



Wildlife Management Advisory Council North Slope

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Yukon North Slope Conference

Science and communities both important for North Slope's future

Communities and community members took centre stage at the seventh Yukon North Slope Conference, held in Whitehorse January 30 to February 1, 2007. The conference theme was Environmental Monitoring and Reporting in Wildlife Management. Much of the discussion centred on the role of community members in environmental monitoring and the importance of communication between scientists and wildlife managers.

Yukon North Slope conferences are held every three years to encourage discussion among the groups involved in using, monitoring, and managing the Yukon North Slope. More than 150 delegates attended the 2007 conference.

In his opening address, conference chair John Donihee praised the co-management system created by the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA) as a ground-breaking partnership between government and those who know the land best. "As you talk about monitoring and the search for solutions to environment problems, I urge you to plan those activities in the most inclusive way and to make room for Inuvialuit rights holders as central players in these efforts," he said.

Randall Pokiak, an Inuvialuit harvester who helped negotiate the IFA, returned to that theme in his speech. The scientific community and the Inuvialuit community have close ties, he said, and they need each other. "The only thing is that our types of knowledge are a little bit different: one is academic, and the other one is basically practical. I think you need both to make life a little easier for everybody."

Many panel members and speakers at the conference talked about ways that scientists and community members are already working together to monitor the North Slope environment, such as the Herschel Island monitoring program, the Arctic Borderlands Ecological Knowledge Co-op, and the Circum-Arctic Rangifer Monitoring and Assessment Network (CARMA).

Another recurring theme was concern about current pressures on the North Slope, particularly climate change and oil and gas development. Richard Binder of the Inuvialuit Joint Secretariat said those pressures make it even more important to monitor the environment and make sure the results of monitoring are communicated back to managers. Wildlife and environmental monitoring programs provide an essential service, Binder said. "They give the Inuvialuit some level of comfort, knowing that their interests are being looked after."

The conference ended with a look at the next steps needed for effective environmental monitoring and reporting on the North Slope. Several scientists said that reporting to the community is made more difficult because academic and government funding sources don't recognize its importance.

Evelyn Storr of the Aklavik Hunters and Trappers Committee said communication should go both ways. "When I was up there talking about what we in the communities want you to do when you come, I realized that I have a part, too," she said. "I have to be able to work to help you improve what you want to do, to advise you and identify the areas that you may be overlooking because you're so wrapped up in your work."

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Managers pose questions, science seeks answers

Science can answer questions about what is happening to the land, but choosing the questions is the job of managers and policy-makers, permafrost researcher Chris Burn told participants in the 2007 Yukon North Slope Conference. "We do not have the luxury of collecting data just for the sake of it," Burn said. "We need instead to decide in advance what the principal objectives of our program are. That is the management decision."

Only long-term monitoring provides enough information to see patterns of environmental change, the Ottawa-based researcher said. Burn has been monitoring ground temperatures and permafrost in the Mackenzie Delta and central and southern Yukon for many years. More recently, he has begun monitoring ground temperatures on Herschel Island and near Old Crow.

Much of his research would be impossible without the assistance of northerners, Burn said. Local people take regular measurements at the southern and

central Yukon sites, and the Herschel Island rangers are active participants. "At Herschel, we have a series of data loggers that monitor ground temperature throughout the year. They're all placed at sites where the rangers can come and measure the snow depth."

The Yukon North Slope and the Mackenzie Delta are experiencing the fastest rate of warming in North America, and Burn's monitoring shows that the ground is warming along with the atmosphere. "Climate change creates a problem for how we describe and understand our environment, and for how we manage it," Burn said.

Science can help our understanding of what is happening, but managers and policy makers have to use that information to establish priorities and make the decisions about management. That means that monitoring alone is not enough, he said. "We have to not only collect the data, but also to analyze it so that board members can make decisions,

knowing they have a sound basis for understanding the environment, or at least have some idea of the limits of our present knowledge."

Arctic lupine. Photo credit Michelle Sicotte.



Co-operative monitoring a reality on Herschel Island

Herschel Island Territorial Park is the site of a major multidisciplinary monitoring project involving both scientists and rangers. Several participants in the project took part in a panel presentation at the 2007 Yukon North Slope Conference.

Yukon government biologist Dorothy Cooley said scientists and rangers are monitoring bird, wildlife, and plant populations, as well as measuring soil temperature, permafrost, snow depth, and erosion. "We're especially interested in working with the rangers because they are on the island continuously from April until early September," Cooley said. "That's a long field season, something that a lot of scientists don't have."

Herschel Island Park Rangers collecting monitoring data with assistance from Regional Biologist Dorothy Cooley. Photo credit Aileen Horler.



