

On the Positive Side

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Responsible Recreation Conference- CMAIE, Revelstoke BC
May 2023

Outdoor Recreation as a source of commitment toward Nature Conservation The campaign to protect the Magpie River - a compelling real-world Example

Introduction

Outdoor recreation as a springboard for conservation advocacy is a hotly debated subject. Substantial literature describes this relationship, but a growing body of research questions whether mass outdoor tourism truly benefits conservation. Here, we argue that outdoor recreation can play an important role in the Canadian context, notably by highlighting outstanding candidate locations for protected areas in more remote parts of the country. We present a case where whitewater activities have indisputably played an instrumental role in fostering a deep commitment toward conservation advocacy by First Nations, local citizens, and municipal/regional governments.

The Storyline

'Since Time Immemorial': The Ekuaniitshit Innu frequent and use the *Muteshekau Shipu*, practicing a unique way of life (OIDN 2023).

1890: The lower 34 miles of the river are surveyed by T. Simard. The remaining 250 km of river remain uncharted until the advent of air photography.

1891: First descent of the Magpie River, led by Raymond Boyer on behalf of Québec's Federation Québécoise du Canot Camping (FQCC). Boyer labelled the river "almost uncanoeable", yet his river-running maps would prove to be instrumental in the future river conservation project (see Fig. 2).

1999: Québec's government raises the threshold for run-of-the-river dam classification from 25 MW to 50 MW. This opens the door to a number of private ventures, the most substantial being the proposal to refurbish and raise the 1959 dam at the mouth of the Magpie River.

2003: The National Geographic ranks the Magpie River as one of the Top 10 rivers for whitewater rafting expeditions.

2006: Following public hearings on new protected areas on Québec's North Shore, Québec's Environmental Hearings Bureau (BAPE) reiterates its recommendation to "fully preserve the wilderness character and the internationally-recognized recreational potential" of the river.

2010: The first of several yearly river trips is organized by the Mamit Innuat Tribal Council. This introduces Innu youth to multi-day whitewater expeditions on the Magpie River.

2018: Given the attention brought to the Magpie, the North-American Conference on River Conservation is organized in nearby Sept-Îles.

The Ekuaniitshit Nation joins forces with the regional government, local paddlers and SNAP-CPAWS, forming the *Alliance Muteshekau-Shipu*, devoted to seeing the Magpie river protected. The recreational value of the river is among key justifications put forth by the group (Fig. 6).

2021: A joint resolution is adopted by the Ekuaniitshit First Nation and the Minganie Regional Government. The resolution assigns **Legal Personhood to the Magpie River, a first in Canada** (OIDN 2021).

2023: Fifteen years after its hit documentary on the Romaine hydro complex, *Les Productions du Rapide-Blanc* release *Après la Romaine*, which questions the need for further hydroelectric development in Québec. Premiered on CBC/Radio-Canada in April 2023, the film highlights the transformative role of nature-based recreation, notably for youth and local communities.

