

The Canadian Heritage Rivers system

SEAL RIVER MANITOBA

Of the four major rivers in northern Manitoba, the Seal River alone remains completely underdeveloped, wild and rugged. In contrast to the impoundments on the Churchill and the Nelson, and the rich fur trade and exploration history of the Hayes, the Seal River shows virtually no evidence of modern human activity. Although in the days before written history the river flowed through a major native hunting and fishing ground, the Seal now attracts only a few native people and small groups of hardy wilderness adventurers.

For these groups, travel downriver may require two to four weeks of difficult yet exhilarating boating. First, an extensive cold-water lake is encountered where winds create dangerous waves; then, numerous long rapids in a totally isolated, sub-arctic environment test their survival skills; finally, travellers must navigate a boulder-strewn tidal estuary.

The Province of Manitoba nominated the Seal to the Canadian Heritage Rivers System in June, 1987. The nominated section is 260 km long and extends from the junction of the North and South Seal rivers, at Shethanei Lake, to Hudson Bay.

The Seal River gets its name from the 'marine' harbour seals which can be seen in freshwater as far inland as Shethanei Lake.

GEOGRAPHY

The Seal River is located in the roadless wilderness of northern Manitoba, 1000 km by air charter from Winnipeg. The Seal estuary is 45 km across Hudson Bay from Churchill. Other than Churchill (population 1,300), the only settlement in the area is Tadoule (population 250), a small Chipewyan community located along the South Seal River at Tadoule Lake.

The Seal begins its course at Shethanei Lake, ringed by the magnificent sand-crowned eskers that are so much a part of the Seal River landscape. Then, passing stands of black spruce, its velocity increases toward the Big Spruce River Delta, and accelerates dramatically into the rapids and gorges which surround Great Island. Beyond the island, the river leaves the boreal forest and enters a sparsely-treed, transitional subarctic environment of tundra and heath, christened by the natives the "Land of Little Sticks". Finally, the Seal flows through barren arctic tundra, huge boulder fields and complex rapids, spilling into a beautiful estuary where its freshwaters mix with the salt of Hudson Bay. Except for the less than two dozen skilled rafting and canoeing parties which visit the river each year, and the occasional native fisherman and trapper, there is virtually no human activity along the Seal River. The remote, roadless nature of this region has meant that activities such as mining exploration have been costly, air-supported ventures, and even the discussion stages of any development of the area's hydro potential are many years away.

Natural Heritage

Nomination of the Seal river to the CHRS was based primarily on its outstanding natural heritage:

- The Seal is the largest remaining undammed river in northern Manitoba.
- The river valley contains excellent representation of the subarctic boreal forest of the Precambrian shield, and the arctic tundra of the Hudson Bay Lowlands.
- The valley is also habitat for 33 species of plants which are rare in Manitoba, and supports some unusually large white spruce and tamarack.
- Glacial features are everywhere. 300 metre-wide eskers extend up to several hundred kilometres in a north-south direction, sometimes as lake peninsulas or submerged landforms. Northern Manitoba's largest drumlin fields were formed here by the glaciers, as were extensive boulder fields.
- The estuary area is actually rebounding from the weight of the glaciers at a rate of about 53 cm per century, among the fastest in the world.
- The Seal also provides habitat for undisturbed wildlife populations. Common here are moose, black bear, wolf, fox, snowshoe hare, ptarmigan, Canada goose, ducks, otter and beaver. The much rarer wolverine, golden and bald eagle, osprey, and polar bear are also found. Even more important, the river's estuary is the calving and feeding grounds for 3000 beluga whales, part of the largest concentration in the world and the Seal is winter range for part of the 400,000 strong Kamanuriak caribou herd.

HISTORY

The Seal river area played an important role in native hunting, fishing and travelling. The white man found the area less hospitable. Isolated and difficult to navigate, with infertile soils and a cold climate, the Seal was quickly ruled out as a travel, trade or settlement corridor.

The river's nomination to the CHRS was not based primarily on its human heritage, but there are several historical features of interest:

- The number of prehistoric artifacts and archaeological sites along the Seal is unusually large. Fire rings, scrapers, flakes, projectiles and hammers are often exposed on the surface of eskers at campsites and along the caribou trails by the river, between Tadoult and Great Island. The age of these finds spans the Paleo-indian peoples of 7,000 years ago, to the Taltheili Tradition of 1 A.D. to 1700 A.D.
- The remains of Chipewyan and European trappers cabins, and 100 year old grave sites marked by picket fences on top of eskers, reflect more recent occupation.

- The river is also closely associated with one European explorer. Samuel Hearne of the Hudson Bay Company left Fort Prince of Wales, near Churchill, February 1771, on his second of three attempts to locate the copper fields which the Indians said bordered the northern ocean. Enduring incredible hardship, Hearne followed the Seal River inland on foot to Shethanei Lake. He then back-tracked to the Wolverine river which he followed north into the barrenlands. Hearne became the first white man to discover the Arctic Ocean, and his journals and maps were a major contribution to the knowledge of Canada's north until the early 20th century.
- An abandoned mining camp on Great Island, operated by the Great Seal Prospecting and Developing Syndicate between 1953 and 1958, is typical of mineral exploration camps which operated in the north during the 1940's and 1950's. Well preserved log buildings, a dynamite storage shack, a drilling platform, and the other remnants are scattered throughout the site.

