, planning and management of protected areas by government, non-governmental organizations, and indigenous people with examples from around the world.

The Nahanni River is not the longest (only about 500 km) nor the hardest river to paddle, but it slices through the heart of a region that abounds in grandeur and natural diversity, and this book will help the reader appreciate it all the more.

CYNDI M. SMITH
Canmore, AB, Canada