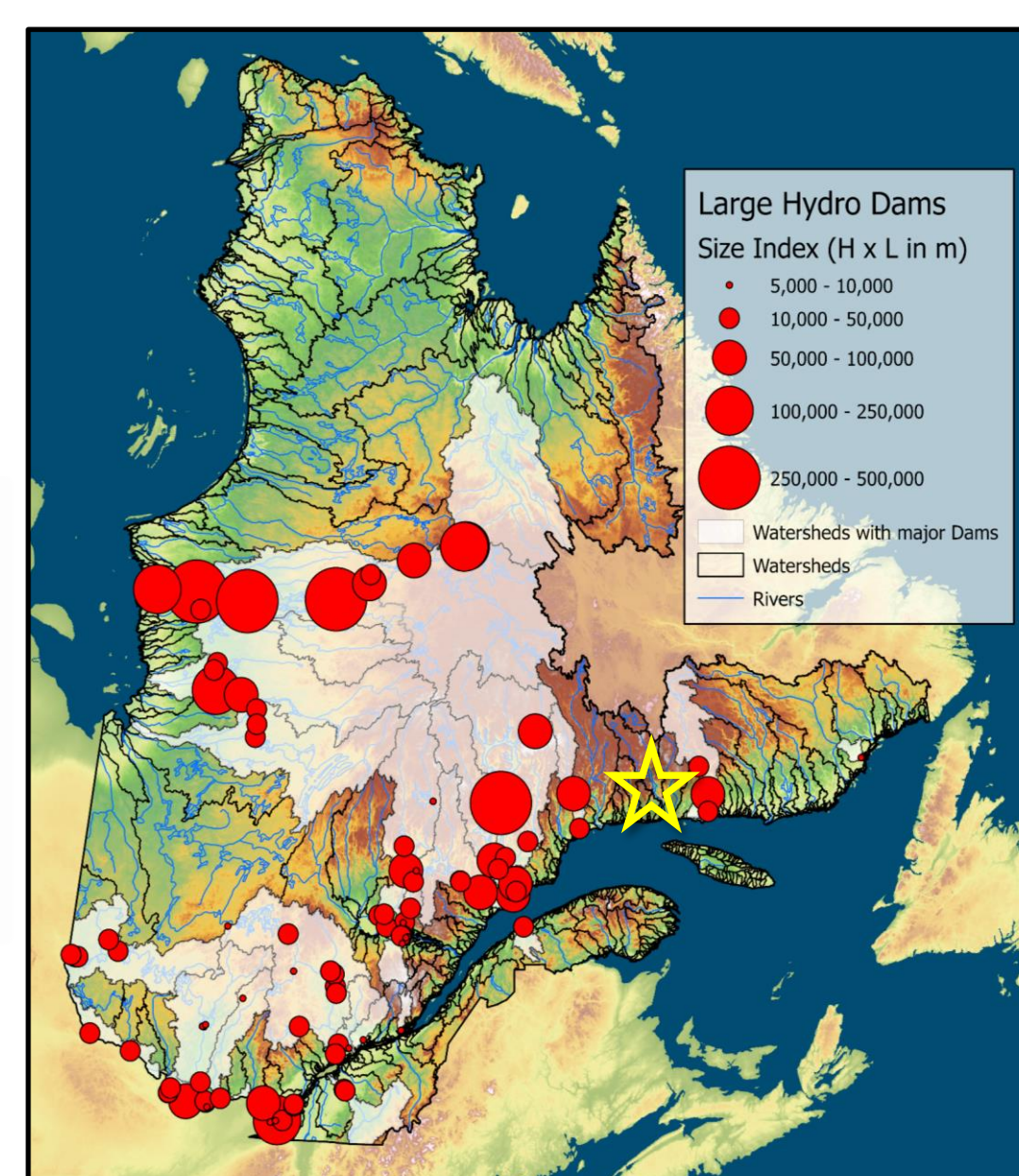


Figure 1: The Magpie is among the few rivers still flowing freely down from the heights of the Labrador plateau.

The Magpie River

Flowing on the unceded traditional territory - the *Nitassinan* - of the Innu Nation, the *Muteshekau Shipu* - "the river where water flows between square rocky cliffs" - drops from the edge of the Labrador Plateau, running 300 km down to the Gulf of St-Lawrence. As one of few remaining steep free-flowing rivers in the East (Fig. 1), the river boasts an exceptional number of whitewater features, as was revealed by the detailed analysis of Québec's official recreational river maps (Fig. 2).

