

2. Description of Planning Region

2.1 Setting

The North Yukon Planning Region, shown in Figure 2.1, represents about 12% of Yukon. It is the traditional territory of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation. There is one major all-season road, the Dempster Highway. Old Crow is the only permanent community, and the only community in Yukon with no all-season road access.

The planning region is part of the vast Gwich'in homeland of northwest Canada and Alaska. Portions of the Tetlit Gwich'in, Tr'ondek Hwech'in and Na-cho Nyak Dun traditional territories extend into it, including the Tetlit Gwich'in Secondary Use Area. The Inuvialuit Settlement Region is located to the north of the planning region, on the Yukon North Slope.

Land and resource management in the planning region is shared between governments, other agencies and land claim boards. The Yukon and Vuntut Gwitchin governments are the primary land managers for most of the area. VGFN Settlement Lands cover 14% of the region. Most of the Settlement Lands fall under Category A, which means the First Nation owns both surface and subsurface rights. In cooperation with other groups and agencies, the Government of Canada (Parks Canada) manages Vuntut National Park. As of 2008, there is almost no private land ownership in the North Yukon Planning Region.

Much of the land in northern Yukon and adjacent jurisdictions is managed with a strong conservation focus. The region contains three existing Protected Areas:

- Vuntut National Park;
- Old Crow Flats SMA; and,
- Ni'iinlii'njik (Fishing Branch) Wilderness Preserve, Ecological Reserve and VG R-05A.

In total, these Protected Areas account for 32% of the region. Ivvavik National Park and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in Alaska border the northwest portion of the region. Inuvialuit Community Conservation Plans are in place for the Yukon North Slope. The Rat River and James Creek-Vittrekwa River Gwich'in Conservation Zones in NWT are located to the east.

The North Yukon Land Withdrawal, an area that has not been available for land disposition and resource exploration since 1978, affects lands north of the Porcupine and west of the Bell rivers.

