



THE MAGNIFICENT  
NAHANNI  
*The Struggle to Protect a Wild Place*

GORDON NELSON

*With the research and editorial assistance of*  
SHIRLEY NELSON

*foreword by* HARVEY LOCKE



University of Regina Press

© 2017 Gordon Nelson

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means — graphic, electronic, or mechanical — without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any request for photocopying, recording, taping or placement in information storage and retrieval systems of any sort shall be directed in writing to Access Copyright.

Printed and bound in Canada at Marquis. The text of this book is printed on 100% post-consumer recycled paper with earth-friendly vegetable-based inks.

COVER AND TEXT DESIGN: Duncan Campbell, University of Regina Press

COPY EDITOR: Kirsten Craven

PROOFREADER: Kristine Douaud

INDEXER: Sergey Lobachev, Brookfield Indexing Services

COVER ART: Cirque of the Unclimbables Mt. Harrison. Photographer Fritz Mueller.  
*Courtesy of Parks Canada.*

All photographs courtesy of the author.

### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Nelson, J. G. (James Gordon), 1932-, author

The magnificent Nahanni : the struggle to protect a wild place / Gordon Nelson ; with the research and editorial assistance of Shirley Nelson ; foreword by Harvey Locke.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-88977-460-5 (softcover).—ISBN 978-0-88977-464-3 (PDF).—

ISBN 978-0-88977-465-0 (HTML)

1. Nahanni National Park Reserve (N.W.T.)—History. 2. National parks and reserves—Northwest Territories—History. 3. Natural areas—Northwest Territories—History.  
I. Title.

FC4163.N34N44 2017

333.7809719'3

C2016-907588-5

C2016-907589-3W

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



University of Regina Press, University of Regina

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, S4S 0A2

TEL: (306) 585-4758 FAX: (306) 585-4699

WEB: [www.uofrpress.ca](http://www.uofrpress.ca)

**U OF R PRESS** EMAIL: [uofrpress@uregina.ca](mailto:uofrpress@uregina.ca)

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada. / Nous remercions l'appui financier du gouvernement du Canada. This publication was made possible through Creative Saskatchewan's Creative Industries Production Grant Program.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada

Canada

creative  
SASKATCHEWAN

*Dedicated to:*  
*Dehcho First Nations,*  
*Parks Canada,*  
*The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society,*  
*The Canadian Wildlife Service,*  
*Nahanni River Adventures,*  
*The Royal Canadian Geographical Society,*  
*The Wildlife Conservation Society, and*  
*The leaders in research: George Scotter, Derek Ford, and John Weaver*

# CONTENTS

*Foreword*—xi

*Acknowledgements*—xiii

*Introduction*—xvii

*A Note on Terminology*—xxv

## PART I: THE WONDERS OF THE NAHANNI: PLANNING FOR A NATIONAL PARK RESERVE

*Chapter 1: Envisioning the Magnificent Nahanni*—3

*Chapter 2: Creating the Initial Nahanni National Park Reserve: Ideal Wilderness and Top-Down Planning*—21

*Chapter 3: The Struggle for Expansion: New Ideas and Approaches in the 1980s and 1990s*—43

## PART II: WHY AND HOW THE NATURAL QUALITIES OF THE NAHANNI WERE CONSERVED IN THE PAST

*Chapter 4: The Nineteenth-Century Fur Trade: The Early Years*—65

*Chapter 5: The Nineteenth-Century Fur Trade: The Later Years*—89

*Chapter 6: Mining and a Mixed Economy*—101

*Chapter 7: Conserving the Ecological Integrity of the Nahanni for More than Two Hundred Years*—117

### PART III: THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

*Chapter 8: Challenges and Opportunities—131*

*Chapter 9: Analogies with Experience Elsewhere—157*

*A Note on Sources—177*

*Appendix A: A Timeline for the Protection of the  
Nahanni—183*

*Appendix B: A List of Traditional Place Names in the Dene  
Language (Dehcho Dene Zhatie)—187*

*Notes—189*

*References—211*

*Permissions Acknowledgements—227*

*Index—229*

# ILLUSTRATIONS

*Colour Plates*—between pages 128 and 129

## *Figures*

- FIGURE 1.1. Initial Phase of Nahanni National Park Reserve, General Borders of 2009 Expansion and Greater Park Ecosystem Boundaries—4
- FIGURE 1.2. Sketch Map of Gold Rush Trails from the East—12
- FIGURE 1.3. 1928 Route of Travel of Fenley Hunter—14
- FIGURE 1.4. Map of South Nahanni River, Fenley Hunter, 1928—16
- FIGURE 2.1. Schematic of Land Systems and Associated Vegetation—29
- FIGURE 2.2. North and South Nahanni Region—32
- FIGURE 2.3. Glaciation of Nahanni—33
- FIGURE 2.4. Ancient Glacial Lakes—33
- FIGURE 2.5. Elevations—36
- FIGURE 2.6. Geology—36
- FIGURE 2.7. Discharge Record above Virginia Falls—39

- FIGURE 3.1. Schematic of Woodland Caribou Herd  
Seasonal Distribution and Movements—45
- FIGURE 3.2. Simple Ecological Model of Nahʔ ą Dehé—57
- FIGURE 4.1. Mackenzie Valley to 1850, Fur  
Trading Posts—67
- FIGURE 4.2. Sketch Map of McLeod’s 1823  
and 1824 Journeys—87
- FIGURE 7.1. Bird and Game Preserves and  
Sanctuaries, 1918–1948—121
- FIGURE 8.1. Schematic of Options for Sahtu or  
Nááts’ihch’oh National Park Reserve—140

### *Tables*

- TABLE 2.1 Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society’s  
Public Communications for the Nahanni—23
- TABLE 3.1. Nahanni River Adventures Public  
Communications for the Nahanni—55
- TABLE 8.1. Notes on Schematic Options for  
Nááts’ihch’oh National Park Reserve—139
- TABLE 9.1. Results of Research and Co-operative  
Needs Assessment Program—164





## *Foreword*

---

**T**he Nahanni is a place touched by magic. The river enchants as it meanders past hot springs, through deep canyons, plunges over an enormous waterfall, and braids out into boreal forest. The landscape includes the stunning granite spires of the Cirque of the Unclimbables, vast karst features, and the extraordinary Ram Plateau. There are only a few places with such power on Earth. The Nahanni's magic touched me so deeply that I willingly devoted a good part of ten years to its protection. And I was far from alone.

