

Old Crow and the Northern Yukon:  
Achieving Sustainable Renewable Resource Utilization

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The community of Old Crow has been at the centre of the debate about resource developments in the northern Yukon for the past fifteen years. Although never completely opposed to the development of non-renewables, Old Crow has remained largely dependent on the renewable resource base and has viewed the proposed oil and gas developments (and others) with concern and a sense of uncertainty. This has led the Band Council to begin preparation of a renewables-based socio-economic development plan. The central theme of this work focuses on ensuring the sustainable use of wildlife, water, wood and other renewable resources. Community involvement and control over aspects of resource use and management remain priority goals as well.

The development pressures on Old Crow have resulted from two simultaneous sets of activities. The community sits close to the southern fringe of the Yukon north slope where there is a long history of oil and gas development proposals and where the Inuvialuit Final Agreement between Canada and the Beaufort communities has set the stage for a major resolution of land and resource management regimes. Although there are opportunities in these processes for Old Crow's involvement, there is a continuing sense of apprehension about the pace and course of events.

Old Crow is also close to the northern limit of the area to be allocated under the terms of a land claims settlement between Canada and the Council for Yukon Indians (CYI). Within this region there is a different set of resource uses and management issues to be resolved. As a result, the community must also keep its attention focused on the initiatives and events emerging from Whitehorse.

In each of the two geographic areas there are different organizations, individuals, governments, resources and interests involved. This dramatically complicates the decision-making process for the community and the uncertainty adds another dimension to their efforts towards self sufficiency. It also complicates the actions of government in day-to-day management activities and in implementing the broad principles of sustainable resource use and development.

Notwithstanding the various uncertainties, it is clear that the Band Council maintains a sense of optimism about their future opportunities. The preparation of their socio-economic plan has included several workshops designed to define a community "vision" and there is convergence toward a unified set of priorities. During April 1986, at a similar workshop on preparing community input to the World Conservation Strategy Conference (Ottawa, June 1986) it was also evident that there is a strong commitment to sustainable resource management.

**The community of Old Crow**

The North Yukon regional ecosystem is biologically productive and sensitive. It is critically important as a habitat for a variety of Arctic mammals and migratory birds. The Porcupine caribou are the most significant of the wildlife species that inhabit the region. The herd, which numbers over 160,000 animals, ranges throughout northern Yukon and into adjoining areas of Alaska and the North Slope from the Babbage River west across

the international border into the U.S. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, established specifically for caribou protection. Other indigenous terrestrial wildlife includes barren-ground grizzlies, arctic fox, muskrat and other fur bearers, and polar bears. Salmon in the Yukon and Porcupine River systems also provide an essential food source. Marine mammals, which occupy the coastal waters, include beluga and bowhead whales. Various kinds of waterfowl migrate to and through the coastal region each year, and peregrine falcons, golden eagles and other rare raptors nest in the mountain areas.

Old Crow is situated on the north bank of the Porcupine River just west of the mouth of the Old Crow River in the isolated northern portion of the Yukon. In 1985 yr community had an estimated population of 250, most of whom are Vunta Gwich'in Indians. Residents still have strong family ties with families in Fort McPherson, NWT, and Fort Yukon in Alaska, as a result of population movements during the height of the fur-trade era.

Although the community of Old Crow was not established until 1894 as a fur trade post, there have been archeological studies at Tloklut, a nearby site, which shows occupation for at least 1000 years. Fragmentary evidence exists for longer occupation in the region

Old Crow residents depend upon resource harvesting for a considerable portion of their food supply and much of their cash income. Residents harvest the Porcupine caribou herd, often traveling considerable distances from Old Crow to intercept the animals. The herd has been subjected to increasing study in light of 15 years of development proposals in both Canada and Alaska. Development of the Prudhoe Bay pipeline in Alaska and the Dempster Highway in Canada has reduced the area available to the herd for uninterrupted use, although opinion is divided about the seriousness of the effect of development on the herd's use of the traditional range.

Most trapping activities are focused on the muskrat population of the Old Crow flats, a low-lying marshy area some 15 miles north of the community. Families move out to camp on the Old Crow flats for ridding, duck and goose hunting and fishing. Lynx, marten, beaver, coloured fox and mink are also taken on the flats during winter trapping. Although trapping may be undertaken anywhere within the Registered Group Trapping Area, a large area surrounding the community including the Old Crow flats, most trapping is concentrated within the vicinity of Old Crow. "Day" or "week-end" trap lines extending from the village, are common.

