

Roads: More than lines on a map

Place: Nahanni River Watershed, NWT

Case study #4

Road: Prairie Creek mine road

Issues: Impact on protected areas; precedent for further development and landscape fragmentation; impact on sensitive areas (karst landscape); lack of community support.



ining is often seen as having a small landscape “footprint,” with an individual mine site requiring a much smaller landbase than forestry operations, for example. However, the proposed Prairie Creek silver-lead-zinc mine on the edge of Nahanni National Park Reserve is an example of how the access required by mining activities can dramatically increase landscape impact.

In the early 1980s, construction began on a silver-lead-zinc mine immediately adjacent to Prairie Creek, a tributary of the South Nahanni River, 32 kilometres upstream from the Nahanni National Park Reserve. As part of the mine construction, a 165 kilometre winter road corridor was cleared through the forest and mountains in order to reach the mine site. However, before the mine became operational the mine owners went bankrupt and the winter road was left unused for 20 years. The Canadian Zinc Corporation (CZN), a junior mining company, now owns the property. CZN has applied for a permit to re-construct the winter road and is going through its sixth environmental assessment to expand exploration activities.

The Prairie Creek mine site is located in an area of globally significant wilderness and natural features, which are recognized and protected by several national and international conservation designations. For example, the Nahanni National Park Reserve (NNPR) is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site; the South Nahanni River within the Park Reserve is a Canadian Heritage River; and the entire South Nahanni watershed is a candidate protected area, identified for protection by First Nations in the Deh Cho and Sahtu regions of the NWT.

The road corridor runs through the South Nahanni watershed, and passes through the heart of the Nahanni karstlands, an area of sensitive, globally unique limestone formations north of the Park Reserve, coming to within less than one kilometre of several unique karst features. These include Canal Canyon, Raven Lake Sinkhole, Karst Labyrinth, the assemblage of the First, Second and Third Poljes, which Dr. Derek Ford, a leading karst expert, describes as unique in the world.

The Dehcho First Nations (DFN, formerly Deh Cho First Nations) are strongly in favour of protecting the entire South Nahanni watershed. The proposed winter road would cross lands within the South Nahanni watershed that were recently granted interim protection from industrial development by the federal government as part of the Deh Cho Process (a land and self-governance negotiating process) because of their significant cultural and ecological values. The lands are also currently under consideration for inclusion in an expanded Nahanni National Park Reserve. Part of protecting the watershed would involve removing the Prairie Creek mine and associated infrastructure, such as the proposed road.

The Deh Cho Process is underway in part to define how the land and waters will be managed in the Deh Cho Region. The federal government currently owns and manages the land, while the DFN assert that they are the keepers of the lands and waters of their ancestral homeland. The application for a permit to re-open the road has been made under the *Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act* (MVRMA), a federal government act.

In responding to the road application, DFN has stated their concerns about the environmental impacts the

road may have on their traditional lands and waters, which they rely on for hunting and fishing, and have requested an environmental assessment. The community of Nahanni Butte, located on the South Nahanni River downstream from the mine, stated they did not support the application and passed a Band Council Resolution requesting an environmental assessment.

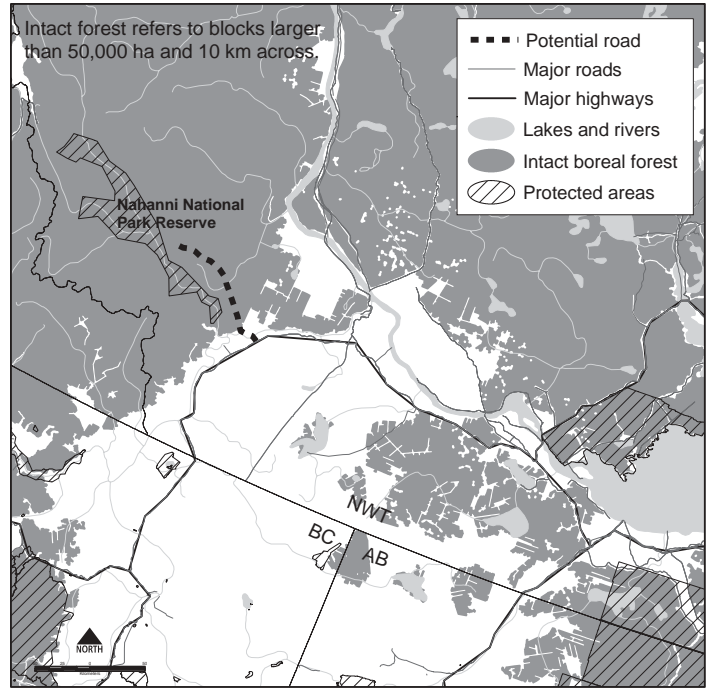
Parks Canada, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, the Government of the Northwest Territories, karst expert Dr. Derek Ford and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society have all made submissions supporting an environmental assessment of the project.

However, CZN has requested that the road be exempt from Part 5 of the MVRMA, which would mean that the project would not undergo an environmental assessment. The company is relying in its submission on a clause in the MVRMA that exempts some older projects from preliminary screening and environmental assessment.

In 2002, the Cantung mine, also located in the South Nahanni Watershed, applied for the same exemption for a water licence renewal application. They were initially denied the exemption, but this decision was eventually overturned on court appeal and the requirement for an environmental assessment was waived. However, the Cantung mine subsequently ceased operations and filed for bankruptcy protection in December 2003.

In May 2004, CZN's request for an exemption was denied and a preliminary screening of the application was at the environmental assessment stage. However, CZN subsequently won an appeal to exempt the road from an environmental assessment. CZN has also initiated another environmental assessment for further exploration and has publicly stated that they will need not only a winter road but an all-weather road.

Unless the South Nahanni Watershed is fully protected, as has been proposed by local First Nations, conservation groups and thousands of Canadians, applications



for development around the current Park Reserve will continue to be submitted and, over time, the area will become increasingly fragmented. Additionally, as long as the Prairie Creek mine remains in the watershed, it will retain the ability to apply for and receive permits for developments that may put the natural values and water quality of the Nahanni at risk.

In August 2003, Parks Canada and the Dehcho First Nations signed a memorandum of understanding to expand the park reserve, with the entire watershed as the area under consideration. Expansion of the Park Reserve to include the entire watershed and removal of existing developments is the only way to ensure that the Nahanni remains an unspoiled ecological treasure.