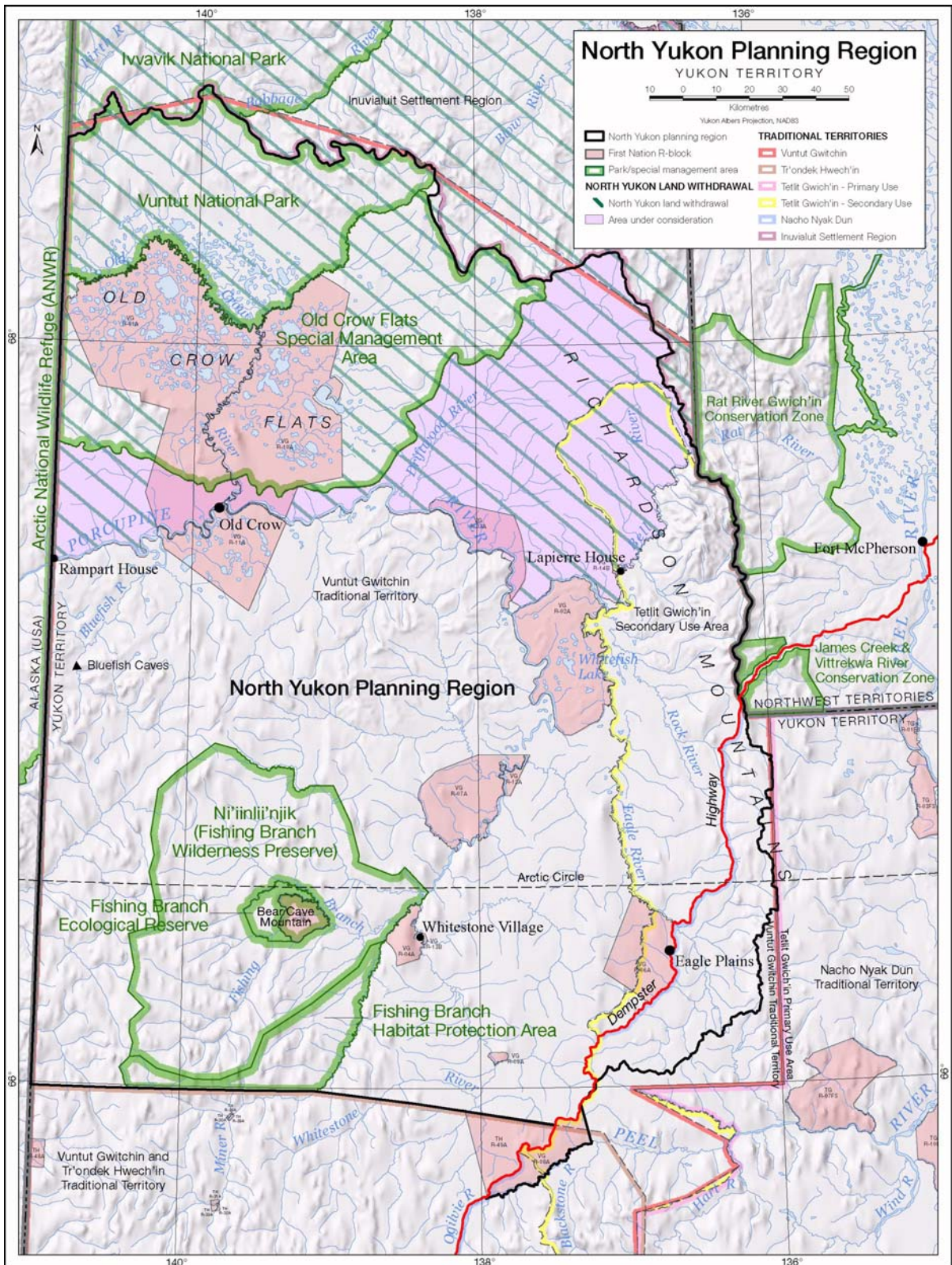


Figure 2.1. Overview of North Yukon Planning Region.

2.2 Environment

The entire region is part of Beringia, an area extending from Yukon to Siberia. For almost two million years, Beringia remained free of glaciers, providing a refuge for plants, animals, and some of the first people of North America. The land, water, people, plants and animals have all been influenced by these ice-free conditions.

One of the most extreme climate regions in Yukon, the North Yukon Planning Region is underlain by continuous permafrost. Low-stature spruce forests, shrub and tundra vegetation characterize low-mid elevation areas. High elevation mountain ranges contain extensive areas of rock and sparse vegetation.

The region contains portions of six distinct ecoregions, including Old Crow Flats, Old Crow Basin, Eagle Plains, North Ogilvie Mountains, British-Richardson Mountains and Davidson Mountains. Elevation ranges from 325 to 1,700 metres above sea level. Most of the region is within the Porcupine River Watershed. Rivers experience very low winter flows and dramatic variations in the summer.

2.3 People

As of 2008, the total regional population is about 300. All live in Old Crow and almost all (90%) are VGFN beneficiaries. Since 1985, the Old Crow population has remained relatively stable, with population growth trends currently less than 1%. There are an estimated 800 VGFN beneficiaries in total.

2.4 Economy

The regional economy is a mixed economy in which traditional subsistence harvesting and wage-based activities co-exist. Subsistence hunting, gathering and trapping are still very important economic and cultural activities in Old Crow. A high participation rate in the traditional economy is important for the maintenance of Vuntut Gwitchin culture, ties to the land, and community well-being.

The region, in 2008, had one of the lowest levels of wage-based economic activity in Yukon. The planning and delivery of government services and government transfer payments are the primary economic inputs. Transportation is currently the largest sector, followed by tourism linked with the Dempster Highway. Activity levels in all other sectors are low, including oil and gas and mining, and there is no commercial forestry, guiding and outfitting, or agriculture. At present, interest in developing sources of renewable energy is limited to the community of Old Crow.

Major sectors are discussed briefly below.

2.4.1 Transportation

The Dempster Highway connects southern Yukon and Canada to the Mackenzie Delta communities of the Northwest Territories (NWT). Regular scheduled air service facilitates the transport of goods and people between Old Crow, Dawson, Inuvik and Whitehorse. Major rivers provide summer and winter travel routes for Old Crow residents and tourists seeking wilderness

recreation. Residents use many trails and routes for subsistence harvest, travel between communities, and other cultural activities.

2.4.2 Tourism

Approximately 7,000 tourists travel the Dempster Highway annually. Outside of the highway corridor, however, tourism activity is currently low, tourism products and services are modest and the tourism market is not well developed. Improvements to Old Crow tourism infrastructure will be required if tourism is to grow. Although the region holds impressive natural and cultural features, North Yukon will likely continue to appeal to a small and specialized market. Important areas for future tourism activity include Old Crow and adjacent Protected Areas, Vuntut National Park, Ni'iinlii'njik (Fishing Branch), the Richardson Mountains, and several major rivers (Porcupine, Eagle and Bell rivers).

2.4.3 Oil and Gas

Oil and gas activity is low but interest is increasing. The region contains a significant portion of Yukon's total estimated natural gas and oil potential. The Eagle Plains basin, which contains proven reserves, is considered most important. Eagle Plains received a high level of oil and gas exploration in the 1960s-70s. Currently, resource assessments suggest substantial natural gas potential (mean estimate 7.9 trillion cubic feet), and moderate oil potential (mean estimate 536 million barrels).

While large-scale natural gas exploration and development may generate significant economic activity, the lack of pipeline infrastructure is currently a major barrier to developing the potential natural gas resource of northern Yukon. Small-scale oil and gas development scenarios could occur separately from, and prior to, large-scale pipeline development and natural gas production.