In the first decade of this century, Canadians packed auditoriums in Whitehorse, Halifax, Victoria, and many cities in between to hear about the glories and stories of the Nahanni. By the thousands they responded to the urgings of a collaboration of the Dehcho First Nations and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) to join the chorus of musicians, scientists, public figures, canoe guides, businesses, and conservationists calling for its protection. It became so important to so many varied people that Parks Canada was able to successfully drive a park expansion through the labyrinth of mining interests inside government almost unscathed.

The social movement we generated achieved that rarest of things: political consensus. The 2009 legislation to expand the park sped

through a contentious minority Parliament by all-party agreement and I was told it was the fastest bill any senator could remember passing through the Senate. The Governor General rushed to the Senate floor to give it royal assent. The sixfold expansion of the park meant Canadians had accomplished something great together while honouring the Dehcho First Peoples' deep connection to the land. For twenty-first-century conservationists, it represented a scenic national park expanded to a scale that matters to large mammals and the large landscape conservation initiatives of Yellowstone to Yukon and the Canadian Boreal Forest.

The massive expansion of Nahanni National Park Reserve became an international conservation cause célèbre. Feted at WILD 9, the Ninth World Wilderness Congress, in Mérida, Mexico, the host country even issued a postage stamp to celebrate it. The excitement also led to partial protection of the river's headwaters in a new Nááts'ihch'oh National Park Reserve created with the support of the Sahtu Dene in 2014. These two parks of the Nahanni together constitute one of the world's largest national park complexes. However, as great as they are, they suffer from problematic boundary anomalies. It remains for an enlightened government to do the obvious and remove the mining threats to the Nahanni.

Just as the Nahanni is an exceptional place, this is no ordinary book. It contains reflections on this remarkable national park landscape by one of the keenest students of parks and protected areas this country has ever produced. For fifty years Gordon Nelson has been thinking about and influencing how the rest of us see national parks in Canada. He brings his unique perspective to the Nahanni and places the conservation story in the context of evolving ideas about conservation. It will be a valuable reference for years to come.

I am honoured to have been asked to provide my photographs and this foreword to support Dr. Nelson's fine consideration of the magnificent Nahanni. I am glad he was touched by its magic, too.

—Harvey Locke, co-founder of the Yellowstone Yukon Conservation Initiative and Nature Needs Half Movement, and past president of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society  
Banff National Park, July 2016

## *Acknowledgements*

---

**T**his book grows from decades of personal observations on the development of Nahanni National Park Reserve. I was president of the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada at the time the federal government made the original proposal in the early 1970s. The book is highly dependent on interviews with Alison Woodley, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society; David Murray, Park Establishment Branch, Parks Canada; Stephen Woodley, formerly chief ecosystem scientist, Parks Canada, and former senior advisor, protected areas and climate change for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature; Herb Norwegian, grand chief of the Dehcho First Nations; Chuck Blyth, retired superintendent of the Nahanni National Park Reserve;<sup>1</sup> and Neil Hartling, president of Nahanni River Adventures.

These people spent hours in conversation with me and often supplied numerous references. I am grateful to them, as well as Derek Ford and George Scotter, for reviewing earlier drafts of this book, making many useful suggestions based on years of research in the valley, and helping with photographs. Ford and Scotter arranged for me to see early and difficult-to-obtain personal and government reports on the Nahanni. George Scotter sent me a copy of E.G. Oldham's

important 1948 letter on Nahanni National Park. I also owe thanks to Warren Wulff, librarian, Environment Canada, in Saskatoon, for making it possible to review the now rare 1971 report by Scotter and his colleagues on *Ecology of the South Nahanni and Flat River Areas*. Librarians at the Hudson's Bay Archives in Winnipeg and the National Archives in Ottawa were also of great assistance.

Thanks to Tom Andrews, archaeologist, Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, in Yellowknife, for our discussions and a copy of the Arctic special issue on snow-patch work in the upper Keele River area. I am very grateful to the staff at the University of Waterloo Library for their continuing support, especially Laurie Strome, circulation, as well as Joan Mitchell and Cindy Preece at the Wilfrid Laurier Archives.

I am profoundly in debt to Neil Hartling of Nahanni River Adventures for a great river trip. In August 2013, I travelled with my energetic and supportive friend, Bill Graham, to the Nahanni for a raft trip downriver with Nahanni River Adventures. En route, in Yellowknife and Fort Simpson, we had some revealing discussions. I thank the participants, including Erica Janes, Kevin O'Reilly, Bertha Norwegian, and David Britton. I also had the opportunity to learn from participants on the raft trip as well as the staff. I thank all my raft trip companions, including Kristin Morch, Al Pace, Bob Kelly, Chris and Noah Henderson, Andrea and Isaac Prazmowske, and, most particularly, Bill Graham, all from Ontario; Bob Warner and Sean Hommersen from British Columbia; and John Hommersen from Alberta. The staff was outstanding: Jamie VanDrunen of British Columbia, and Dylan Bajer and Mitch McCambly of Alberta, as well as enthusiastic Natalie Haltrich, trip planner, and Neil Hartling, owner and master guide of Nahanni River Adventures, both of Whitehorse, Yukon. I spent much of the trip talking with Neil. He also provided valuable advice on early drafts of this book, assisted with contacts and observations from his long Nahanni experience, and helped with photographs. I owe thanks to Chuck Blyth, former Nahanni National Park Reserve superintendent, and Herb Norwegian, grand chief of the Dehcho First Nations, for the valuable conversations we had when I was preparing the manuscript. Kevin O'Reilly and Gordon Hamre carefully reviewed and commented on earlier versions of the manuscript, offering advice

from their long experience in parks and environmental issues in the Northwest Territories. Kevin O'Reilly offered an additional helpful review of a late version of the manuscript. Alison Woodley also made a special contribution by reviewing both an early and a late version of the manuscript. Ann Baggio provided information on CPAWS work in northern Ontario and Manitoba. Barry Levely did his usual fine job on the figures.