Moose are hunted along the flats of the Porcupine River and its tributaries, but most intensively near the settlement. Major hunts are conducted in the spring and fall. Salmon fishing occurs along the Porcupine River. The fish are dried and smoked for year round use.

Research over three decades by Balikci (1963), McSkimming (1973), and Murphy (1983) has provided harvest return data from the 1930's to the 1980's.

In summary, the research has illustrated the following trends:

- an increase in the total number of people hunting in the community but a decrease in the total area harvested;
- a decrease in the total number of trappers, and a decrease in the length of trap line but an increase in the number of people trapping muskrat and the total number of muskrats harvested; and
- and increase in the total game harvested by the community.

These data demonstrate that Old Crow residents remain deeply dependent on fish and wildlife resources of the North Yukon. However, there is a sense of uncertainty that pervades the community in light of the relative success of the southern anti-fur lobbies. A large proportion of the local economy is threatened by the dramatic reductions in fur prices and considerable economic hardship will ensue if fur markets are further affected by the ill-considered effects of the animals rights advocates. From the perspective of Old Crow it is not an exaggeration to speak of “cultural genocide” when describing the impacts of the anti-fur campaigns.

There are also limited, but growing, alternative opportunities for permanent wage employment activities in Old Crow. Plans are being designed to develop a more permanent, year-round hotel to support the Band’s efforts to encourage a controlled tourism industry. They are supported in this by the Council for Yukon Indians, which is undertaking a study of Native tourism opportunities. In April 1986, Transport Canada licensed North Yukon Air, a new community-based air service, 50 percent owned by the Band Council, which supports the tourism development planning.

Old Crow has a limited infrastructure but plans have been developed for a new subdivision. Water supply is obtained from the Porcupine River and from wells. Old Crow is located close to the tree line and the white spruce in the area, although small in diameter, are adequate for building materials and fuel supply. Houses in Old Crow are log construction and most residents heat their homes with local wood. The school is heated by a large wood furnace, consuming 140 cords of wood per year. Concerns are frequently expressed about the need to ensure a long term sustainable wood supply.

These various data illustrate that the renewable resources of the north Yukon provide the subsistence economy necessary for the basic existence of Old Crow and the Vunta Gwich’in. It is equally true that the community wishes to develop these resources in a manner which can be sustained in the future, particularly given the uncertainty of the oil and gas and related industries in the north.

### **Resource development proposals in the North Yukon**

Although European exploration had led to an understanding of the geography of the Northern Yukon and to the establishment of the fur trade during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first major exploitation of resources began with the rapid depletion of whale populations by hunters working from Herschel Island during the 1890’s. The nearly simultaneous discovery of gold in the south west corner of the Territory led to rapid population growth beginning in 1898. This resulted in the establishment of a form of local representative government early in this century. With the end of the gold rush, and with a reduced population, the next major developments did not occur until World War II and the completion of the Alaska Highway. Since that time mining and tourism have been established as the two principal industries in the Yukon with characteristic cyclical change in the former industry corresponding to major discoveries and fluctuating metal prices.

Developments in the northern half of the Yukon were minimal until the 1960’s. Police and medical services have been established in Old Crow. Barge service began in the late 1950’s along the Porcupine River. The Dempster road was begun and worked its way north. The Distant Early Warning system was constructed, establishing a serious of

radar stations along the north east. Mineral exploration proceeded at a steady, slow pace. Preliminary oil exploration took place south and east of the Old Crow flats serviced from the Dempster road. Very little else occurred.

The situation changed dramatically with the discovery of oil and gas at Prudhoe Bay in 1968. Within the following five years there were major development proposals and rapidly accelerating exploration activities all around the Beaufort Sea rim. Major proposals for development included a 48-inch pipeline across the north slope of the Yukon and the Mackenzie Delta. Such an alignment crossed the already established (1960) Arctic National Wildlife Range in Alaska and the proposed Arctic International Wildlife Ranch extension in the northern Yukon.

In 1974, the various competing northern pipeline proposals were referred to the Berger commission for review. Three years later, following an unprecedented set of public hearings, Berger recommended a 10 year moratorium on development to allow for the settlement of Native claims in the Western Arctic. He also recommended a national wilderness park for the north Yukon, and much more government attention to the development of the renewable resource economy. The attention and expectations of Native communities throughout the Western Arctic were raised by Berger's work and the new rhetoric of self-determination extended the regional vocabulary.