In late 2008, the region contained 14 Oil and Gas Permits, 13 of which were awarded in spring 2007. Two Significant Discovery Licenses date from the 1980s.

2.4.4 Mining

Mineral exploration interest in the region has been low in the past but is increasing. Potential mineral resources remain largely unexplored, and there is a limited understanding of regional mineral potential. Based on existing information, a small portion of the region is considered to have high potential for mineral resources. Areas of higher mineral potential are located in the vicinity of Fishing Branch, the Old Crow Range, and in portions of the Richardson Mountains.

Approximately 375 mineral claims were staked in 2007 and 2008, for a total of over 500 active claims in the region. There are no operating mines.

2.4.5 Aggregate (gravel)

Aggregate is an important resource for the community of Old Crow and annual maintenance activities associated with the Dempster Highway. Large amounts of crushed rock, sand and gravel will also be required to support future industrial activity. The Beringian history of the region means there are very few glacial surface deposits, the major source of conventional aggregate materials. Suitable aggregate sources are therefore scarce, and are often associated with ancient and modern river channels and terraces. Gravel mining in these locations can have environmental impacts, and affect other land uses.

2.5 Significant Ecological and Cultural Values

The region contains a number of features and values of territorial, national and global significance, including both heritage and ecological resources.

2.5.1 Heritage Resources

The past and the present are linked in northern Yukon. Through Beringia, the land, people and wildlife share a common past; they have coexisted for several thousand years. The region holds some of the oldest recorded sites of human occupation in North America. Evidence of human occupation in Bluefish Caves, 50 kilometres southwest of Old Crow, has been dated to 24,000 years ago. Sites in the Richardson Mountains are 12,000 years old. Some sites may be as old as 40,000 years. The fossil remains of extinct Ice Age mammals, such as mammoth, steppe bison and shortfaced bear, are common in the Old Crow, Bluefish and Bell-Whitefish basins.

The region contains Gwich'in caribou fences, a form of communal caribou hunting technology. These fences are important cultural artefacts. More recent historical sites include Rampart House, Lapierre House, Whitestone and Johnston Creek villages, fur trade era trading posts and seasonal Gwich'in communities. Some heritage trails and routes are still used to travel between communities and to reach areas for hunting, trapping and fishing.

2.5.2 Wildlife and Plants

The region is occupied seasonally or annually by approximately 40 species of mammals, 150 species of birds and 18 species of fish, including three species of salmon. Five wildlife species in the region are listed as being of national conservation concern—the Grizzly Bear, Wolverine, Short-eared Owl, Peregrine Falcon, and Rusty Blackbird. All five are considered stable in Yukon. Approximately 600 plant species have been documented; 93 are recorded as rare.

The most significant and culturally-important wildlife resource in the planning region is the barren-ground Porcupine Caribou Herd. The migratory herd uses the entire region at various times of year. The highest usage occurs during the winter, spring migration, fall migration and late fall seasons.

The Porcupine Caribou Herd is the eighth-largest herd of migratory caribou in North America. It has been the mainstay of Gwich'in culture for at least 20,000 years and is also important to other aboriginal peoples whose territories overlap its range. Beyond its value to humans, the herd is essential to the well-being of the entire North Yukon ecosystem. As the predominant large mammal species, its presence, or absence, influences this ecosystem and other resident species.

The current (2008) population estimate is 110,000 animals. The herd has been steadily declining since 1989. The future health of the Porcupine Caribou Herd is one of the major issues identified in developing this Plan.

2.5.3 Wetlands, Lakes and Rivers

The region contains three major wetland complexes—Old Crow Flats, Bluefish-Cadzow and Whitefish. Almost all of the lakes in the region are contained in these three wetlands. Reinforcing the ecological and cultural significance of these areas, the three wetlands account for most of VGFNs total settlement land area.

At 5,000 square kilometres, Old Crow Flats is the largest wetland complex in Yukon. Of continental significance for migratory waterbirds, its importance has received international recognition. Also known as Van Tat, the wetland complex is the homeland of the Vuntut Gwitchin and protected within Vuntut National Park and Old Crow Flats Special Management Area.

Bluefish-Cadzow and Whitefish wetlands are also of territorial significance. Located near the community of Old Crow, Bluefish-Cadzow is an important subsistence use area for local residents. In Eagle Plains, the Whitefish complex is one of the most important areas in the region for supporting wildlife and fish resources.

The large rivers of the region—the Porcupine, Eagle, Bell, Whitestone, Miner, Fishing Branch, Bluefish and Old Crow—are important travel and subsistence use corridors. These rivers and their adjacent habitats also support many wildlife and plant species. Rivers transport water between the wetlands, and allow fish to travel between spawning, rearing and over-winter habitats.