Many people with deep experience of the Nahanni helped me in trying to secure suitable photos for this book. This was not easy, with the University of Regina Press having high standards for photos in line with current digital photography. Older historic photos taken in black and white or as slides in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s had difficulty meeting these standards. George Scotter, in particular, located many black-and-white and slide photos, only some of which could be used, including some by his colleague, Norman Simmons. George was helpful in many other ways. I am greatly in debt to him. Others were very helpful in finding more recent photos for consideration. Some of these are included in *The Magnificent Nahanni*. I owe special thanks to Alison Woodley, Wendy Francis, Derek Ford, and Neil Hartling. John Weaver also offered photos and was very helpful at a later stage, reading and suggesting improvements to Chapter 3. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Harvey Locke for offering photos, being kind and experienced enough to write a foreword quickly just before the manuscript was submitted to the press, and finally for his ideas, commitment, organization, and sustained leadership in expanding the Nahanni National Park Reserve in 2009 and for his ongoing efforts to conserve wild places in Canada, the United States, and the world.

I learned much from research and conservation colleagues over the years, including the late Jim Cragg, Steve Herrero, the late Larry Cordes, John and Mary Theberge, Harvey Buckmaster, Chad Day, Ellsworth LeDrew, and the late Len Gertler, as well, in the mid-1970s, as the people at the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, where my appreciation of Indigenous culture was enriched by service as a renewable resources consultant. I have had many years of lengthy and rewarding contacts with Parks Canada and am especially grateful to Al Davidson and Stephen Woodley. I have also benefitted greatly from my membership on

the Carolinian Canada Coalition, the Bruce Peninsula National Park Advisory Committee, and the Bruce Peninsula Sources of Knowledge Forum. I owe much to Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society colleagues such as the late Gavin Henderson, John Marsh, Bob Peart, Phil Deardon, and Mary Granskou. We are all in debt to Harvey Locke, long-time president and vice-president conservation, as well as Alison Woodley, now national director, parks program, and Eric Hebert-Daly, currently executive director. My understanding of provincial parks and the human dimensions of park planning has also been enriched by long service on the Ontario Parks Board of Directors.

I also owe much to Roger Byrne, Bob Scace, John Marsh, Jack Glenn, Jim Masyk, Sabina Jessen, Scott Slocombe, Amer Rghei, the late Terry Fenge, Judy Harris, Caron Olive, Lucy Sportza, Patrick Lawrence, Ken Van Osch, Kerrie and Steve Wilcox, Chris Lemieux, Heather Black, and other students and friends too numerous to mention, but each has my thanks. Of fundamental importance over the years has been the financial, logistical, and other support by the University of Waterloo, notably the Faculty of Environment. My debt to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for the University of Regina Press is very considerable as their observations made for substantial improvements in the book. I owe thanks to the individuals and organizations giving me permission to use their maps. And, as always, I owe enormous thanks to Shirley Nelson for her research, editorial and typing skills, memory, and strong overall support. Stacy Cooper, of Cooper Admin, was very helpful in working with the citations and references in completing the book. My sons, Jim and David, were supportive, as was my daughter, Kathryn, who referred me to newly published work on Fenley Hunter's Nahanni journals. The style and general quality of this book owe much to the guidance, hard work, and dedication of my editors, Karen Clark and Donna Grant, and copy editor Kirsten Craven; the technical and artistic skills of Duncan Campbell; the commitment to marketing of Morgan Tunzelmann; and the encouragement of U of R Press director and publisher Bruce Walsh. I am very grateful to all of them. The ultimate responsibility for this work remains with me.

## *Introduction*

---

**T**he *Magnificent Nahanni* is written for researchers, planners, conservationists, teachers, students, ecotourists, and citizens generally concerned about great wild environments and the North. The book focuses on the natural wonders of the Nahanni River and the long, more than forty-year struggle to protect it from pollution, habitat disturbance, and wildlife losses arising from mining or other development. Unlike the Yukon, Mackenzie, and other northern rivers, the Nahanni is not remarkable for its size. It begins in the mountains of the Northwest Territories near the Yukon border and flows about five hundred kilometres to the small Indigenous village of Nahanni Butte. Here it joins the Liard River, which runs on for about 150 kilometres, to join the mighty Arctic-bound Mackenzie River at the old fur trade settlement of Fort Simpson.

What is unique and remarkable about the Nahanni is the richness and diversity of its caribou, wolf, grizzly, Dall's sheep, and other wildlife; its old-growth forests; upland tundra; seemingly endless surrounding mountains; deep long canyons; swift waters; towering Virginia Falls; and majestic scenery. It was these natural wonders that motivated the federal national park agency, scientists, and nongovernment conservation organizations to begin publicly planning for a



national park in the early 1970s. The initial result was the creation of a small national park reserve around the great canyons and Virginia Falls in 1976. It was not until 2009, with the vital co-operation of the Indigenous people, that the long struggle resulted in approximately thirty-five thousand square kilometres being protected in a watershed-scale national park reserve. But two private enclaves within its boundaries remain open to mining and other development. And the struggle continues.

