

1. Introduction

1.1 The Context

The North Yukon Planning Region is the traditional territory of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (VGFN). Encompassing 55,548 square kilometres, it is part of Beringia, the land that escaped the ice sheets during the last Ice Age. During that time, it was a refuge for plants, animals, and some of the first peoples in North America.

Today, the region includes large intact ecosystems, healthy wildlife populations, internationally recognized wetlands, a wealth of natural resources, and archaeological and palaeontological resources of global significance. However, the level of economic development activity in northern Yukon is increasing. Greater economic development will bring many benefits to the people of the region and Yukon, but not without impacts.

The North Yukon Land Use Plan (the Plan) is designed to protect the significant natural and cultural resources of the region while still allowing for current and future economic development opportunities. The guiding principle of the Plan is sustainable development. The Plan aims to reflect the vision, values and interests of the Vuntut Gwitchin, and of Yukoners as a whole.

Created under the provisions of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement, this Plan is the first of a network of regional land use plans to be produced through the Yukon First Nation land claim agreements.

1.2 Scope of the Plan

It is important to understand both what a regional land use plan is and what it is not.

A regional land use plan is a collective statement about how to manage land and resources within a given area. It provides guidance for land and resource decision-making and helps us to achieve the kind of future we want to see.

This regional land use plan, however, is not a legal document. It does not replace existing legislation. Neither does it affect First Nation rights as established by land claim agreements and constitutional law.

The Plan applies only to the North Yukon Planning Region (Figure 1.1). It provides management direction for all Yukon public lands and all VGFN Settlement Lands outside of existing Protected Areas and Special Management Areas (SMAs).

It does not apply to Vuntut National Park of Canada, the Ni'iinlii'njik (Fishing Branch) Ecological Reserve, Wilderness Preserve and Habitat Protection Area, Old Crow Flats SMA, or the village of Old Crow. The Plan does, however, consider these areas and existing management plans in providing management direction.



Figure 1.1. North Yukon Planning Region.

1.3 What the Plan is About

The Vuntut Gwitchin and other First Nations have utilized the water, wildlife, fish and plant resources of the region for thousands of years, and continue to use these resources today. The continuation of Vuntut Gwitchin culture and traditional economy depends on a healthy environment, and people's connection with the land.

This Plan, in addition to the existing SMAs established through the VGFN Final Agreement, makes an important contribution towards ensuring regional conservation measures are in place prior to an increase in levels of land use activity. A number of existing economic development plans and land disposition processes (e.g., Yukon oil and gas disposition process) will benefit from guidance provided by this Plan.

Old Crow Elders and community members desired a land use plan that would ensure respect for the land, while allowing for future opportunities. Governments and industry asked for a plan that would ensure certainty and flexibility. This Plan aims to satisfy those desires by balancing development of the region's resources with conservation measures to protect valued cultural and ecological resources.

Plan partners and stakeholders identified six major planning issues of both short-term and long-term importance to the North Yukon Planning Region:

Oil and gas exploration and development in Eagle Plains

How might exploration and development of North Yukon’s oil and gas resources affect the region? What are the cumulative effects and how will they affect the region’s economy, society and environment, particularly the Porcupine Caribou Herd?

Land management and the Porcupine Caribou Herd

Residents of Old Crow are concerned about immediate and long-term conservation of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. The culture, traditional values and subsistence economy of the Vuntut Gwitchin depend on continued access to and utilization of a healthy Porcupine Caribou Herd.

Future development impacts on water, wetlands and riparian habitat

Wetlands, lakes, rivers and riparian environments are biologically productive areas that hold many of the heritage, cultural and ecological values of the region. Future land use activities have the potential to impact these values.

Opportunities to access land and resources

Future natural resource development will require access to resources, such as oil and gas, aggregate and minerals. Restrictions on access to these resources may affect the establishment and growth of the region’s natural resource economy. Of particular concern are the Eagle Plains area and the land covered by the North Yukon Land Withdrawal.

Transportation

The current lack of ground transportation infrastructure in the region is seen as a barrier to natural resource development. All-season access roads may be required in the future to support economic development. However, roads and people’s use of these features could affect wildlife and fish populations.

Climate change

Climate change affects land, water, wildlife, fish and people’s use of these resources. The impacts of climate change may also compound potential future land use impacts.

1.4 Plan Principles

Four important principles underlie the North Yukon Land Use Plan.

Sustainable Development

The core principle that guides the Plan is sustainable development, as defined in the VGFNFA:

“Beneficial socio-economic change that does not undermine the ecological and social systems upon which communities and societies are dependent.”

Precautionary Principle

Regional planning should consider potential impacts before making resource decisions. Our limited understanding of land use impacts on other resources in the North makes this especially important. The International Institute for Sustainable Development describes the Precautionary Principle as:

“A lack of conclusive scientific evidence does not justify inaction on managing the environment, particularly when the consequences of inaction may be undesirable or when the costs of action are negligible.”

Conservation

The Plan proposes to manage fish and wildlife habitats using the conservation principle. Conservation, as defined by the VGFNFA is:

“The management of Fish and Wildlife populations and habitats and the regulation of users to ensure the quality, diversity and Long Term Optimum Productivity of Fish and Wildlife populations, with the primary goal of ensuring a sustainable harvest and its proper utilization.”

Adaptive Management

Adaptive Management means responding to changing land use and/or environmental conditions as new or better information becomes available. It is a management philosophy that applies a structured, iterative process to decision-making. Adaptive Management means we must:

“Look, learn and adjust as required.”



Figure 1.2. Sustainable development is the guiding principle for the Plan. The VGFN Final Agreement provides guidance for Plan principles and goals.

1.5 Plan Goals

The underlying principle of sustainable development is expressed in the Plan in a set of six goals that cover economic, social and ecological considerations.

Goal 1

Promote sustainable development by ensuring that social, cultural, economic and environmental policies are applied to the management, protection and use of land, water and resources in an integrated and coordinated manner.

Goal 2

Maintain terrestrial habitat in a condition required to sustain regional wildlife populations.

Goal 3

Maintain aquatic habitat in a condition required to sustain regional fish populations.

Goal 4

Maintain the integrity of wetlands, lakes, rivers and sensitive permafrost areas.

Goal 5

Recognize, conserve and promote the heritage and cultural resources and values of the Vuntut Gwitchin, other affected First Nations, and the Yukon.

Goal 6

Facilitate economic development opportunities and activities that result in socio-economic benefits to the community of Old Crow, other affected First Nations and Yukon as a whole, and that meet the sustainable development criteria established by this Plan.