

Tabled by RRDC, Oct. 8, 1997

## Special Management Areas Proposal

Ed.

### **A PROTECTED AREAS STRATEGY FOR THE ROSS RIVER DENA TRADITIONAL TERRITORY**

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#### **RATIONALE**

Escalating loss and fragmentation of fish and wildlife habitats, combined with species extinction, loss of biological diversity, and disruptions to ecological processes, have heightened concerns for human and environmental health, and prompted a global initiative for the protection of natural areas. Interest in the protection of special areas has led to a range of territorial conservation initiatives, including the International Convention on Biological Diversity, the World Wildlife Funds Wildlands Project and the Endangered Spaces Campaign, the Tri-Council Statement of Commitment to Complete Canada's Networks of Protected Areas, Canada's National Wildlife Areas Program, the Yukon Conservation Strategy, the Yukon Parks System Plan, and the Umbrella Final Agreement. These programs have received some legislative support through the Canada Wildlife Act, the National Park Act, the Yukon Wildlife Act and Yukon Final Agreements.

The Ross River Dena First Nation similarly want assurance that the ecosystem will continue to function to sustain biodiversity and their lifestyle. They endorse a system of protected areas, in so far as their opportunities to hunt and fish are not compromised, and that they are beneficiaries in the economic spin-offs from a network of protected areas. This desire was captured in the objective of Chapter 10 in the Umbrella Final Agreement; "to maintain important features of the Yukon's natural and cultural environment for the benefit of Yukon residents and all Canadians, while respecting the rights of Yukon Indian People, and Yukon First Nations". Although this provides a good start for establishing a network of protected areas in this area, we consider land claims negotiations as only the beginning of this protected areas strategy. We envision an ongoing process, during, and continuing after land claims, of identifying and protecting important areas for protection and special consideration. After these sites are identified the hard work begins as we develop and implement management plans for each of these areas.

#### **PRINCIPLE**

The Ross River Dena First Nation wish to adopt a protected areas strategy that will endeavor to ensure environmental health, preserve cultural heritage, and retain a lifestyle that is connected to the land. This requires the identification of sites of special spiritual-cultural significance, of ecological significance and of unique or outstanding biological significance, and the development of tools required to manage these areas so as to meet a range of environmental and social goals. This strategy provides a commitment to International, National, and Territorial initiatives to establish a protected areas network while maintaining the constitutional rights of the Ross River Dena to hunt, fish, and gather, and to benefit from economic opportunities within their traditional territory.

## **THE GOAL**

The goal of this Protected Areas Strategy is to assure, (a) protection of critical habitats as a basic requirement to preserve ecosystem functions, (b) protection of culturally important areas, (c) protection of unique or outstanding biological or physical features, and (d) protection of representative natural regions, within the context of Chapter 10 and 13 of the UFA. This goal is guided in part by territorial initiatives to protect critical fish and wildlife habitats, and to establish candidate sites for protection.

The Ross River Dena endorse the concept of a network of core protected areas, surrounded by adjacent buffer areas, and corridor linkages between protected areas. However, the designation and management of protected areas is not viewed as a negation of responsibilities to manage all areas in the traditional territory. Rather, a protected areas network will guarantee greater levels of protection in special areas, and greater certainty regarding exploration, development, and access to land throughout the traditional territory. Also, the protection of special areas will give the Ross River Dena, as the primary tenant on the land, more influence over the management of these special areas. Particular attention will be given to candidate areas with multiple features that require protection.

## **TYPES OF PROTECTED AREAS**

There are many types of candidate areas that require some form of protection. These areas fulfill different functions, require different selection criteria, differ in their size, and require different levels of protection. Protected areas are typically referenced as National Parks, Territorial Parks, Ecological Reserves, Wildlife Sanctuaries, National Wildlife Areas, Heritage Rivers, Watershed protection areas, Habitat Protection Areas, Heritage Sites, or Special Wildlife and Fish Management Areas. Areas requiring some level of protection fall under 5 general categories.

**CRITICAL WILDLIFE HABITAT.** Some fish and wildlife habitats are more important than others, and often critical to the well-being of fish or wildlife species that they serve. Other habitats serve a broader ecosystem function, and are essential to the ecological dynamics of a wide area. Failure to protect these areas can put a species or multiple species at significant risk, by influencing distribution and movement patterns, productivity, and/or the ability to survive. Protection of these areas is essential to meet conservation objectives.

**CULTURAL AREAS.** The protection of these areas is fundamental to the preservation of Ross River Dena culture. Candidate sites could include archaeological sites, historic sites, historic trails, sacred places, mineral springs, grave sites, known burial areas, or other legendary or spiritual sites. These areas could be site specific areas or corridors.