The intriguing story of the natural and human history of the Nahanni, and its escape from the effects of the fur trade, the late nineteenth-century Yukon Gold Rush, prospecting, sports hunting, and other European, American, and Canadian activities remains untold, as does the tale of how the current national park reserve came to be. Like other past conservation struggles in Canada, the ideas, policies, and practices that eventually led to the establishment and expansion of the Nahanni National Park Reserve are at risk of being forgotten. We will be the poorer for this, destined to begin the process anew somewhere else. This risk was prominent in my mind when I decided it would be valuable to prepare this conservation history of the Nahanni.

I have built the book on more than fifty years of research, planning, and personal and professional involvement in national parks and conservation in Canada and other parts of the world. This lengthy experience has made me aware of many important changes in thinking, policy, and practice that are relevant to the story of *The Magnificent Nahanni*.

I first became involved with the river in the early 1970s, when the federal government first announced the proposal for a national park. I have followed the story ever since, reading widely on the natural and human history of the Nahanni region, as well as other parts of the North. My research for this book has included archival and documentary studies, interviews and general discussion with knowledgeable people, and extensive travel in the North, including a monumental raft trip down the Nahanni in August 2013.

*The Magnificent Nahanni* is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 extols the natural wonders of the Nahanni, the cause of so much sustained interest in its protection as a national park. The descriptions

are built on my impressions from the August 2013 raft trip and more detailed observations made by two 1920s travellers and adventurers: the Englishman, Raymond Patterson, and the American, Fenley Hunter. Patterson's observations became widely known through his writings, particularly his book, *The Dangerous River*, published in 1954. The writings were interpreted by government officials, nongovernment conservation organizations, and many citizens as describing a valley that was pristine, essentially undisturbed by past or present human activity—the vision of ideal wilderness that came to Canada from the United States.

Chapter 2 analyzes the ideas, policies, and practices behind the creation of the first small Nahanni National Park Reserve in 1976. A larger park was wanted, especially by nongovernment conservation organizations, but was not achieved mainly because of opposition from mining interests and the Indigenous people of the area. The national park agency and conservation organizations generally were committed to the guiding concept of pristine or ideal wilderness, as well as the federal policy requiring that all the lands and waters in a national park be publicly owned or Crown land. These conditions led to the Indigenous opposition to a larger national park, since they meant that the people would lose the opportunity to pursue hunting and traditional activities within its boundaries. The Crown ownership question was put in abeyance by labelling the protected area as a national park reserve, the ownership decision postponed until there was agreement on a comprehensive land claim settlement. The overall result was the small initial reserve shaped in a narrow belt around the lower river valley and Virginia Falls.

Chapter 3 describes the growing commitment to biological, landform, and other research begun in planning for the initial 1976 reserve. The chapter also describes the introduction of landscape ecology, conservation biology, and other innovative concepts in ecological theory, as well as new and more effective research and mapping methods, including remote sensing and geographical information systems (GIS). These theoretical and methodological advances were applied to the Nahanni and demonstrated that the initial reserve was too small to provide for the food and survival needs of the wide-ranging nomadic

caribou, wolf, grizzly, and other animals within it, supporting reserve expansion to near watershed scale in 2009. This expansion was also built on the introduction of the science-based concept of ecological integrity, which involved thinking about and managing the Nahanni as a diverse, dynamic, self-generating ecosystem rather than an essentially static wilderness. The ecological integrity concept was more amenable to Indigenous hunting, fishing, and other long-time traditional uses and ultimately contributed to agreement by conservationists to accept these activities as part of the historic and current Nahanni ecosystem.

Another important change was the shift from relatively exclusive top-down corporate planning by the federal government to a more inclusive, interactive, and co-operative approach with and among nongovernment conservation organizations and Indigenous people. This also facilitated acceptance of the idea of “inhabited wilderness” and the negotiations and compromises that led to the expansion of the reserve in 2009.

Chapter 4 addresses the Parks Canada claim that the ecological integrity or dynamic state of the Nahanni ecosystem is similar today as in the past. This means that while forests, wildlife, and landscape conditions can change through space and time—due to fires, floods, earthquakes, and other processes—they are still the product of the same underlying self-generating ecosystem. This contention seems reasonable in scientific terms. However, it is not supported by historical analysis of any landscape changes. I thus undertook a study to determine if historical evidence supported the claim.

This investigation was organized in terms of a series of historical eras, characterized by distinct sets of economic, technical, and ideological features and processes considered likely to produce different effects on the Nahanni ecosystem. Wildlife and natural observations recorded in the journals and other writings of early traders and travelers are drawn on to determine what changes occurred in each era. It begins with a focus on the early fur trade era from circa 1800 to 1840. Knowledge of wildlife and the state of the system at that time rests largely on the observations of John McLeod, a Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) trader, who appears to be the first person of European

origin to travel into and describe forests, upland tundra, caribou, beaver, and other wildlife in the lower valley of the Nahanni, principally near the Jackfish River.

Chapter 5 then discusses the fur trade and its effects in the middle and later years of the eighteenth century when the previously isolated Mackenzie–Liard River region was opened up by free traders arriving on recently introduced steamboats from the Pacific coast. They set up shop at Hudson’s Bay posts such as Fort Simpson, attracting Indigenous peoples to trade, taking a rising toll on marten, fox, and other fur bearers, as well as moose, caribou, and game animals. One of the trade items was alcohol, and it unfortunately brought more Indigenous peoples in from outlying areas and created dislocations and social disturbances additional to the distress previously caused by smallpox and other new Old World diseases introduced early on by traders from Montreal. I did not have access to any traveller’s accounts of the state of the ecosystem at this time, although it may well be that further research in the post records at Fort Simpson or Fort Liard could fill this gap. Indigenous oral history does indicate that the ecosystem remained remote, diverse, wild, and apparently fundamentally unchanged.