Chief ranger Richard Gordon said the rangers work closely with the scientists, serving as assistants in research and data collection. The rangers also make their own observations, and Gordon relays that information to the scientists working on Herschel Island. "The connection with the scientific community continues the research we need to help us make plans," he said.

Catherine Kennedy, a botanist with the Yukon government, first worked on the island in 1985. She returned in 1999 and noticed dramatic changes. "I really was stunned to find that the vegetation classification that I had done in 1985 wasn't making sense."

Kennedy's data revealed that polargrass, lupine, and willow are increasing on the island, while lichen and bare ground are decreasing. Nearby test sites in Ivavik National Park show the same changes happening on the mainland, but more slowly. "You have to bear in mind that Herschel is a unique place on this planet; it's a study unto itself. It has attracted all kinds of wildlife and birds. People have gone to Herschel since time immemorial because it's such an abundant and rich place," she said. Kennedy is not sure yet whether the vegetation changes are part of a long-term cycle or triggered by climate change.

Parks Canada biologist David Henry described long-term monitoring his agency is undertaking in Ivavik National Park in order to understand the changes Kennedy observed. "You have to understand how much variation is natural before you can set a management threshold to determine unnatural change," Henry said.

Harvesters and scientists can help each other

Harvesters and scientists can learn from each other, Randall Pokiak told participants in the 2007 North Slope Conference. However, each group must try to understand the other's needs.

Pokiak addressed the conference on the role of harvesters and traditional users in environmental monitoring programs. He is a member of the Wildlife Management Advisory Council (NWT) and a harvester.

"If you want a harvester to be involved, you've got to know a little bit about the kind of life that we live and the day-to-day activities," he said.

He described the difficulties he faced in getting from his trapline to Whitehorse in time for the conference. Sometimes harvesters find that taking time away from their lives on the land to get to community meetings is too demanding, Pokiak said.

"That's why at public meetings and community gatherings, you don't see so many harvesters coming in and sitting on chairs like you are, because they prefer to be out there."

Nevertheless, it's important that harvesters and traditional users of the land be part of environmental monitoring programs, he said.

"The people that are out there right now, that are not here, that can't be here, they've got a lot of knowledge."

Pokiak said he has spent a lot of time learning about government, management agencies, and researchers because they are important to the future of the land and the future of harvesters and traditional users. Managers and environmental scientists need to make the

same kind of effort to learn about traditional knowledge (TK) and the lives of harvesters.

Whenever he goes to a meeting, Pokiak said, he is asked about TK. However, people ask him the same questions again and again, so meetings may not be the best way to transmit the knowledge. Instead, he suggested, researchers should make the same kind of effort he did in attending the North Slope Conference.

"I came to this conference. Biologists and scientists should go to the harvesters' environment. That's where you can learn. That's where you can get a better understanding of their situation."

It's also important to recognize that harvesters are already busy when they are on the land, Pokiak said. He suggested that providing supplies such as oil and gas would make it easier for them to make time to do environmental monitoring as well as their own work.

Finding a way to involve traditional harvesters in environmental monitoring is worthwhile, Pokiak said.

"Harvesting is not only hunting and trapping. When we're out there, there are a lot of times when we've got enough of what you need, we just observe the wildlife."

Elder Danny A. Gordon checking a fish net at Herschel Island with Inuvialuit youth during the Herschel Island Youth and Elders Program, 2005. Photo credit Herschel Island Park Rangers.



For More Information

The Yukon North Slope Conference is a requirement of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, signed in 1984 between the Inuvialuit, Canada, the Northwest Territories and Yukon. The Agreement called for the establishment of a conference to promote public discussion around the management of the Yukon North Slope amongst aboriginal people, governments and the private sector.

Since 1988 seven conferences have been held to address a wide variety of issues and bring together diverse perspectives for improved management. Each and every conference serves to advance the conservation of wildlife and the environment on the Yukon North Slope through the exchange of ideas, experiences and points of view.

For more information on the 2007 Yukon North Slope Conference please visit our website at www.wmacns.ca, or contact our office.

Conference Chair praises co-management

John Donihee, Chair of the 2007 Yukon North Slope Conference, says he likes the co-management regime set up by the Inuvialuit Final Agreement.

"Inuvialuit sat down at the negotiating table and solved a lot of problems that had been imposed on them over the years by an external system," Donihee told conference participants. He said co-management is a move forward into the future, not a return to the past.

Donihee was a wildlife biologist in the Northwest Territories before becoming a lawyer. Now based in Calgary, he specializes in environmental and aboriginal law, with clients that include many northern co-management organizations.

The Yukon North Slope is one of Canada's unspoiled natural areas. Photo Ramona Maraj.



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and Ernest Pokiak;
Alternates: Evelyn Storr
and Lawrence Amos

Government of Canada:
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