## **RARE, UNIQUE, OR OUTSTANDING BIOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL FEATURES.**

Certain areas are unique or outstanding because of the life forms they support, or because they are in themselves rare or of international, national, or territorial significance as a special landform.

**ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS, TO ENSURE BIODIVERSITY.** Population growth and industrial development over much of Southern Canada had transformed the natural ecosystem and eliminated or fractured major biological (biotic) communities. This has resulted in species extinction, a reduction in biodiversity, a reduction in biological productivity, and a weakening resilience of the ecosystem to natural catastrophes. To avoid similar whole scale changes to entire biotic communities elsewhere in Canada, there has been a national campaign to establish core protected areas that ensure ecosystem representation, conserve viable populations and sustain ecological processes. This has been recognized by the Yukon Parks Service, the Whitehorse Mining Initiative, and the Yukon Conservation Society. Within the Ross River Traditional Territory, 5 ecological regions have been differentiated, including the Selwyn Mountains, the Yukon Plateau North, the Pelly Mountains, the Liard Basin and the Yukon Southern Lakes. Only in the Yukon Plateau North has there been any progress on the protection of a representative area; that being the MacArthur Wildlife Sanctuary.

**RECREATIONAL, TOURISM, AND SCENIC AREAS.** The final category of selection is designed to establish candidate areas that are visually or otherwise unique to meet outdoor recreational opportunities that are compatible with ecosystem protection.

## **SELECTION CRITERIA**

### **CRITICAL HABITAT**

The importance of specific habitats varies between species, dependent in part on the geographic availability of the habitat type, the degree of habitat specialization of the species, and accessibility to the habitat which can be influenced by snow conditions, habitat fragmentation, or barriers to movements. Note that some habitats may be of special importance but are readily available, and therefore less critical than special places that are uncommon to the area.

Critical wildlife habitats include:

nesting or birthing areas, such as bird nests, calving and lambing areas, and spawning areas,

key wintering areas of many species,

mineral licks or thermal relief habitats

migration corridors of some species, including staging areas for migratory birds, and linkages between habitats of certain species,

rearing areas, including waterfowl production areas, post calving refuges, etc., wetlands, and

the entire range of wildlife species with restricted distributions or special range requirements, such as mountain goats on the Itsi Range.

## CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT AREAS

Culturally significant areas are more than just sites where physical evidence of past use has been discovered. They are areas or sites that have been traditionally important through oral history and are a part of the Ross River Dena heritage. Some areas support physical structures or archaeological evidence, others are ceremonial places or important landmarks, while others mark the location of legends or spiritual beliefs.

Culturally significant areas include:

- grave sites or other burial sites
- cabins or other buildings, such as is found at the trading post at Pelly Banks
- location of artifacts or other archaeological sites
- traditional meeting places
- well-used trails
- the location of legends, or spiritually significant areas
- significant landmarks

## UNIQUE OR OUTSTANDING BIOLOGICAL OR PHYSICAL FEATURES

Here we are looking for areas that are unique, unusual, or of geological, geographic or biological prominence. Such outstanding features could include:

- geologically significant areas such as prominent mountains, or isolated mountain blocks;
- areas with unique geomorphic processes, such as permafrost features, pulsas, pingos, and rock glaciers;
- palaeontological areas with unusual or rich fossilization;
- hot springs;
- the home of rare species or unusually rich or ecologically distinctive areas.

## REPRESENTATIVE NATURAL AREAS

Candidate areas under this category should be representative of ecological regions (ecoregions) or other biological-geological-climatic region, and large enough to sustain a functioning ecosystem. Some selection criteria include attention to:

- vast wilderness areas;
- areas of species richness, with a variety of habitats;
- watersheds of high value,
- areas with biological "hot spots", such as areas where there are wildlife concentrations, including staging areas, post calving areas, rutting areas, colonial nesting sites, etc.
- sites that are sensitive to development, such as areas with steep sloped, unstable soils, or aquifer recharge areas.

Sites that could be added to adjacent protected areas to form larger defensible reserves.

## RECREATIONAL AREAS

Under this category attention should be given to areas with spectacular scenery, areas with a variety of habitats and therefore life forms, and accessible for recreational activities, including road, river or lake access.

## MANAGEMENT

### Legislative Tools

UFA; special management areas

Canadian Wildlife Act; National Wildlife Areas

Yukon Wildlife Act; habitat protection areas

Canadian Parks Act

Yukon Environment Act

Yukon Parks Act

## CANDIDATE SITES IN ROSS RIVER DENA TRADITIONAL TERRITORY

Below is the beginning of a list of candidate sites that fulfill the selection criteria under each of the five protected areas categories. Some sites fulfill more than one function and are therefore described under more than one category. We envision an ongoing process of candidate selection and identification, ranked if possible, based on their relative importance.