Chapter 6 describes the prospecting, mining, and mixed economy that developed after the great Yukon Gold Rush of 1896–1899. The hunt for the precious metal spread into the Nahanni, although apparently only to a limited extent. The 1930s wildlife and natural observations of the adventurers Raymond Patterson and Fenley Hunter reveal a system still rich in wolf and other predators, as well as caribou and other wildlife. Dick Turner, a long-time resident of the nearby Liard Valley, wrote of numerous moose, caribou, Dall’s sheep, and other game he saw in the 1930s while searching for gold along the Flat, the big west bank tributary of the Nahanni. E.G. Oldham, a wildlife officer, inspected the Nahanni in 1948 and reported it was rich in game, devoid of fires, essentially “unspoiled,” and worthy of study as a possible Nahanni national park.

In contrast, Raymond Patterson despaired of heavy wildlife losses, notably Dall’s sheep, in the country around the First Canyon and Tlogotsho Plateau during his return to the lower valley in 1951. The

observations of other long-time prospectors, trappers, and travellers such as the Klondiker, Poole Field, and the American “mountain man,” Albert Faille, are lost in time, although further research may turn up records of what they saw.

Chapter 7 briefly summarizes the findings in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. It concludes that the Nahanni did essentially retain its natural diversity, resilience, and high ecological integrity up to the beginning of national park conservation efforts in the 1970s, although reports by Patterson, sports hunters, and government officials indicate declines, notably of Dall’s sheep in the lower valley. The establishment of the first phase of the Nahanni National Park Reserve in 1976 and its expansion in 2009 were timely in limiting prospecting, mining, sports hunting, and other economic activities, and stemming wildlife losses. The rest of Chapter 7 is a search for reasons why the Nahanni escaped the fur trade, mining, and other activities that caused extensive wildlife and ecosystem changes in surrounding lands and waters. The answer seems to lie in difficult access, remoteness, frequently ineffective company or government conservation efforts, and particularly strong stewardship of wildlife and habitat for centuries by Indigenous people. The anthropologists Hugh Brody and Richard Nelson, who lived with Indigenous people for months in the 1970s, describe these stewardship measures in detail. The hunting regulations posted by the Dene people of Nahanni Butte after the expansion of the reserve are vivid testimony to the strength of their stewardship today.

Chapter 8 describes the major challenges and opportunities now facing the Nahanni National Park Reserve. These include mining, notably threats from the Prairie Creek development in a private enclave within the boundaries of the reserve. Other challenges or opportunities include the need to adjust boundaries in the upper Nahanni Valley if wildlife is to be well protected against mining and the threats it poses to wild animals, habitat, and water quality. More archaeological work is generally needed to promote greater understanding of the early activities and effects of Indigenous people in the Nahanni in the centuries before the arrival of Europeans. Government commitments to the Dehcho First Nations for offering ancestral lands and waters to the expansion of the reserve remain to be fulfilled,

along with opportunities to work with them in securing greater benefits and a richer yet still diverse and traditional way of life through the Nahanni National Park Reserve.

Chapter 9 concludes the study and does so by drawing analogies between what has been done in the Nahanni and other places in Canada, the United States, and other parts of the world. The stress is on the idea of inhabited wilderness and the significance of co-operation in research, planning, and management of national parks and protected areas by government, conservation nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and Indigenous people. Examples are given from the historic experience of conservation leaders in the United States, such as the legendary Aldo Leopold. Reference is also made to recent relevant experience along the U.S.–Mexico border, as well as elsewhere on the international scene. In the end, considerable emphasis is placed on the opportunities national parks offer to provide economic, environmental, and lifestyle choices for Indigenous people. Opportunities are available for Indigenous people to maintain an essentially traditional lifestyle while participating in tourism, research, and other national park activities in co-operation with responsible government officials, NGOs, and citizens generally. The recent report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada underlines the need to rectify colonial injustices of the past. National parks and other protected areas offer relatively direct ways of doing so.

The book then ends with “A Note on Sources” that explains the cross-disciplinary fields of study and schools of thought that were drawn upon in preparing this book, as these may interest students, researchers, and citizens concerned about its origins.

A set of plates can be found between pages 128 and 129. These photographs are organized to show major features of the Nahanni Valley from the Ragged Range in the upper watershed through towering Virginia Falls, the long, deep canyons of the lower river and the braided channels, or Splits, leading to the Liard, the major west bank tributary of the mighty Mackenzie River. Readers may find it helpful to look over these photographs before reading the text.



## *A Note on Terminology*

---

Long-time residents of the land have been called “Indians,” “Savages,” “Red Men,” and other terms that are historically derived and often less than accurate. “Aboriginals” or “First Nations” are terms used frequently now, often for legal or political reasons. “Native” is also widely used. “Indigenous” is a current favoured appellation. It is generally used in this book, except where another name may be more appropriate in suggesting historic views or attitudes applicable at the time under consideration.

Old World newcomers also bear various names, such as English, Scottish, French, white man, Canadian, and American. Use of such specific names is generally neither possible nor especially desirable in this book. People intermingled; for example, Canadian can embrace people of French, Quebec, Metis, or American background. I have been guided in my usage by simplicity and circumstances, tending to describe people according to their enterprise or origin—for instance, Montreal or Hudson’s Bay Company traders. I write in a time of intense interest in identity, but such an approach is not necessary to this book. Here the focus is on interactions of Old World and Indigenous North American peoples and how their markedly different cultural, social, economic, technical, and natural values and characteristics influenced



land use, landscape, and environmental changes, and the conservation of the great Nahanni wildlands.

