Protected Areas and Aboriginal Interests
At Home in the Canadian Arctic Wilderness

BY ERIN E. SHERRY

Abstract: An alliance in the Canadian Arctic between aboriginal and conservation interests through agreements that combine aboriginal entitlement, national park creation, and cooperative management is giving new dimension to wilderness preservation goals and is enriching protected area values. This article explores the historic roots and contemporary character of aboriginal and nonaboriginal views of wilderness. A case study analysis of Vuntut National Park, Yukon, Canada is presented to exemplify a new type of protected area establishment and management that promises to support both ancient aboriginal lifeways and national conservation objectives.

Differing Perspectives on Wilderness
For Canada’s first people, wilderness protection is part of larger political and legal questions, those “bound up in the thorny issues of treaty rights, aboriginal title, and Land Claims” (Erasmus 1989). Through aboriginal eyes the Canadian Arctic embodies many pervasive and enduring connections, family ties; seasonal cycles of activity, a spirit of place, sacred spaces, and ancestral homeland (Klein 1994; Davis 1994). During the past three decades aboriginal land claims and self-government negotiations have altered the political, legal, and cultural face of the North. The exploration and development of energy mining, water, and timber interests have affected traditional aboriginal lifestyles and the health of northern ecosystems. In the context of this contested terrain, aboriginal groups, resource managers, and conservationists are endeavoring to define common goals and mutual understanding.

Changing Wilderness Concepts
Northern First Nations, through the Land Claim process and self-government negotiations, are seeking both a land and resource base sufficient to support their communities and recognition of their inherent right to autonomous government. The role of protected areas in relation to northern aboriginal communities is being redefined through international documents such as the “World Conservation Strategy” (IUCN 1980) and “Our Common Future” (WCED 1987). These vision statements link the aesthetic, utilitarian, and ecological traditions of western wilderness protection with the broader processes of social development, economic development, and cultural survival (Sadler 1989). This global movement highlights the importance of self-sufficient communities and sound environmental management practices that reflect the cultural values, belief systems, and aspirations of indigenous people. Particular attention is focused on the rights and interests of aboriginal users directly affected by protected area creation and management.

Aboriginal Perspectives
Wilderness protection that supports the diversity and productivity of northern ecosystems is a common western and aboriginal goal. However, dissonant perceptions of wilderness and discordant attitudes toward formalized wilderness protection still echo between the two cultures. While there is no one aboriginal viewpoint, for many the land is synonymous with community and survival.

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Examine a map of aboriginal land use in the Arctic and misconceptions of untouched landscapes vanish. Instead, another face of the land appeared—a traditional territory that is intimately known, traveled, used, and named. As Hrenchuk (1993) cautions, it is “illusive to think that others have not gone before us nor used these areas today.” Aboriginal groups hold a large stake in “preserving areas as close as possible to their original state for without renewable resources to harvest, aboriginal people lose both their livelihood and their way of life” (Erasmus 1989). However, in the pursuit of this goal, many First Nations remain skeptical of alliances with governments and conservationists who have too often violated their aboriginal rights in the name of parks and environmental protection.

Aboriginal Relationships to Protected Areas

Historically, the establishment of Canadian parks meant the imposition of rules and regulations that jeopardized aboriginal ways of life by restricting or eliminating the people’s legal rights (Hrenchuk 1993; Presset al. 1995). The freedom of First Nations to practice their cultures in harmony with nature was often abruptly overridden by state authorities: “We were told we may no longer take certain plants for medicines and food . . . we may no longer pitch tents in certain places in which we had gathered for generations we may no longer start fires . . . we may no longer carry firearms” (Erasmus 1989). Setting park boundaries alienated First Nations, divorcing people from their homeland. The creation of most wilderness-oriented protected areas in Canada involved the exclusion of aboriginal people. The Keeseeekowenwen were evicted and their homes burnt in Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba. Blackfoot and Stoney groups were expelled from Banff National Park, Alberta, and their hunting rights suspended. The Ojibway were prohibited from hunting, trapping, and fishing within Quetico Provincial Park, Ontario. It is an unequivocal truth that First Nations have heavily borne the costs of “protecting” natural areas in the “public” interest for the benefit of future generations (Hrenchuk 1993; Kassi 1994; Njootli 1994; Morrison 1995). The interests of the new dominant society were placed above those of minority aboriginal groups, making “an ancient way of life subject to the apparent modem-day whims of an alien culture, all in the name of conservation” (Erasmus 1989).