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## CRITICAL WILDLIFE HABITATS

**Ross River/Sheldon Lake Wetlands.** This extensive wetland and myriad of lakes and standing water is the heartbeat of a much broader ecosystem. As a wetland it is biologically rich, supporting an abundance and diversity of life forms. The area has hydrological importance regulating the overland flow of water. It support species that are indicators of biological productivity, including Ruddy Ducks, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Sora Rails. These species are relatively uncommon to much of the Yukon. It also provides a birthing and maternity area for moose. Moose are relatively common in the area, no doubt a reflection of the availability of wetlands as birthing and predator refuge habitat, as well as a rich supply of willow forage. The area also is also part of the winter range of the Finlayson Caribou herd. The area also is a staging area and migration corridor for numerous waterfowl, shorebirds and other species, migrating along the Tintina Trench to arctic and subarctic breeding areas. Note that along the Tintina Trench there area a limited number of wetlands that provide refuge and staging (essential feeding and resting areas) for migratory birds. The area also supports a diversity and abundance of small mammals that provide the building blocks of and extensive food chain. Some of the beneficiaries include birds of prey, such as ospreys, bald eagles, harriers, and short-eared owls.

**Finlayson Caribou Winter Range.** This area is in a snow-shadow of the Pelly Mountains, and along the riparian and wetland zone of the Ross and Pelly Rivers (overlaps with Ross-Pelly lowlands). Relatively shallow snow with ample supply of sedge meadows are conditions that are geographically restricted in over much of the central Yukon, and result in the concentration and traditional use of caribou to this area in late winter. Consequently this area is of critical importance to the Finlayson Caribou Herd, one of the largest woodland caribou herds in the Yukon.

**Tay River lowlands.** This area is a mix of alluvial spruce, riparian willows, and marsh, and is of particular importance to furbearers.

**Finlayson River Wetlands.** This area has been identified as of particular importance as a staging area along the Tintina Trench migration flyway.

**Itsi Range goat range.** Mountain goats have a limited distribution in the Yukon, typically confined to small scattered mountain blocks which provide refuge from deep snow (due in part to steepness of the terrain), predator refuge (escape terrain), thermal relief (due to thermal inversions), and diverse habitats that fulfill a divers diet. The Itsi Range supports the most northern population of mountain goats over their entire range. Goat here are isolated and meet all their requirements over a relatively small area.

**Mac Pass.** This area includes International Biological Program site 55. Several interesting plants are found here which are at their known northern or eastern limits. Hoary marmots and caribou all are found in the area. Some believe 4 caribou herds overlap in this area.

**Blind Creek and Swim Lakes.** Blind Creek is an important salmon spawning area. Swim Lakes; shallow, productive lakes and marshes that provide good habitat for moose and other wetland associated species

**Orchay River/Marjorie Lake.** Important wetland riverine habitat and a very productive lake. Mountain sheep are also known to use this area.

**Wolf Canyon/Gull lake area.** Good wetland habitat for geese, beaver, moose and caribou.

**Ram/Porcupine/Ketza creek area.** This contains International Biological Program site 61 which is described as a mountainous region extensively glaciated with related features including cirques, hanging valleys, scoured u-shaped valleys, lateral moraines and gravel outwash. It is recognized as an IBP site because of a population of Stone/Fannin sheep in the area.

**Twin/Fox Mountain.** An extension of the Ram/Porcupine/Ketza creek area. Recognized for some of the unique areas listed above, sheep and caribou habitat.

**Magundy Creek.** Provides sheep habitat, and recognized by many elders in the community as an important wintering area for caribou.

## CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT AREAS

**Ketza.** This is a very important area for Ross River Dena People. Near the mine site is a rock formation called "Dena Nee Zada" or people standing. There are many stories associated with this area.

**Green Mountain.** Not far from Ketza is another culturally important area. In Kaska this area is called "Tosetona" for paddle mountain. This is the area of the big paddle and also the big rope. There are many stories of how people were able to land on this mountain after the great flood.

**Blind Creek.** This is a very important gathering and fishing area for the Ross River Dena. There are many burial sites in the area. Some are the resting sites of powerful medicine men.

**North Canol Heritage Trail.** Historically Ross River Dena traveled from the Pelly River north to Mac Pass along the route that is now the Canol Road. Many families have Sahtu ancestors from up in that area. This is still culturally a very important area that experiences many pressures (particularly hunting) from visitors outside the local area.

**Pelly Banks.** Culturally a very important area used for gathering, fishing, hunting and living. Former Location of a trading post and historic gathering area for Ross River Dena.

**Mac Pass.** Historically an important area for Ross River Dena fall hunt. Many members still travel to this area each year for their fall dried meat hunt.

**Mount Sheldon.** This is another culturally important area featured in many stories as another place that people were able to land after the great flood.