Parks Canada is now the name of the federal agency for Canadian national and historic parks. Its name changed often in the period under study. Constant shifts in terminology in the text are avoided by using general terms, such as national park service. A similar path is followed with other agency and government names. Measurement is given in kilometres or miles, depending on the circumstances, treating one metre as about three feet and a kilometre as about 0.62 miles.

*Part I*

---

THE WONDERS  
OF THE NAHANNI:  
*Planning for a National Park Reserve*



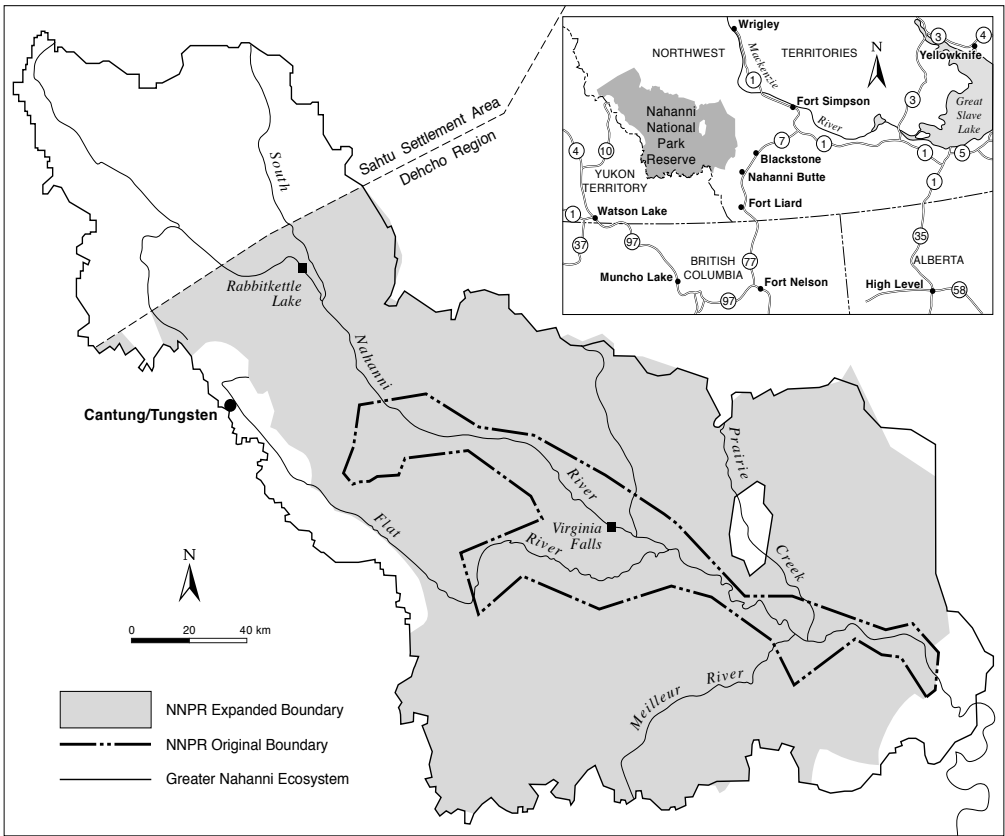
## *Chapter 1*

---

# Envisioning the Magnificent Nahanni

**D**espite centuries of pressure from trapping, prospecting, mining, big game hunting, and other exploitive activities, the magnificent Nahanni River still runs wild and free in Canada's Far North. More correctly known as the South Nahanni, the river is the stuff of legend and awe-inspiring reality. River rafters see and feel the ghosts of the past: rare cabins left by long-gone prospectors and trappers, with Indigenous people still travelling the lower river. Yet the wild predominates: the river's rush; colourful flowers, butterflies, and birds; caribou and wolf; vast green and yellow spruce, pine, and aspen forests; upland prairie and tundra; waterfalls, cliffs, clefts, canyons, caves, and uneven limestone karst terrain. These unique natural wonders are now protected in the Nahanni National Park Reserve. After decades of struggle, they have eluded "the paw of the ape," imagery evoked by Raymond Patterson, the adventurous traveller who trapped and prospected in the lower valley in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

The Nahanni stands out among northern rivers, not because of its size but because of its unique grandeur and rich natural diversity. It begins in the Mackenzie Mountains in Canada's Northwest Territories (Figure 1.1) and flows southeast for about five hundred kilometres before emptying into the Liard River near its junction with the great



**Figure 1.1.** Initial Phase of Nahanni National Park Reserve, General Borders of 2009 Expansion and Greater Park Ecosystem Boundaries. Adapted from Weaver (2006).

Arctic-bound Mackenzie. Along its course, the Nahanni passes from steep mountain slopes into a wide gently inclined basin fringed on the south side by the jagged towering glaciated peaks of the Ragged Range. It plunges over the precipitous 130-metre-high Virginia Falls and races through four great canyons before running into a maze of branching channels—the Splits—flowing to the Liard near the small Indigenous village of Nahanni Butte.<sup>2</sup>

Along the way, the Nahanni passes extensive forests, wetlands, and high alpine tundra housing caribou, moose, black and grizzly bears, Dall’s sheep, lynx, wolf, and many other animals and plants in a wild ecosystem increasingly rare in much of the North. These natural wonders have been described and briefly explained in books and guides such as Neil Hartling’s *Nahanni: River of Gold . . . River of*

*Dreams* (1998), Peter Jowett's *Nahanni: The River Guide* (1998), Pat and Rosemarie Keough's vividly illustrated *The Nahanni Portfolio* (1988), Richard Davis's *Nahanni Journals: R.M. Patterson's 1927–1929 Journals* (2008), and Chuck Blyth's *Nahanni Nah? q Dehé: A Selection of Photographic Images of the South Nahanni Watershed (2007–2010)* (2011).<sup>3</sup> *The Magnificent Nahanni* expands on these publications by giving more recent explanations of its outstanding landforms, wildlife, scenery, and human activities. But this book is unique in its focus on the long struggle to conserve the river and its watershed in a national park reserve.