Then National Energy Board deliberated on the formal pipeline application during 1977, and concurred with Berger's assessment of the North Yukon route. Following these complementary recommendations, the federal government withdrew (by Order-In-Council) the north Yukon lands from consideration for any development. This protected the lands pending the designation of a National Park and the settlement of the Committee for Original Peoples Entitlement (COPE) lands claim, an action opposed by the Yukon government of the day. The Inuvialuit, through (COPE), came to an agreement-in-principal with the federal government during 1978. This agreement proposed the formal establishment of an 8000 square kilometer national park with a variety of special rights for Native hunters.

The Yukon Territorial Government proposed the national park because it did not want the remainder of the territory cut off from the coastline. As an alternative, it developed a *Resource Management Model* which divided the North Slope into three zones. Most of the area was proposed as a multiple use zone, in which exploration, roads, ports and similar activities would be permitted under a joint management regime involving Native groups and the federal government. The *Resource Management Model* became the basis for an agreement-in-principal in 1980 signed by the Council for Yukon Indians and the federal and territorial government, which guaranteed the representation of Native peoples on committees to conduct land use planning and environmental assessment of proposed developments.

Oil exploration in the Beaufort was underway in earnest by 1980, serviced from ships or by barge traffic down the Mackenzie. An environmental assessment panel (EARP) considered and approved extension of a small diameter pipeline to Norman Wells and many predictions of eventual oil and gas production had captured the imagination of government and industry alike. The federal government then referred the production phase proposals of industry in the Beaufort Sea to another EARP Panel, which began activities during 1980-1981. Although ostensibly a "concept" review, the panel

examined in detail many aspects of the proposed projects, including those affecting the northern Yukon.

Industry's future production plans, identified in the seven volume *Environmental Impact Statement* submitted to the EARP Panel, called for major base camps at McKinley Bay or possibly at a deep water location on the Yukon Coast. King Point and Stokes Point were the two sites under active consideration by Dome and Gulf respectively. Both were located within proposed national park boundaries and included road links to a quarry site at Mount Sedgewick, inland from King Point. The proposed routes transected the migratory routes and calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd.

Part way through the Beaufort Sea Environmental Assessment and review Process, Gulf Canada proposed the use of Stokes Point as a *temporary* marine base to support offshore exploration activities. Existing harbours at Tuktoyaktuk were too shallow, and the mooring basin at McKinley Bay would require extensive dredging to accommodate this equipment. During the summer of 1983, the company conducted a coastal study of potential port locations along the Beaufort Sea and confirmed Stokes Point site as its preferred location, on the basis of cost, engineering and operational considerations. The federal Department advocate of a national park, argued against any approval, insisting that Native claims should be settled and that the Beaufort EARP report recommendation should be received and reviewed.

Gulf formally applied for a land use permit in March 1983, for a temporary base at Stokes Point. Public reactive was so negative that DIAND extended the permit review period. The situation became more complicated when another firm (Peter Kiewit and Sons) applied for permits to develop a quarry operation and shore base at King Point. (A subsequent competing application by Monenco/Interlog was also received).

The federal Minister of DIAND deferred decisions of both proposals to a hastily formed North Yukon Project Review Group, which was composed of stakeholders in the outcome of the review, and which subsequently failed to agree on a final report. Native groups opposed the permits and the Yukon government supported them. The federal Minister deferred his decision in light of the disagreement.

The Inuvialuit Final Agreement (COPE) was proclaimed in federal legislation in July 1984 and provided a framework for future decisions on Yukon's North Slope by zoning the area. Land west of the Babbage River was to be formally designated as a national park and Herschel Island will become a Territorial Park. To the east, development activities would be permitted subject to detailed planning and assessment and where overall public need outweighs the overall conservation or Native Harvesting interests.

The Beaufort Sea Environmental Assessment Panel also reported in July of 1984 and with respect to the north Yukon recommended that:

by limiting the spread and proliferation of facilities in the Beaufort Sea region, environmental impacts can be kept within acceptable limits. Therefore, the Panel concludes that all onshore infrastructures related to off-shore and onshore hydrocarbon production should be based on common-carrier, common-processor and common-user principles.