## UNIQUE OR OUTSTANDING

**Keele Peak/ Itsi Range/MacPass.** Keele Peak is the highest mountain in the Yukon outside of Kluane National Park, and the highest mountain in the Rocky Mountains north of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel (Yukon/B.C. border). Keele Peak and the Itsi Range are glaciated. In the vicinity of Mac Pass has a preponderance of permafrost features, the most distinctive being pulsa's which are cones made up of a matrix of ice overlain by peat moss. The largest know pulsa (> 60 feet high) is found in the vicinity of MacPass. These areas have been the center of attention for permafrost and geomorphology studies from both the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. The area also has many rock glaciers, which are debris slopes impregnated with ice and is dynamic much like an ice glacier, and the subject of one Ph.D. study in the vicinity. According to some elders, and partially supported by scientific studies, 4 woodland caribou herds are believed to overlap in the Keele/MacPass area during the

late summer, including the Redstone, Finlayson, Tay and Hess Herds. It also borders the Mackenzie Mountain Barrens, a United Nations International Biological Program Site. The area straddles the North Canol Heritage Trail, a road, oil pipeline, and transmission line that was built during World War II to move oil from the fields at Norman Wells to the refinery in Whitehorse, to serve the war effort.

**Ram/Porcupine Creek/Ketza Area.** United Nations International Biological Program Site 61. Supports a population of Fannin Sheep, one of few places where this colour phase of thorn sheep occurs. A mountainous region extensively glaciated with related features including cirques, hanging valleys, unique valleys and plant communities.

## REPRESENTATIVE AREAS

**Keele/Itsi in Selwyn Ecoregion.** Keele Peak, the Itsi Range and the land between lies in the center of the Selwyn Mountains Ecological Region. The Ecoregion is about 35,000 Km<sup>2</sup> most of it within the Kaska Dena Traditional Territory. The candidate protected areas is representative of the Selwyn Ecoregion, supporting glaciated mountains (Keele Peak and Itsi Range), a major river valley (MacMillan River), a range of permafrost and geological features, a wide range of habitats including the wetlands along the MacMillan River, and alluvial spruce.

The area supports a wide range of fauna, including most of the Yukon's large mammal species and furbearers. The area supports more than 7 different microtine species, and an abundant population of ground squirrels and marmots. Bird species are well represented including such northern specialties as gyrfalcons, golden eagles, wheatears, snow buntings, wandering tattlers, long-tailed jaegers, etc. Noteworthy is the occurrence of the most northern mountain goat population and a thriving wolverine population.

The area has been considered a candidate Protected Area by Yukon Parks System Plan, by the Yukon Conservation Society, and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter. Furthermore, the area abuts the soon to be created Canol Heritage Park in the NWT, and the United Nations Mackenzie Mountain Barrens IBP site. The area also has some unique characteristics (see above)

**Ram/Porcupine/Ketza creek area in Pelly Mountains Ecoregion.** There are no protected areas in this ecoregion. The ecoregion is about 33,600 Km<sup>2</sup> much of it within the Kaska Traditional Territory. Much of the area is above treeline with a high landscape that intercepts weather systems sweeping in from the Pacific, making it a distinct interior "wet-belt" area. The Pelly Mountains are part of the northernmost range of Fannin or Stone sheep. Twin Fox mountains and the Rose-Lapie Rivers have been suggested as area of interest for protection in several reports on the subject.

**Ross River/Sheldon lake and Finlayson River wetlands in the Yukon Plateau North.**

The North Yukon Plateau is a land of plateaus and small groups of mountains dissected by forested U-shaped valleys. The Tintina Trench traverses this ecoregion from southeast to northwest and is part of the migration route of many bird species including large numbers of sandhill cranes. Protected area along these routes will provide resting and staging areas for migratory species as they move through the area.

**Francis Lake.** Although the Ross River Dena Council has not proposed a special management area here we understand the Liard First Nation has proposed an S.M.A. in this area and we fully support their proposal.

**CONCLUSION**

The Ross River Dena First Nation wish to adopt a protected areas strategy that will endeavor to ensure environmental health, preserve cultural heritage, and retain a life-style that is connected to the land. This strategy will grow and develop as our people grow and develop and as our Final Agreement is implemented. This requires the identification of sites of special spiritual and cultural significance, of ecological significance and of unique or outstanding biological significance. The list of candidate sites in the Ross River Dena Traditional Territory is not yet complete, nor is the information about each site. This information will be added as this protected areas strategy develops. This strategy also requires the development of the tools required to manage these areas so as to meet a range of environmental and social goals. We look forward to developing these tools and the expertise to use them here within our own community and our own government.

Attach. International Biological Program Sites  
details.

Let Chris S.  
know if you  
want to see  
this attach.