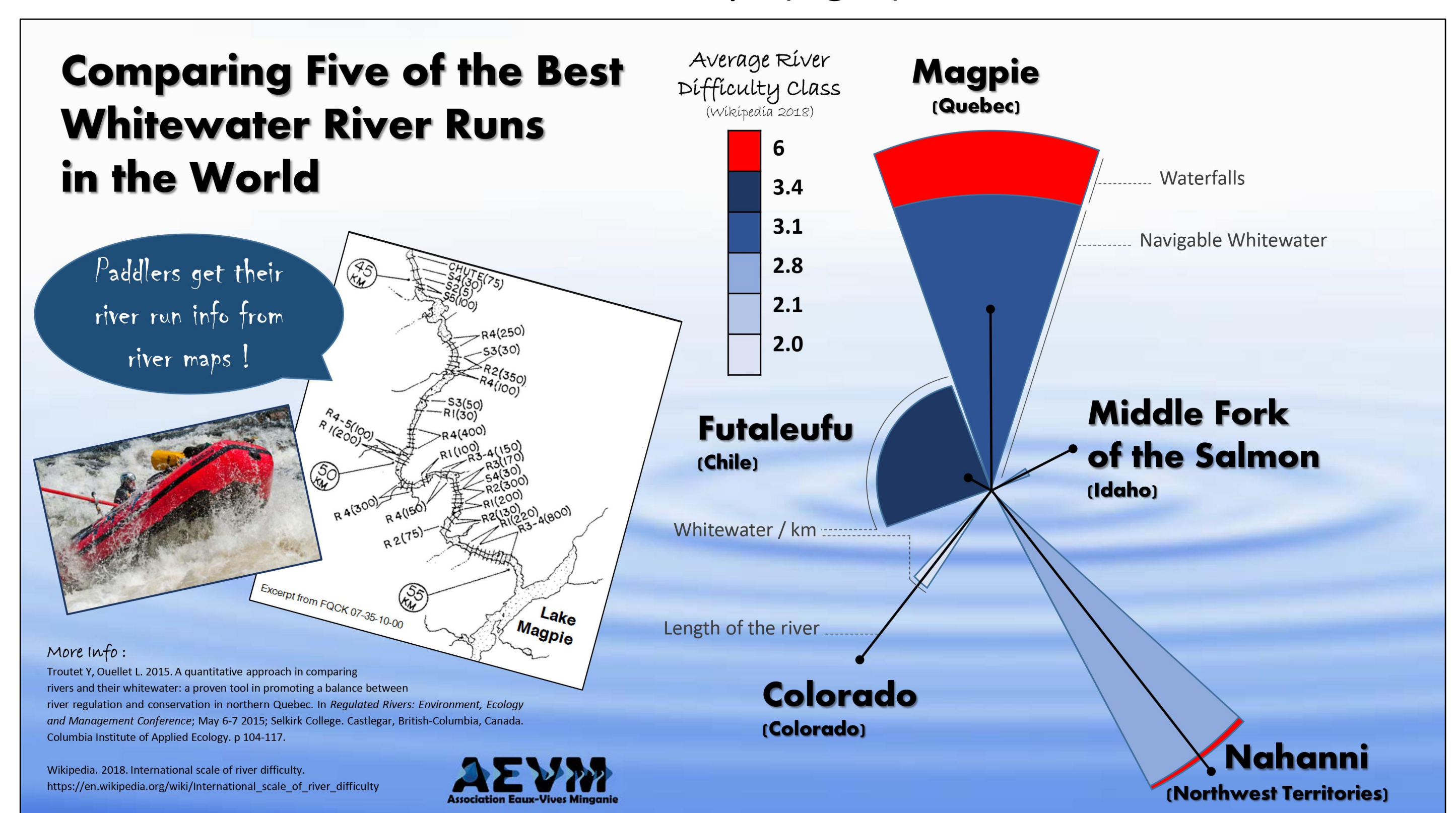


Figure 2: As part of its efforts to protect the Magpie River, paddlers partnered with NGO's and experts from the *Laboratoire d'Expertise et de Recherche en Plein Air* (LERPA - UQAC). Metrics derived from recreational river maps were used to compare the character of various world-renowned whitewater rivers. This has provided a key source of information to support the legal protection of the Magpie River.