Recreation

The river's nomination to the CHRS was based in part on its ability to provide an outstanding whitewater wilderness river trip. A trip from Tadoule to Hudson Bay would encounter, in order: 20 km of lake travel, with three major sets of rapids and a boulder field between Tadould and Shethanei Lake; 40 km of open, shallow water on Shethanei lake, where dangerous waves and heavy winds can make travel impossible for days; 64 km of variable channels through numerous choppy rapids and a narrow, deep gorge; 28 km of intermittent whitewater along the scenic channel of Great Island including a possible 3 km portage; 124 km of flat country, transitional subarctic tundra forest and boulder field rapids; 4 km through the estuary's maze of marshes, tidal flats, islands, shelves and reefs passable only on the north channel and then only when properly timed with the tides; and, finally a rendezvous with a float plane or water taxi from Churchill on the Hudson Bay shoreline.

In addition to a rugged wilderness river trip, the Seal River offers other recreational opportunities:

- Shethanei Lake is very reliable for trophy-size lake trout, and large northern pike, and grayling are present throughout the river.
- Hikes to the top of eskers and rocky knolls are rewarded with 360 degree vistas of a totally natural environment. Short hikes along eskers and beaches, or across Great Island, allow modern-day explorers to follow the timeless migration path of the barren-ground caribou. Visitors can also retrace the steps of Samuel Hearne by climbing the esker that was his vantage point on Shethanei Lake.

- Wilderness camping is possible at numerous sites along the western two-thirds of the river. However, toward Hudson Bay, only poorly drained campsites on densely-willowled river banks are found.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Access: the closest permanent road passes 275 km southwest of the Seal. One can fly from Flin Flon, Lynn Lake, Thompson, or Churchill to Tadoule, Shethanei Lake or to the east or west ends of Great island. Access from southern Canada to Churchill is possible by daily air service or three times weekly rail service from Winnipeg and The Pas. For those wishing to extend their trip by 200 km or more, it is possible to start further upstream landing by float plane on any of the numerous lakes along the North and South Seal rivers or in the Nueltin lake system, or by beginning one's journey from road accessible Southern Indian Lake.

Egress is also difficult. While motorised rafters may be able to travel the 45 km over the treacherous shoals and open water of Hudson Bay to Churchill, canoeists and kayakers cannot do so safely. All river travellers are advised to arrange for water taxi or aircraft pick-up from the Seal river estuary.

Accommodation and Services: There are no accommodation or visitor services along the Seal. Tadoule has a landing strip, nursing station and grocery store but no other services. Churchill and Thompson are the primary service centers with support facilities and accommodation. Outfitters and guides may also be arranged from Flin Flon, Lynn Lake, The Pas, and Winnipeg. A further alternative is to arrange trips through wilderness camps at Nueltin Lake or the South Knife river.

Travellers are strongly advised to make detailed plans for a trip. Hazards here are plentiful. The river is fast, shallow and ice-cold. Capsizing and hypothermia are very real possibilities. Rapids are often long, shallow and boulder-strewn. Navigation for motorised craft may not be possible in years of low precipitation and portage paths do not exist at present. Travel on the estuary and Hudson Bay requires prior knowledge of tide charts and healthy respect for unpredictable weather, ice, and polar bears.

Topographic Maps: Maps for the Seal River are available from the Canada Map Office, 615 Booth Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0E9: 1:250,000 scale - 54L, 54M, 64I and 64J; 1:50,000 scale: 54L 13, 14 and 15: 54M 2, 3 and 4: 64I 13, 14, 15 and 16: and 64J 9, 10 and 16. Maps at a scale of 1" = 4 mi. are available for Manitoba canoe routes from: department of Natural Resources, Surveys and Mapping Branch, 1007 Century Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3H 0W4.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Seal River - Services, Permits and Regulations: Manitoba Department of Natural Resources, Parks Branch, 4th Floor, 258 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 0B6.

Tourist Information - Manitoba Canoe routes, Outfitters, Guides, accommodation and Visitor Services: Travel Manitoba, 155 Carlton St., Winnipeg Manitoba, R3C 3H8.

Canadian Heritage Rivers System: the Secretary, Canadian Heritage rivers Board, Canadian parks Service, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0H3; or the Member for Manitoba, Canadian Heritage Rivers Board, c/o Assistant Deputy Minister, Manitoba Department of Natural Resources, Box 50, Room 800, 1495 St. James Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3H 0W9.

Additional Reading:

- Beals, C.S. ed. Science History and Hudson Bay. Queen's Printer, Ottawa. 1968.
- Malloy, William. "Paddling Manitoba". Explore. March/April, 1987.
- Travel Manitoba. "Land of Little Sticks". Canoe Route brochure. Travel Manitoba. Winnipeg, Manitoba. No date.

THE CANADIAN HERITAGE RIVERS SYSTEM

The Canadian Heritage Rivers System is a co-operative program, developed and run by the parks administrations of federal, provincial, and territorial governments to give national recognition to the important rivers of Canada. The primary objective of the program is to ensure that rivers which are outstanding examples of Canada's natural heritage, which have played a significant role in Canadian history, or which offer outstanding opportunities for recreation, are managed in such a way that their distinctive value is conserved while public use and enjoyment is enhanced.

On January 18, 1984, the Canadian Heritage Rivers Board was established to administer the CHRS program and to review river nominations for inclusion in that program. The CHR Board currently is comprised of twelve members, two appointed by the federal government and one appointed by each of the ten participating provincial and territorial governments. As of January 1, 1989, sections of fifteen different rivers, with a total length of 2607 km, had been nominated to the System.

Nomination of rivers to the Canadian Heritage Rivers System may be made only participating governments. However, private citizens or groups may suggest rivers to the responsible provincial or territorial parks' agencies.