



Rick and Abi Horobin pose with a canoe paddle near the Yukon River in Whitehorse on Sept. 3. (Crystal Schick/Yukon News)

Project aims to assess human impacts on Yukon River campsites

Efforts made to examine human impacts on the river

HALEY RITCHIE / Sep. 4, 2020 4:00 p.m. / LOCAL NEWS / NEWS

The Yukon River's appeal as pristine wilderness may be attracting so many people that it risks losing that reputation, say volunteers who are tracking impacts on campsites along its banks.

Volunteers Abi and Ric Horobin have spent the past summer travelling the Yukon River for days at a time, visiting campsites along the trip route to document the human impacts.

This includes things like trash, toilet paper, human waste, unofficial structures and tree damage.

"It's a combination of people not knowing and it's a combination of you getting somewhere and if it's not clean, you're more likely to think, 'It doesn't really matter.' [The Yukon River] is popular and getting more popular," Abi Horobin said.

It's not worth pointing fingers and debating whether the issue is local Yukoners or those visiting from Outside, said the Horobins.

"It doesn't matter where they're from. It's people. So we're trying to get away from labeling," she said.

Earlier this year, the couple and the Yukon Canoe and Kayak Club applied for a grant from the Environmental Awareness Fund in order to fund the initial assessment.

Of the 127 locations they checked out, the Horobins emphasized most were in good shape, but a handful were disasters. Most sites have a very small amount of trash left behind, while one site was so bad the smell of feces was present before they got ashore.

"The whole point of this entire assessment really was to get a handle on what is going on," Ric said.

The problem is, the worst sites are also generally the most popular. While you could plan a multi-day paddle trip and avoid the bad sites, most people will end up at popular sites and their experience of the river will be a poor one.

"If you have a whole bunch of people always stopping at one place then you don't need very many people to make a mess," Ric said.

“We’ve done this on the river this year, and we’ve seen piles of poo and toilet paper that people have not even tried to bury,” Abi added.

Included in the application were also plans for a public awareness campaign and an app that would allow crowdsourcing campsite conditions from other paddlers.

Due to the unusual COVID-19 paddling year and the high water levels, the initial assessment completed by the couple is only the first phase in the plan to visit all campsites along the river and label them from “excellent” to “very poor.”

Data collection points include whether the site already has pit toilets, and what kinds of human impacts are visible at the start and end of the season.

The Wilderness Tourism Association of the Yukon happened to be forming their own river stewardship committee at the same time, according to president Kalin Pallett, and are looking forward to working together.

“We’re excited about this initiative. It’s been on the back burner for a while, and we’ve got the time and the resources and we’re excited to be working with other community groups like [the Canoe and Kayak Club] and the community rangers and with the hope and goal of creating benefit to everyone,” he said.

The Horobins said finding a solution won’t rely on one organization. Instead, a management plan would require teamwork from the Yukon government and tour operators, clubs and parks, in addition to First Nations governments. Many parts of the river route include settlement lands.

The tourism association is also discussing what can be done to make improvements, including more presentations and public awareness campaigns. Pallett said they have also been in talks about arranging fall clean-ups to help mitigate the current situation at busy camps.

"It's tough because we don't want to necessarily inundate these beautiful wilderness rivers with signage and structures and all that kind of stuff, but at the same time, we need to mitigate the impacts that are happening," Pallett said.

"We want to take care of these resources so that generations can enjoy them the way we have," he added.

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