I first became interested in the Nahanni in the early 1970s when the long struggle to protect the river really got underway. But I was not able to actually visit the Nahanni until August 2013, when my good friend, Bill Graham, and I took a raft trip down the river. We flew from Toronto to the long-time mining centre of Yellowknife, staying for two days talking to experienced northerners. We went on to Fort Simpson, the old fur trade settlement at the junction of the Mackenzie and its west branch tributary, the Liard. Just 150 kilometres upstream, the Nahanni enters the Liard at Nahanni Butte. We stayed in Fort Simpson for two days, walking the dusty streets, visiting the small, intriguing museum, the local pub, and the big general store, getting our gear together for the raft trip.

A small float plane took us over a vast panorama of mountains, forests, lakes, bogs, and muskeg to an arcing landing on a pool of relatively quiet water above the steep cliffs of Virginia Falls. We stayed overnight in a small Parks Canada campground, then portaged down to the river. Canoes and rafts rested on the bank amid thin mist, the roar of falling waters, and trembling ground. Our party of about ten was broken into groups of two or three, placed on rafts, and we were on our way.

The run was like a dream, the wide Nahanni flowing at times through turbulent rapids, at times through comparatively gentle reaches where we basked in the sun. Eagle nests, caribou, wolf, and black bear appeared here and there. Mountains loomed large on the horizon. We surged through the four great canyons. The last—or First Canyon upstream from the Laird—is virtually vertical, scarred with

caves sometimes leading to long tunnels dissolved in limestone bedrock underlying pitted karst terrain on the bordering Nahanni Plateau. We saw only one other party in the six days before our rendezvous with a big powerboat. It took us swiftly through the Splits, shifting channels carved relentlessly by the river as it erodes its way across the broad lowland sediments leading to the Liard, Nahanni Butte, and the end of a remarkable journey.

We can dig much deeper into the wonders of the Nahanni by turning to the writings of Raymond Patterson, who spent months prospecting and trapping in the lower valley in 1927 and 1928–1929. Patterson was an Englishman in his late twenties at the time of his sojourns in the Nahanni. He had enjoyed natural beauty, hunting, and outdoor life since boyhood. He served in the British Army during the First World War (1914–1918) and was captured and imprisoned by the Germans. Upon his release, he returned to England, worked for awhile for a bank, then left for Canada, seeking new experiences and adventure. He spent several years on ranches, mainly in British Columbia. He homesteaded in Peace River Country, living off the land, before undertaking his adventurous trip to the little-known Nahanni Valley in 1927.

Patterson's interest in the Nahanni seems to have been activated when he encountered stories of the river in the book, *The Arctic Forests*, by Michael H. Mason.<sup>4</sup> Patterson found this book at Harrod's, the well-known department store in London, while on a trip home from Western Canada in the winter of 1927. The book had physical and ethnographical maps of Alaska, Yukon, and the Mackenzie Valley, then a little-known region that had intrigued Patterson since he was a boy. One map had a large, beige-coloured area, labelled "Nahanni" after the poorly understood people of the region.

According to Patterson, Mason described the Nahanni as "a hearty, virile people, but have suffered much from white influences. They are hostile to strangers and many white pioneers have been done to death by them. The tribe was for many years under the complete domination of one woman, supposed to be partly of European descent."<sup>5</sup> Patterson had had a run of luck lately. He could afford to satisfy his curiosity and visit this exotic place. He proceeded to do so on his return to Western

Canada in the spring of 1927. Patterson described his journey in his classic book, *The Dangerous River*. It was not originally published until 1954 and has been republished numerous times since. *The Dangerous River* is a somewhat romanticized story written sometime after the fact for popular audiences. Fortunately, in 2008, Richard Davis edited and published Patterson's daily Nahanni River journals prepared while he was on the river in 1927 and 1928–1929. The journals give much more direct observations of his actual experiences and will be relied upon heavily in the following account.

In spring 1927, Patterson travelled about three hundred miles by rail to Waterways, now the oil sands town of Fort McMurray on the Athabasca River.<sup>6</sup> He then went about eight hundred miles downstream by canoe and steamer to Lake Athabasca, then down the Great Slave River, across Great Slave Lake, and on to the mighty Mackenzie River. Patterson ascended this great river to the mouth of its first major west bank tributary, the Liard. He moved by steamer and canoe up this stream to the South Nahanni River, where it enters the Liard after the long run from its source in the Mackenzie Mountains and the Yukon border country to the northwest.

After months of arduous travel, Patterson reached the South Nahanni in late July 1927. A major reason for coming to the valley was to face the challenges of a hostile yet beautiful wildland. He wanted to learn to survive through his own skill and labour in the bush tradition. Patterson poled, dragged, and sometimes paddled his canoe through the snyes and canyons of the lower South Nahanni up to the Flat River, a large tributary from the west. While in Nahanni Butte, he encountered the wildlands traveller, Albert Faille, originally from Minnesota. Faille was a veteran of the U.S. Army in the Great War. After his return home, he eventually found his way to the Lake Athabasca area, where he trapped for a couple of years before going to the Nahanni to trap and prospect.<sup>7</sup> Faille helped Patterson learn the ways of the canoe and the bush. He accompanied Patterson upstream on a very challenging canoe trip through the Nahanni canyons to the vicinity of the towering and majestic Virginia Falls.

Patterson did not go beyond the falls into the middle or upper Nahanni Valley on this or his later 1928–1929 journey to the valley. For the



most part, he and Faille travelled separately as Patterson acquired the skills and experience he needed to live on the land. Patterson spent several weeks exploring the Flat River. He found traces of gold and resolved to come back the following year to seek his fortune in the precious metal. He saw this wealth as a means to marry and support a young woman he had left behind in England.

