

World Class Whitewater in the Shadow of a Dam

SRJ Staff

Staring down the threat of a hydro dam on the Slave River, nearly 50 paddlers from across Canada, USA and Australia hit the Slave's whitewater on the August long weekend for Fort Smith's second annual PaddleFest.

In an ironic twist, ATCO's CEO Nancy Southern identified the Slave River as a key element of her northern hydro energy corridor only one week before the festival. So while paddlers came to celebrate Fort Smith's world class rapids, the possibility of losing those rapids forever was never far from mind.

Western Arctic MP Dennis Bevington, who was part of an instrumental group in stopping the proposed Slave hydro project in the early 1980's, summed up the politics of the festival in a powerful speech after dinner on the first night.

"We fought the dam before, and we won. I enjoyed the last fight. If someone wants to build a dam again, we'll fight and we'll win again because we're on the right side," Bevington said.

During a pancake breakfast the next morning, kayaker Adam Lindenburger of Canmore, Alberta said Bevington spoke to what everyone was thinking.

"Anyone who enjoys rivers, as well as anyone who loves free water, I don't know how they could support (a dam on the Slave)," Lindenburger said. "What is it actually worth to destroy a wilderness ecosystem? It's more than economics. It's our identity, our spirituality."

The Slave River hydro feasibility studies have been held up all winter while ATCO negotiates with local First Nations. Original studies were to start last October, a date which has been pushed back through the winter and spring. Most of the key stakeholders – Salt River First Nation, Smith's Landing First Nation and the NWT Metis Nation – have not come out for or against a dam on the Slave River, and ATCO continues to negotiate without revealing where exactly a dam would go and how much land upstream would be flooded.

Sixteen-year-old Angus Jenkins traveled from Jasper, Alberta for the festival. He paddled all weekend sporting a "No dam on the Slave" sticker on his kayak, a gift from his white water coach last year. Jenkins said he has been waiting years for a chance to paddle the Slave.

"This river is legendary," Jenkins said. "A lot of the biggest pros came to this river. If you dam the Slave River everything changes."

Paddlers from as far away as Australia and Colorado, USA echoed Jenkin's sentiments. The Slave River's whitewater is the best in the world, rivaled only by the White Nile in Africa. These young men and women could not believe anyone would consider allowing a dam to destroy something so unique.

"You've got world class water right here," Lindenburger said. "We drove all the way from Canmore (Alberta) to experience the size and beauty of the river. There's a lot more value than just energy production."

The festival saw nearly 300 participants and spectators over four days. While organizers originally aimed to introduce more people in the community to kayaking and the river, Paddling Club president Kirsten Bradley realized early on politics of the dam could not be separated from the experience on the river.

"PaddleFest is a statement. If we don't use it, we will lose it," Bradley said. "The more people who visit, they'll always be blown away by the rapids. Any way we can encourage people to come and see how special the river is will help protect the river."

Vice president John Blyth said the festival is a positive way to react against the threat of a dam on the river. He acknowledged that while the dam would bring economic benefits, a community built around the river and kayaking would bring lifestyle benefits.

"Think about where people want to live, not in Fort McMurray where there's a lot of money, but in Canmore or Banff, more desirable places with like-minded people," Blyth said. "Is quality determined by money generated or determined by people in the community and what they create?"

Of the 25 paddlers who travelled to PaddleFest, Blyth said several people have applied for jobs in

the community, while other paddlers have extended their stay and pumped money into the economy. He acknowledged kayaking could never compete with the \$6 billion dam project in terms of short term jobs, but said a tourism industry would provide a diverse, stable population, rather than one filled with people flooding in to build a dam and then leaving.

The community of Fort Smith has been polarized on the issue of a Slave River dam for nearly 30 years. Current town council supported ATCO's plan for feasibility studies, and Mayor Peter Martselos has stated numerous times the Slave River dam is one of two major projects the town needs to work towards.

Last week Martselos told The Journal the dam would bring much needed employment to Fort Smith.

"My goal was and continues to be (for youth) to have the opportunity to have jobs in Fort Smith and to live here," Martselos said. "We have some big projects, including the Slave River Hydro Development. I'm not saying the project can be good, but have the feasibility studies to see if it will be beneficial."

Meanwhile, with a potential dam on the White Nile in eastern Africa, more than 6,000 people who travel to Jinja, Uganda annually to paddle will have to travel somewhere else for their whitewater thrills. Those rafters generate over \$4 million for the local economy every year.

"With the White Nile being flooded out, more people are coming to the Slave," Blyth said.

"They're looking to go elsewhere."

The kayakers who made the trek North for the festival believe Fort Smith, with some encouragement in terms of short-term rental properties and perhaps a kayak shop, could become the next "mecca" of the kayak world.

"I'm suprised it hasn't taken off more already," Lindenburger said. "It's a long trek here, but people will fly to Africa to paddle water not as good as the Slave."