1894: Having surveyed thousands of kilometers of boreal waterways, Albert P. Low, co-founder of the Geological Survey of Canada, travels through the area. Underscoring its ruggedness, he describes the ancestral portage route as "the longest and worst of those known to the writer anywhere in north-eastern Canada".

1959: A small hydroelectric dam is erected at the mouth of the Magpie River, supplying power to its namesake village. Power production is abandoned in 1989, but the dam remained.

1988: *Earth River Expeditions* pioneers commercial recreation on rivers deemed 'unraftable', in turn bringing international attention to their wilderness values. Commercial rafting begins on the Magpie River.

2000-2004: Opposition to a private dam on the Magpie River draws attention from the international paddling and conservation communities. Steve Fisher (arguably the world's best kayaker at the time) and Robert Kennedy Jr. (prominent American conservationist and current US presidential candidate) weigh in. An advocacy movie, *Long Live a Free Magpie* wins the National Paddling Film Festival (Fig. 3).

Public hearings on the private dam proposal are held in 2004. One of the most contentious issues is the impact to the recreational value of the river. The assessment panel approves the refurbishment of the dam, but recommends that no further dam be built, "given that the Magpie River offers a very high potential for recreational tourism".

2009: The provincial government announces the *Plan Nord*, a sweeping set of proposals for industrial developments in Québec's north.

Construction of a mega hydro complex (1550 MW) on the neighboring Romaine River begins. The joint Federal-Provincial Review Panel recommends "that if the project goes ahead, a similar river in the region offering comparable aesthetic and recreational features according to recognized criteria in this area should be protected" (BAPE 2009). This recommendation echos the many public comments requesting protection for the Magpie river as a compensatory measure for the loss of the whitewater character of the Romaine River.

Disregarding the repeated recommendations of the province's Environmental Hearing Bureau, Hydro-Québec announces that it is considering the construction of a new 850 MW hydro complex on the Magpie River (Fig. 4).

With support from local paddlers, SNAP-Québec (CPAWS) launches a campaign advocating for the protection of the Magpie River (see Fig. 5).

2015: *Wapikoni Mobile* releases the movie *Shipu (River)*, exploring the importance of free-flowing water for Innu youth.