Patterson returned to the Nahanni by another route in March 1928, going by train to Peace River Country. He and an English friend, Gordon Matthews, then journeyed by horse wagon, sled, and boat north along the Rockies and then down the Nelson River to the Liard. They were on the Nahanni by May 1928 and stayed until the end of January 1929. Patterson built a log cabin at Wheat Sheaf Creek in Deadmen Valley,<sup>8</sup> not far downstream from the junction of the Nahanni and the Flat. He used it as a base to explore and trap in the surrounding country. For the most part, the two men spent the winter very much alone. Among rare visitors was a group of Indigenous people who apparently had come over the mountains from the Liard Valley. Patterson gave them hot tea with lots of sugar. When they left, they dumped chunks of moose meat on his cabin roof.

In both his 1927 and 1928–1929 journals, Patterson's descriptions focus on two things: his own experiences and challenges; and the stunning natural qualities of the lower Nahanni and the Flat rivers. He describes the poplar, willow, and other trees, gold, red, and vividly beautiful in the late summer and fall. While on a reach of the Nahanni Valley between the Flat River and Virginia Falls on August 21, 1927, he says he is in an area where no one has stayed for seven years. He implies that this hiatus was due to tales of murder, suicide, and starvation.<sup>9</sup> Patterson later used such stories to dramatize *The Dangerous River*. Patterson writes often of feasting on blueberries and other wild fruit. He describes struggling up through spruce, tamarack, and alpine fir forests to the treeless tundra of the uplands, hundreds of feet above the Nahanni and the Flat. He sees Dall's sheep on high ground and kills one, saving the horns to ship south as a trophy of his northern hunts and adventures.

His observations of wildlife are numerous and paint a vivid picture of the natural wonders that eventually led to strong interest in

creating a national park. For example, while in the Nahanni Valley near “Murder Creek” on August 25, 1927, he was awakened at three a.m. by wolves. Later, he saw tracks of wolf, fisher, marten, and lynx in the sands where he had lunch.<sup>10</sup> Patterson saw, or saw signs of beaver and frequently of moose, especially in the late summer and fall in the favourable habitat along the lower slopes and floodplains of the Nahanni and the Flat.

Moose were a major source of food for Patterson, as well as for Indigenous hunters who seemed to concentrate their efforts in the lower Nahanni closer to the village of Nahanni Butte. Moose and other animals were less common and harder to get in the cold, snow, and quiet of winter. Patterson and Matthews found it difficult to live off the land. Flour, cereal, and other supplies had to be packed in from their downriver caches or Nahanni Butte. Their trapping in the winter of 1928–1929 seems to have been quite successful. They sold marten they had trapped for nearly \$2,000, not including what was received for pelts of weasel, fox, mink, coyote, and at least one wolverine.<sup>11</sup> They saw wolf, or signs or sounds of wolf, fairly frequently but do not seem to have trapped or killed many. These animals seemed to fascinate and disturb Patterson, who was impressed with their size. Two timber wolves “about the size of calves” were seen not far from his cabin on November 14, 1928.

On August 21, 1927, while travelling up the Flat, Patterson portrayed the valley as “a dream of peace and beauty.” It had its rapids, but there were long and lovely reaches where the trout jumped and little brown waterfowl nested “and always the splendid chocolate, black and golden butterfly and the one of pure gold.”<sup>12</sup> At supper he saw a great black bear, possibly a grizzly, and heard the plunging of an otter or beaver in the night. A cow moose appeared at midday on August 22. At 5:30 p.m., as he was poling up a riffle, Patterson heard sounds on the river shingle and saw a great bull moose about two hundred yards away, going to the river to drink. “The moose was not the least afraid and stood looking at me. I took his photo twice . . . I said Good-bye and went on my way but he stayed stock still in the water looking after me for a long while.” Patterson concluded that these animals do “not seem to know men” and that the river came “out of Eden.” At

supper that day, he heard marmots “piping amongst the rocks over the river—otherwise no sound but that of water.”<sup>13</sup>

Patterson continued up the Flat and was awakened early on the morning of the twenty-third by a squirrel running across his face. He later saw a pair of “whisky jacks” and watched a woodland caribou leave the woods about five hundred yards away. It apparently was the first caribou he had seen: “A very pretty animal—smaller, more graceful and lighter than a moose.”<sup>14</sup> This could suggest that caribou were generally rarer than moose and other animals. But we need to be careful about drawing firm conclusions, because today caribou mainly spend summers in the upper Nahanni and its cooler, less mosquito-rich highlands, moving downstream in winter.<sup>15</sup>

Patterson’s observations give the impression of a diverse fauna and flora in the lower Nahanni and Flat valleys in the mid- to late 1920s. Overall, animals appear to have been relatively numerous. Patterson’s observations were concentrated largely in the lower valley of the Nahanni and along the Flat, where the slopes and floodplains offer favourable habitat for wildlife. His observations also suggest that the animals may have been recovering from heavier hunting, trapping, and prospecting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

His allusions to murder along the valley reflect long-held tales and legends of the river. They suggest that in earlier days, prospectors and trappers may have been numerous enough to come into conflict with one another over gold or the fur-bearers of the country. However, their numbers and effects remain elusive because a few people can range widely in the search for fur or precious metal. Their activities may have been sufficient to threaten yield and create hostilities over territory. Some of the conflict may also have been due to struggles among Indigenous people and newcomers to the valley. Patterson does refer to an old path near Virginia Falls said to have been used by prospectors in the Yukon Gold Rush some twenty to thirty years earlier, around the turn of the twentieth century. He also records finding, in various parts of the valley, abandoned campsites, old cabins, old river scows, and other equipment.

Patterson stresses the endurance and persistence needed to survive on the land. He faced dangers and risks in swinging his canoe