Will the persistent differences between western ideals of wilderness and aboriginal perspectives make the simultaneous protection of wildlife, unique landscapes, functioning ecosystems, and indigenous lifeways an impossibility? This difficult question remains unresolved; however, the northern Yukon contains a protected area, Vuntut National Park (VNP), which provides a promising working model of joint action in wilderness protection.

Vuntut National Park: Enriching Aboriginal Cultures

VNP bridges the divide between protected and utilized areas and gives new dimension to mainstream wilderness preservation goals. It lies within the Yukon, a region of internationally significant cultural and natural heritage, rich in its diversity of fish and wildlife, vegetation, landscapes, and lifeways. Here, the federal and territorial government have successfully negotiated comprehensive claims with aboriginal organizations such as the Inuvialuit, Tutchone First Nation, Champagne and Aishihik First Nation, Trondek Hwech’in First Nation, and the Nacho Nyak Dun First Nation (Morrison 1993; Peepre 1994; Morrison 1995). These agreements have emerged as a positive force for both the expansion of northern national parks and the recognition of aboriginal people’s stewardship role.

VNP was established in the context of cooperation and shared responsibility as a provision of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement (VGFA) (DIAND 1993). The creation of VNP provided not only for conservation of this remote wildland, but fully integrated the traditional lifestyle, culture, knowledge, and spiritual values of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (VGFN). Sitting north of the Arctic Circle and encompassing Old Crow Flats, the new park contains wetlands of international significance, critical portions of the Porcupine Caribou Herd range, important migratory waterfowl habitat, and archaeological and paleontological resources of global concern (DIAND 1993). Consequently, the park is a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site candidate, the first to be recognized for its combined natural and cultural resource wealth.

A Vuntut Gwitchin Viewpoint

VNP is part of the Old Crow community’s conservation strategy. Under the direction of community elders, VGFN attempted to establish a park to “protect the wildlife, protect the land, and to have
some authority given to Indian people so that we can exercise our rights and carry on with our way of life” (Njootli 1994). Through the land claims process, VGFN has secured several park co-management rights and responsibilities: harvesting rights, advisory obligations, park planning and management duties, and employment and economic opportunities (DIAND 1993; Njootli 1994).

VNP is closely linked to the aboriginal ethic of conservation through sustainable use rather than wilderness preservation per se (Sadler 1989). Both traditional and current aboriginal uses of the park are recognized and protected under a cooperative management agreement. This is a significant provision since it respects the right of aboriginal cultures to build on the experience of earlier generations by adapting to the technological and socioeconomic changes of the present (e.g., firearms, snow machines, a cash economy). The Vuntut Gwitchin have exclusive rights to hunt, trap, and gather in the park for subsistence purposes and have priority access over sport fishers (Morrison 1993). VGFN has rights to give, trade, barter, or sell edible fish, wildlife, and plant products harvested within the park for domestic purposes (DIAND 1993). This is a critical recognition of the importance of informal aboriginal economies based on reciprocity and communal sharing.

Co-management of Park Planning

Designed to ensure VGFN shares significantly in decision-making and implementation processes, the VNP’s co-management committee is composed equally of representatives of VGFN and Parks Canada. This advisory body makes broad management, administrative, and planning decisions that involve heritage and cultural resources; travel routes, harvest limits, locations, and seasonal restrictions; development and revision of the parks management plan; and the management of transboundary fish and wildlife (DIAND 1993). The minister of heritage and parks does retain the ultimate authority to accept, reject, or vary the co-management committee’s recommendations and alter VGFN park use (DIAND 1993).