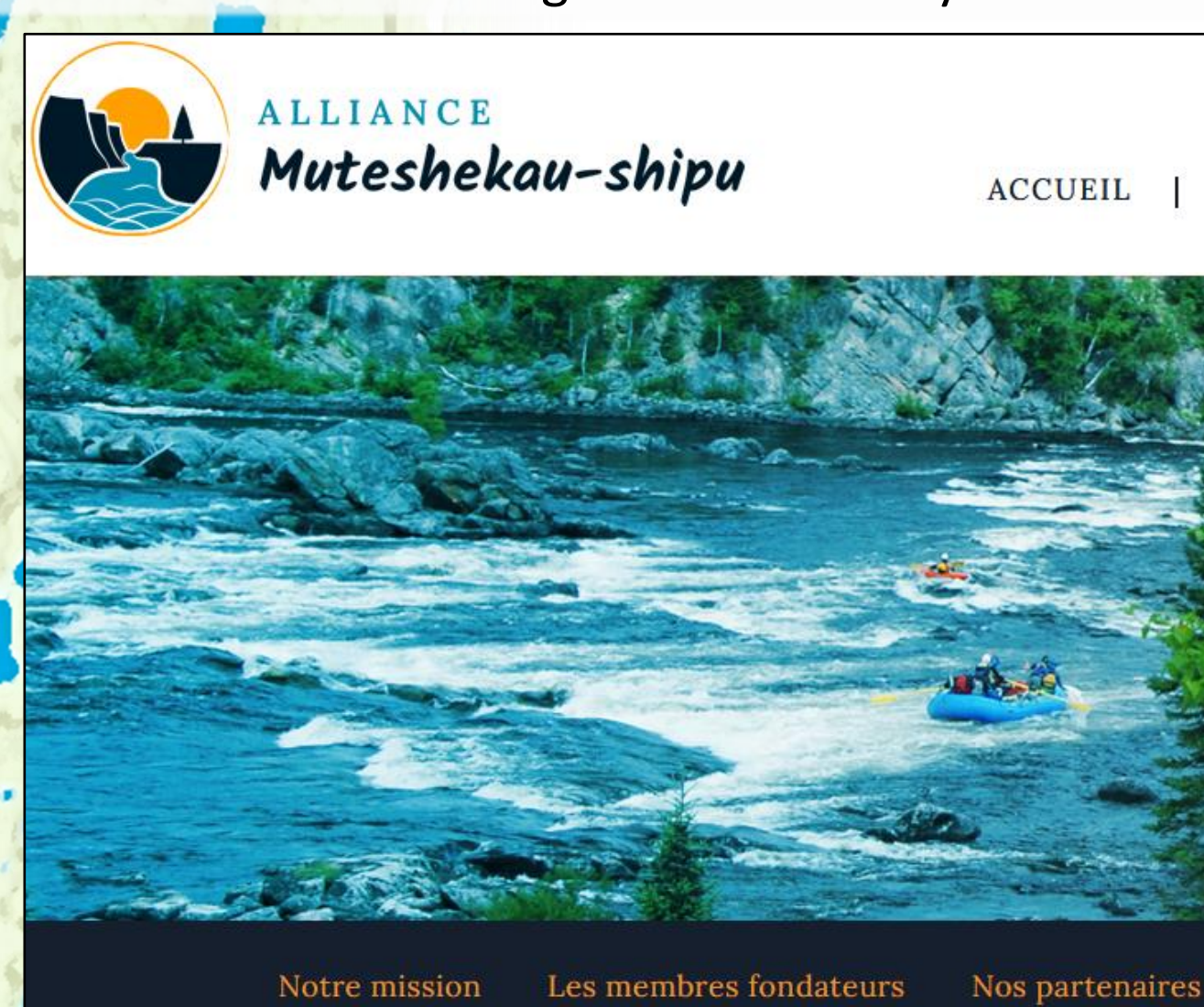


Figure 6: Whitewater sports appear prominently in materials and images put forth by *Alliance Muteshekau-Shipu* (as seen here on its main website header).

2022: Alliance Muteshekau Shipu is awarded the 2022 prize from Québec's *Commission des Droits de la Personne et de la Jeunesse*. In the face of government inaction, the group initiates a process to have the river recognized as an **Indigenous and Community Conserved Area (ICCA)** under the United Nations Environment Programme - World Conservation Monitoring Centre.

