

## IDEAS

David F. Pelly on saving the Thelon Sanctuary, the largest wildlife sanctuary in Canada, located in the barrens of Canada's North



A view of the heart of the Thelon Sanctuary.

DAVID F. PELLY

# Sanctuary preserved

DAVID F. PELLY

**M**annik is one of those older Inuit men who, by their very presence, stir respect in any gathering. He, like others of his era, has been a hunter all his life. That essential fact defines him. It speaks volumes about his understanding, his views, his values. His face is lined by the winds of time. His eyes are forever focused on the distant horizon.

At a public forum in Baker Lake, Nunavut, more than 10 years ago now, several hundred people, including Mannik, turned out to learn about, and contribute to, the discussion of the Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary's future. It was a contentious issue in many ways. Mining companies, for whom the vast area in the heart of the Barrens — 56,000 square kilometres, the oldest and largest fully protected wilderness in Canada — had been off-limits for as long as there has been mineral exploration in the North, had been campaigning for access to the riches they were certain must lie beneath the surface of the sanctuary's pristine landscape. Inuit and Dene both wanted to assert their Aboriginal right to hunt in the sanctuary, in an area that, when it was established in 1927, was set aside as a no-hunting zone to protect the musk-ox, endangered at the time. As recently as the mid-1990s, other groups all had their own particular interest: outfitters, sports-hunters, canoeists, biologists, wolf hunters and so on.

As the meeting wore on, opinions were voiced and duly recorded. One wondered where the consensus would lie in Baker Lake. It was unclear. After an hour or more of somewhat circular discussion, Mannik took the microphone. He spoke slowly. It was translated for those who did not understand Inuktitut. The room was silently absorbed. Here is what he said:

"When I was young, maybe 30, living on the land as a hunter, and the RCMP first told us about the Thelon Sanctuary, a place where we were not to hunt, I thought that was a crazy idea. But many years later, I noticed there was more wildlife in the areas where I was hunting. Then I realized why the Thelon Sanctuary was a good idea. You see lots of musk-ox, lots of wolves, and lots of foxes on the land around here. Do you know where those musk-ox come from? Do you know where those foxes come from? Do you know where those wolves come from? Yes, from the Thelon Sanctuary. It is like a supply place for our land all around. It works for us. It has been left alone for 70 years now, in a natural state, and we should keep it that way, by leaving it alone."

When Mannik stopped speaking, you could feel the atmosphere in the room shift. There was a new certainty of opinion afoot. It was palpable. One man, in 150 words, had laid out what would become the community's accepted truth. In the years that followed, Baker Lake was deeply involved in the development of a new Management Plan for the Thelon Sanctuary, and Mannik's thoughts — though the precise source may have been forgotten, and many other voices added to his words — remained the guiding principle for this community's contribution to the planning process. A few months ago, albeit years after the process began, the Management Plan was finalized and

approved for the Nunavut portion of the sanctuary. Following the lead of people in Baker Lake, the necessary agencies in Nunavut have all endorsed the Plan.

The bigger picture is complicated by the fact that the Nunavut/NWT border cuts through the heart of the sanctuary. To date there has been no real disagreement between the two territories on the principles or practical measures embraced by the Management Plan, although the NWT government has yet to apply its stamp of approval.

The foundation for this state of accord was laid 15 years ago by the late Jim Bourque, a Métis man who was active in wildlife management in the NWT for decades, eventually rising to deputy minister of Renewable Resources. He wanted to see the boundaries of the Thelon Sanctuary expanded. In the early 1990s, he stated firmly that the Thelon was not the place for mineral development, however necessary it might be elsewhere in the NWT. "This is one of the few places in the Canadian North where wildlife can live free of any threat from man,

and reproduce without having to deal with machinery or man-made noise. It's like a wildlife bank for us," said Bourque, echoing the notion put forward by old Mannik in Baker Lake.

The people closest to whatever happens in the West, the Dene of Lutsel K'e, have been vocal in their support for the new Management Plan. In a crucial and recent move, the Lutsel K'e Dene formally wrote to the government of the NWT to "strongly urge" the government to proceed with its approval.

"There is urgency in the matter of Management Plan implementation," the letter says. "In the past, the isolation of the Thelon basin provided relatively hands-off, de facto protection. This circumstance has changed with the four-fold increase in the price of uranium. Many companies are actively exploring for uranium in the area, some with claims immediately adjacent to the Sanctuary. We are concerned that without active management in the near future, the ecological integrity of the Thelon basin may become compromised."

The interests of Inuit in Baker Lake and Dene

in Lutsel K'e — the Native peoples who live on either side of mainland Canada's largest remaining tract of wilderness — have merged into a common goal: the protection of a large amount of wildlife habitat in the central barrenlands, this time in response to the pressure for mineral development from uranium, gold and diamond companies. The question which both of these communities are addressing now is, is the Thelon Sanctuary alone sufficient? Should the entire range of the caribou, upon which they depend for meat, be protected as well?

This is not the first time the Thelon Sanctuary has faced a crossroads in its history. There have, in fact, been several. It has survived them all, and is the more valuable for them — changes to its boundaries, attempts to allow mineral exploration within its borders, questions about its continuing usefulness. Since white man arrived in the North a century or more ago, bringing for his own and for Native use an increasing array of intrusive technology, the Thelon Sanctuary has enjoyed relative immunity from such technological incursions. Previously, the barrenlands ecosystem had not been disturbed by the indigenous people's natural way of life, over preceding centuries. So when the sanctuary was created, the ecosystem was essentially "pure." In the sanctuary alone, it has remained that way, evolving as it should, largely undisturbed by man. The result is, we are the inheritors of one of the world's few untouched wilderness areas.

In the future, there will not be anyone with the embodied wisdom of Mannik's generation to speak up on its behalf, no one who knew the land before all this discussion began, whose life force came from the land itself. The new Management Plan, properly construed, addresses that reality, and provides a road map for the way ahead, to ensure that the Thelon Sanctuary — the very soul of Canada's northern wilderness — will survive unchallenged for untold generations to come.

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David F. Pelly, author of *Thelon: A River Sanctuary*, has travelled extensively in the Thelon region, by canoe in summer and by sled in winter.

## THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

The new Plan, as approved in Nunavut and proposed in NWT, includes the following key elements:

- The Sanctuary is recognized as special for both natural and cultural reasons.
- The Sanctuary will be retained, its status essentially unchanged, its lands remaining "withdrawn" from availability to mineral exploration companies.
- Consideration is to be given to adding special management areas beyond the Sanctuary's boundary (in Nunavut, to protect caribou habitat, and in NWT to protect the upper Thelon watershed), based on community input.
- Inuit hunting rights under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement are not affected.
- A management authority, made up of community and government representatives, is to be established.



Mannik, the Inuit hunter whose vision shaped the plan to save the Thelon Sanctuary.