

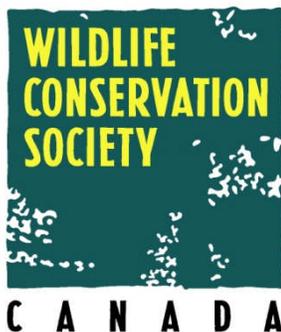
**ISSUES and INTERESTS in the DAWSON REGION**

**Submission to the Dawson Regional Land Use Planning Process**

**By**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This document outlines the interest of Wildlife Conservation Society Canada (WCSC) in the lands and resources under consideration by the Dawson Regional Land Use Plan (DRLUP), and specifies the key issues that WCSC feels that the DRLUP needs to address.

## **INTEREST**

WCSC's interest is in conservation of all wildlife species (i.e. all biodiversity) and the natural habitats they require for the maintenance of robust wild populations, so that the material, aesthetic and spiritual values associated with wildlife can be realized by future generations. To explain this interest, it is worthwhile considering the nature of the wildlife and habitats in these northern boreal mountains in a historical context. Prior to European colonization, aboriginal peoples harvested certain wildlife, and influenced the distribution of habitats to some extent. Various processes, such as fire and flooding, also affected wildlife numbers and the locations and availability of their habitats. Ecological patterns on the land were far from static, and changes in weather patterns, forest conditions and wildlife populations were ongoing and frequent at various scales in time and space, some of them cyclic. Despite a low human population density, the land was fully occupied; various species had evolved to thrive in one or more of the sets of ecological conditions that presented themselves, even as these conditions varied locally.

Since colonization by industrial human society, some lands have changed to human habitats so that they are no longer very suitable as wildlife habitat. Other lands have lost or gained species after habitats have been modified, polluted or disturbed. These processes will continue to some extent with ongoing human activities. However, the challenge of land use planning, from a conservation point of view, is to find ways to minimize the risk of losing species, or more explicitly their habitats, as humans continue to live and work in the region. WCSC seeks a Plan that promotes and guides the locations and intensities of human activities so that all species and their habitats are sustained at ecologically meaningful scales in space and time.

The conservationist's tool box, in a land use planning context, specifically does not include the idea that all land uses can be accommodated on the same land base at the same time; many uses are mutually incompatible at numerous scales in time and space. Instead, the tool box includes land use zoning (ranging from zones with very limited human activities to those with intensive human activities), thresholds on human activity in zones where various land uses are to be satisfied at the same time, and best management practices for human actions that can both harm and enhance wildlife populations and habitats.

WCSC has no specific interest in the Dawson Region land base arising from any ownership, tenure or investment. Our role is to speak for wildlife, who clearly have a vested interest in the land base, but who lack any specific voice at the land planning table.

## **ISSUES**

### **The Wildlife Context - Beringia**

The Dawson Planning Region is of particular interest from a wildlife and biodiversity point of view in that it largely falls within Beringia, the region that was not glaciated in the most recent Pleistocene glaciations. Consequently, it is known, and believed, to support an array of species that have Canadian distributions limited only to portions of Yukon (i.e. “endemic species”). This array of species is primarily plants and insects. Not only are their distributions quite restricted geographically, but they are frequently rare within those distributions because they are dependent on certain growing conditions (including specific host species in the case of some insects). Many Beringian mammals and birds, being more mobile or less habitat specific, have colonized other portions of Yukon and northern Canada after the retreat of the continental glaciers, so their distributions are not as restricted (e.g., arctic ground squirrel; Dall’s sheep).

Unfortunately we do not know the actual distributions of many of these Beringian plants and insects, and in some cases mammals (e.g., Yukon tiny shrew). Some are documented in part; most are still being mapped. One approach to dealing with this uncertainty is to create a land use zone with strong limits on human activities, covering an area where many such species may well exist (e.g., wide range of elevations, geologies, and habitat types). Such a zone could be a traditional protected area, such as an ecological reserve. A complementary approach is to provide a land management tool (e.g., site notation) that would provide local habitat protection once a population of a rare species is discovered. This would provide protection for a smaller, but still viable, area of a certain vegetation type required by the species of concern.