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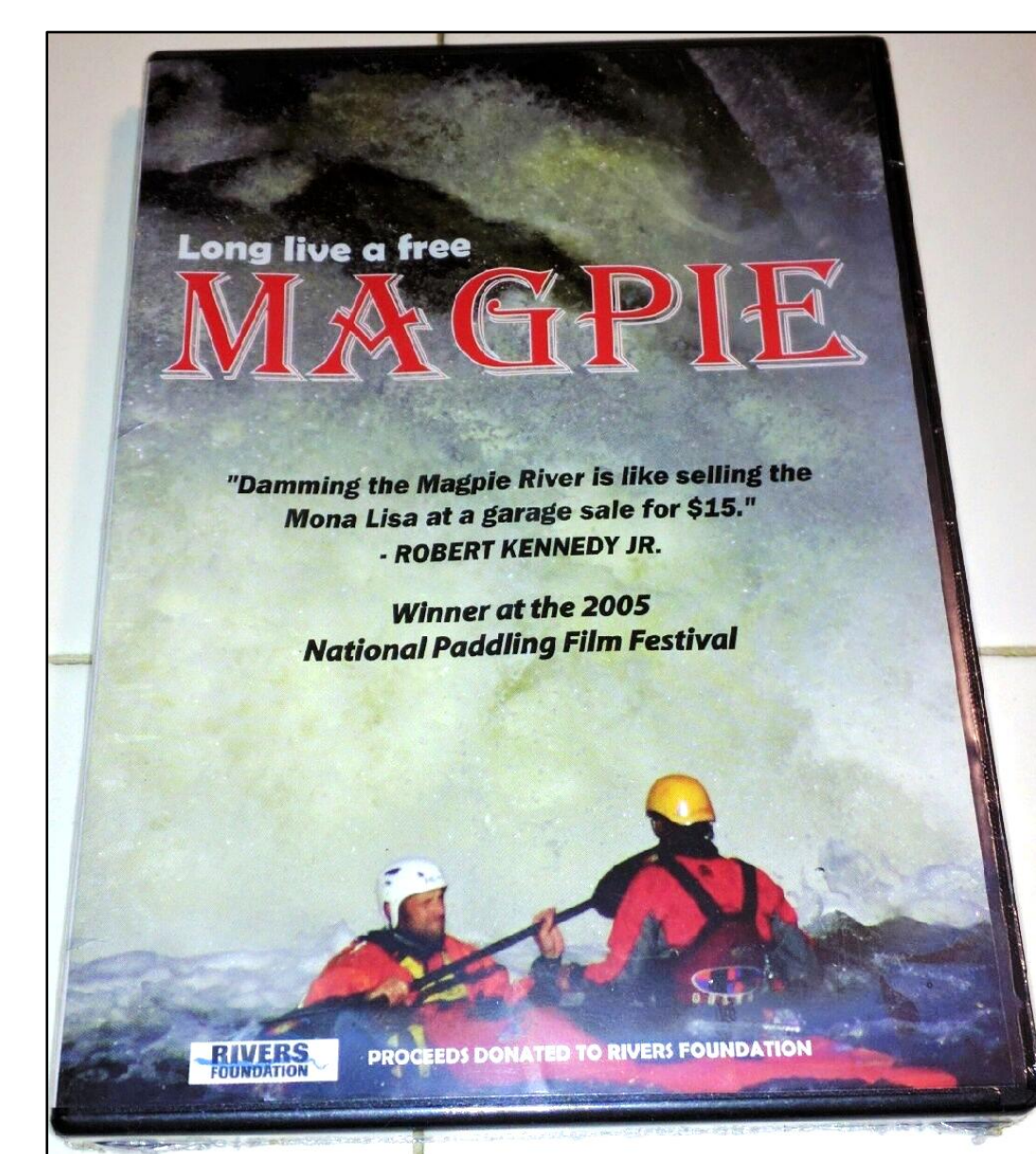


Figure 3: Having pioneered commercial recreation on rivers deemed 'unraftable', Earth River Expeditions was able to draw international opposition against a proposed run-of-the-river dam on the Magpie River. In a resulting movie, Robert Kennedy Jr is quoted as saying: "Damming the Magpie River is like selling the Mona Lisa at a garage sale for \$15."