Cooperative management is described as “both a cornerstone and a barometer in the relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal society” (Hawkes 1995). The co-management of VNP is an approach designed to “combine the best of both worlds,” blending aboriginal and state management approaches. This arrangement entails sharing responsibility and balancing power between local resource users and government agencies. An environment is created where payoffs are greater for cooperation than for competition, and where actors optimize their mutual good by planning jointly with long-term vision. Kofinas (1993) specifies three ways co-management can contribute to economic development: (1) confronting external competing demands and values that threaten the resource base of subsistence economies; (2) creating new and appropriate economic opportunities; and (3) redirecting the flow of resource benefits to local communities. The government-Gwitchin partnership also enhances several park management functions including data gathering and analysis; logistical harvesting and allocation decisions; resource protection; enforcement; long-term planning and enhancement; and broad policy decision-making. Currently the Old Crow community and government agencies are jointly implementing a project focused on mutual learning, cultural research, and park resource management. This community-based investigation into Vuntut Gwitchin traditional ecological knowledge and oral history has the potential to overcome the cultural, perceptual, and disciplinary barriers conventionally impeding sustainable resource management endeavors.

Barriers to Progress

Despite an encouraging outlook, several unresolved issues are acting as barriers to progress in the application of co-management principles throughout northern Canada. First, shifts in the balance of power and control away from government agencies are typically met by reluctance. A second obstacle is learned dependency, resulting from the appropriation of local authority and responsibility by centralized resource management agencies (Hawkes 1995). The breakdown of traditional aboriginal management structures has many causes: loss of resource access and control; disruption of social systems defining property rights, stewardship responsibilities, and community obligations; interference with intergenerational patterns of education and information transmission; and the introduction of cash economies and wage employment. Reintroducing local level control will require the reversal of centuries of dependency and distrust.

Economic and Employment Opportunities

The VGFA ensures Vuntut Gwitchin involvement in park design, tourism

Barren ground caribou of the porcupine herd Mtr through Vuntut National Park by the thousands en route to their wintering grounds. The pervasive spiritual and cultural connections between Vuntut Gwitchin and porcupine caribou will endure only if the herd is protected against threats to their natural existence. Photo by Wayne lynch, Parks Canada.
ventures, and facility construction on the Old Crow town site (DIAND 1993). A Vuntut Gwitchin “community impacts and benefits analysis” must be completed under the terms of the VGFA for any proposed development. This is critical since those who best know local landscapes, wildlife, and natural processes can best assess the potential for overdevelopment (Morrison 1993; Morrison 1995). Local people receive priority in park employment, contract tendering, and business ventures (DIAND 1993). This is highly appropriate since Vuntut Gwitchin have the experience, skills, and interest required to play key roles as park managers, park wardens, park rangers, tour guides, and interpreters.

Vuntut National Park-A New Type of Protected Area

The establishment and comanagement of VNP represents an end to policies and practices based on exclusionary principles that have subverted aboriginal rights and destroyed traditional lifestyles. This regime transfers a large measure of control over decisions affecting park planning, use, and management to Vuntut Gwitchin. It emphasizes the underlying importance of integrating traditional aboriginal use and occupancy within park boundaries. VNP has the potential to emerge as a model of how government and aboriginal people can work together to preserve natural areas vital to cultural survival and the achievement of national wilderness conservation goals.

The Future of Protected Area Creation and Management

Recognition of wilderness as a cultural construct will revolutionize our belief in the existence of uninhabited, primordial landscapes. Wilderness preserved need not be wilderness dispossessed from the aboriginal people a-ho view it as homeland. Development of the contemporary concept of usable occupied wilderness expands not only our view of humanity’s place in nature, but adds new dimensions to western conservation goals. The alliance between conservation and aboriginal interests can bridge the gulf between wilderness preservation and sustainable development, enriching protected area values. The emergence of a new type of protected area, one that incorporates aboriginal use, interests, and wisdom, has the potential to ensure both the protection of unique functioning ecosystems and the preservation of ancient lifeways.

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