***Issue 1 (Beringian Biodiversity): How can we conserve a unique suite of Beringian wildlife species (biodiversity) in the Dawson Planning Region? How well do existing protected areas (e.g., Tombstone Territorial Park) achieve this objective? Where would the best additional reserve be located (e.g., adjacent to Yukon Charley Rivers National Preserve in Alaska)? How can the DRLUP promote and enhance the use and effectiveness of site notations, or other regulatory tools, for Beringian species conservation?***

#### **Land Use Zoning – Ecological Benchmarks**

Land Use Zoning is clearly a key tool for a land use plan to use in segregating incompatible uses, and within which to apply management prescriptions. From a conservation point of view, WCSC believes that a land use zone with the primary purpose of providing protected habitats for wildlife and ongoing ecological processes is a necessary cornerstone of a land use plan. The key purposes of such an “ecological benchmark” zone are: (i) to conserve a representative suite of species and ecological processes operating at appropriate scales as a source for colonization of areas more heavily impacted by humans, and (ii) as a control area in which to study and understand ecological processes in the absence of human impacts other than climate change. The best geographical framework for deciding where such a zone should be is the ecoregion classification of the Yukon Territorial government.

***Issue 2 (Ecological Benchmark Zones): Where can we locate representative ecological benchmark area(s) that have minimal human activity but that are also large enough to maintain most ecological processes? How good, spatially, is Tombstone Territorial Park in satisfying this objective?***

### **Yukon River Corridor**

The Yukon River flows through the centre of the Planning Region, and has been a key ecological, historic, economic and metaphorical artery for the Region and the Territory. This is the migration route, and rearing habitat, for salmon and other fish species that sustain various predators and bring ocean nutrients far inland. These fish have been central to human economies and cultures for a long time, and sustaining fish populations and habitats is a key societal goal at present (e.g., Yukon River Tribal). The River has been a key movement route and seasonal habitat (e.g., moose calving; raptor nesting; waterfowl staging) for many wildlife species and humans, all of whom take advantage of the higher productivity of shoreline and wetland ecosystems and the higher diversity of foods associated with these habitats. The long-standing locations of hunt and fish camps along the river are an ongoing reflection of this ecological wealth. In an industrial world the Yukon River has been one of the main routes for the movement of goods and people as they pursue trade, mineral and timber extraction, and tourism rewards. Historically the emphasis was more on industrial goods; today the emphasis is more on recreation, education and spiritual pursuit.

Given the overwhelming importance of the Yukon River valley to the Territory's ecology, history, and present-day economy, WCSC believes that the Yukon River Corridor deserves special zonation to conserve its ecological processes, conserve its historical legacy, and sustain its current recreational, educational and economic values. The Yukon River is a "heritage river" in the broadest sense of the term. If the Dawson RLUP takes the lead in designation of a Yukon River Corridor, this would provide a strong precedent for the conservation of these heritage values, and the strong economic returns they offer, in other planning regions.

The diversity of heritage values in the Yukon River Corridor presents a challenge within the vision of a single River Corridor Zone, and would require the emphasis of certain values in specific sub-zones. Although the Plan may not have jurisdiction over the river itself, it can influence activities on the water by directing land-based access to the water. The Plan can directly address land uses in the immediate river valley, including conservation of view-scapes (not allowing clearcut timber extraction or mining activities within view of the river), maintenance of wilderness recreational character (strong controls on road access; prescribed campsites with adequate human waste management), adequate integration of agricultural land use and wildlife habitat conservation where possible.

***Issue 3 (Yukon River corridor): How can we best conserve the diverse heritage values of the Yukon River Corridor, both for the legacy of this Region and the Territory as a whole? How can a Yukon River Corridor land use zone be designed and characterised to achieve this objective?***

### **Access Management**

Much of the DRLUP region will be zoned to allow ongoing resource extraction, as is presently the case. Resource extraction frequently requires new roads. New roads are problematic for wildlife because they provide new access for humans to hunt and fish, and to use motorized vehicles on the roads and on new trails build in association with the roads. As a result, big game and fish populations

nearly always decline when a new area is accessed, and animals can be alienated from using important habitats because of the disturbance from motorized vehicles.

The DRLUP can address this problem through general prescriptions for access management in all land use zones, including resource extraction zones. Such prescriptions could include: (i) exclusion of public access to new resource extraction roads by gating roads at public highway intersections and by manning these structures; (ii) direction to land management agencies, including the Yukon Environmental and Socio-economic Assessment Board (YESAB), to limit the number of access points (road intersections) to land use zones so that all routes funnel through a small number of public highway intersections; (iii) requirement for de-activation of roads following closure of a resource tenure such as an operating mine; (iv) prohibitions on the development of new motorized vehicle trails and routes in certain zones; (v) promotion of the use of emerging technologies for backcountry access such as airships.

***Issue 4 (Access Management): WCSC urges the DRLUP to implement zone-specific controls, directions, and prescriptions for minimizing public access to wilderness wildlife habitats and the populations they sustain, so as to maintain the status and quality of those habitats and populations as much as possible in conjunction with resources extraction.***