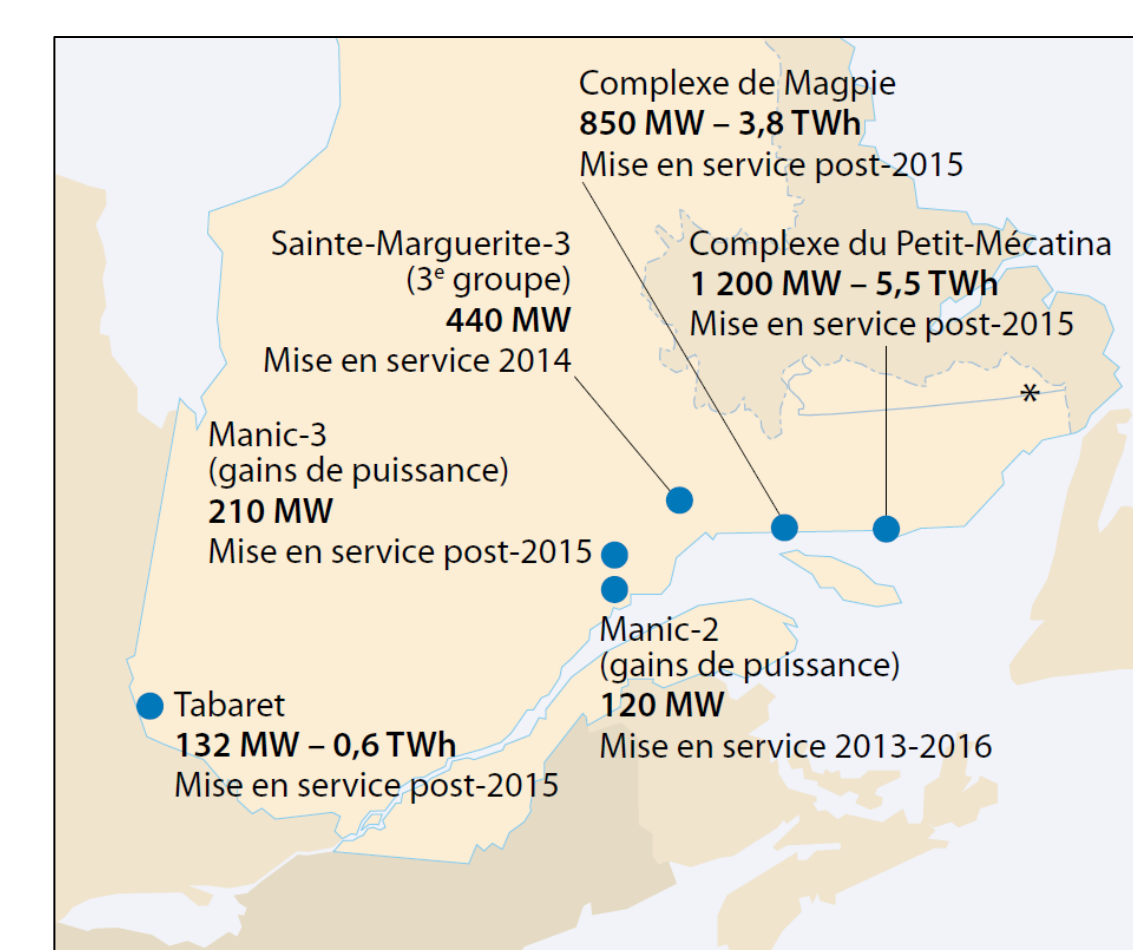


Figure 4: Excerpt from Hydro-Québec's 2009-2013 Strategic Plan. Mere months after getting approval for the construction of a 1550 MW hydro complex on the neighbouring Romaine River, Hydro-Québec announces its plan to build a multi-dam complex on the Magpie River.



Figure 5: A public demonstration in favour of protecting the Magpie River is held on the steps of Hydro-Québec's headquarters in Montréal. Spearheaded by SNAP-CPAWS, the demonstration leans heavily on whitewater recreation for the image it wishes to convey as part of this nature conservation initiative. Photo: SNAP-CPAWS

Discussion and Conclusion

While outdoor recreation entails ecological impacts, the story of the Magpie River shows that it can also inform and foster a deep commitment toward nature conservation.

Over the last 25 years, paddlers and their first nation and NGO partners have poured remarkable amounts of energy into advocating for the protection of the Magpie River in the face of impending large-scale industrial development. This has led to a number of landmark successes. The transformative power of recreation continues to be an instrumental lever in an ongoing process that promises to deliver a major win for nature conservation in Canada.