They also recommended that no port or supply base be permitted west of Kay Point and that only one deep-draft port be permitted on the Beaufort Sea coast unless offshore production areas are so far apart that two separate deep-draft ports become necessary.

At the present time, the question of port development and ancillary facilities remain open. The twelve years of debate about the proposed developments have resulted

in a well-prescribed, formal Inuvialuit review process and several major land allocations have been completed. As a result, there is far more certainty about the future of the north Yukon lands (both procedurally and substantively) than was previously the case. The port proposal is just now entering the environmental review process established in the Inuvialuit Final Agreement.

### **The present**

In addition to this long course of events, a number of other related initiatives are presently underway which further define the resource management context in which Old Crow operates.

- The establishment of the national park necessitates the development of a formal Resource Management Plan which requires formal Native involvement during preparation, implementation and operation. This agreement will prescribe the continued Vunta Gwich'in and Inuvialuit resource uses within the Park.
- Negotiations have begun to extend the southern boundary of the national park to include the Old Crow flats (again with continued Native resource uses). Although complicated by ongoing land claims negotiations an equitable compromise is likely. Parks Canada staff in Yellowknife have been complemented for their sensitivity to Native interests.
- The territorial park under development on Herschel Island will protect and interpret the historic and natural heritage themes of the island. This development must involve both the Old Crow people and the Inuvialuit in early and continuing consultation. Inuvialuit rangers are being hired and trained to fulfill the long-term management needs on the island.
- The Inuvialuit Final Agreement provided funding for a North Slope Wildlife Management Advisory Council, which has recently been formally established. The Council has at least an equal number of Native and government members, including Old Crow representation.
- The Final Agreement also provided funding for a Yukon Secretariat, housed within the Department of Renewable Resources, to provide research and logistics support for all the various committees and boards that apply to the north Yukon.
- A domestic Porcupine Caribou Herd Management Agreement was formally signed during 1985, specifying direct input by Old Crow in ongoing resource management activities, and prohibiting commercial use of the herd. Negotiations with Alaska for an international version of this treaty have begun.
- Old Crow, CYI, and other conservation interests are formally involved in negotiation of a new treaty respecting allocations and management of Yukon River salmon with Alaska.
- Old Crow is involved in a series of discussions with both territorial and federal government officials concerning new economic developments based on tourism and renewable resources. For example, permission and funding have been granted for the Old Crow Band to become 50 percent equity shareholders in North Yukon Air, a community-based charter service.
- Discussions are underway with the Department of National Defense concerning the establishment of a new North Warning System installation close to the

community. Such an installation is presently opposed by the Band Council, although opinion in the community is divided.

- The Yukon Department of Renewable Resources is extending its direct involvement with the community by establishing a Conservation Officer position. It also intends to develop a more formal programme of fur management and continue furbearer and wildfowl research on Old Crow flats. An Old Crow native has been hired as the first Conservation Officer trainee.
- The institutional context of all these initiatives is one which includes the gradual transfer of renewable resource management responsibilities from the federal to territorial government. To accomplish these transfers, new planning and management processes are under development within the Yukon government's Department of Renewable Resources, which will rationalize management activities within one agency and increase the presence and involvement of the territorial government in the north Yukon. In combination with the continuing land claims settlement process and the incipient Northern Land Use Planning Program, the institutional context in which Old Crow operates is changing. These processes hold promise, significantly reducing the uncertainties faced by the people of Old Crow.

### **Conclusion**

Northern development in Canada has been recently described by Robert Page of Trent University as "the Canadian Dilemma", fueled by a curious mix of opportunism and idealism. This phase aptly describes the policy context of development in the northern Yukon, which is one of nearly twenty years of shifting perspectives and a lack of consensus about appropriate futures. This has resulted in considerable uncertainty for residents of communities such as Old Crow.

As a nation we face very definite challenges to Canadian sovereignty in the north and it is often stated that there is a need to look outwards to other circumpolar nations to co-operate on common problems and share common opportunities. Our long term goal should be to achieve a unified vision for socio-economic development in the north in the context of careful environmental protection. Communities such as Old Crow can play an important role in achieving this kind of synthesis.

The people of Old Crow have a clear opportunity to develop a sustainable future based largely on continuing and new uses of the renewable resource base. Doing so is partially dependent on finding adequate and timely solutions to the specific problems and issues listed above. But in their own terms it is equally important that their progress towards a community "vision" be continued and supported by government.