

Walk Softly

Newsletter of the
Yukon Conservation Society
Winter 2017



photo: Shailyn Drukis

Inside: • Roads and Wilderness • Wetlands Protection • Staff Changes

Christmas Lights donations to support the Whitehorse Outreach Van

Shine some light this holiday season by donating your old or broken Christmas lights at Raven Recycling. All proceeds from recycling the lights will be matched by Raven and donated to support the efforts of the Whitehorse Outreach Van. Recycle those old lights while supporting a good cause!

Drop off lights at the Raven Recycling Depot, Monday - Saturday, 9 am - 6 pm.

www.ravenrecycling.org



Art for the Holidays!

Do you know that the Yukon Conservation Society is carrying beautiful limited edition prints by Don Weir? They're beautiful prints! YCS receives partial proceeds from the sales of the prints.

Alpine Colour in the Tatshenshini, 16" x 24"

\$185.00 (tax included)

Don Weir is donating \$75.00 from the sale of every *Alpine Colour in the Tatshenshini Fine Art Print* to the Yukon Conservation Society.



Autumn Colour – Donjek Valley, 16" x 23"

\$185.00 (tax included)

Don Weir is donating \$35.00 from the sale of each *Autumn Colour – Donjek Valley Fine Art Print* to the Yukon Conservation Society, and \$50.00 to Karen's Fund up at the Whitehorse General Hospital which supports breast cancer patients.

We are also carrying four different hand silkscreened prints featuring Yukon wildlife, by Tanya Handley. At \$30, these fun, colourful wolf and raven prints make a great gift – or a perfect Yukon adornment for your own wall! YCS gets all the proceeds from these sales.

It's Time for a Yukon Wetlands Protection Act!

Yukon is one of the only jurisdictions in Canada without any wetlands policy, let alone a *Wetlands Protection Act*.

There is a general consensus that wetlands warrant special status in Yukon: One of the few items that almost everyone agreed upon in the Yukon Protected Area Strategy debate was the need for protection of wetlands.

The Yukon Water Strategy calls for a wetlands management policy.

So why do we not have one?

To answer that, we can consider what activities take place where wetlands are.

Wetlands are generally found in valleys, where the climate is warmer and the soils are richer. And more suitable for humans to live and farm. We have already seen the Lake LeBarge Shallow Bay wetlands sold off and converted to residences and farmland.

Further north, most placer mines occur in river valleys. Most of the lower Klondike valley, and its tributaries such as Bonanza and Hunker Creeks, have had their wetlands overturned in the search for gold. The Indian River, home of the most extensive wetlands in the Klondike, is completely staked and placer miners have plans to mine all of it.

So it is difficult for government to do what they know they need to do and protect the most biologically important landforms in Yukon – because of pressure from special interests.

However, things are changing and we now have a better opportunity to protect the remaining wetlands than ever before. We have the Yukon's modern land claim agreements to thank for this. The Final Agreements impose rigorous, transparent decision making on governments, making it harder for them to disregard environmental and social concerns in favour of short-term political goals.

A good example of how this works is happening in the Indian River.

In 2015, an Indian River placer miner submitted a proposal to YESAB for a large placer mine that would dig up a large chunk of the remaining wetlands. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, YCS and the Nacho Nyak Dun all weighed in with concerns about how much of the remaining wetlands would be mined.

YESAB agreed and recommended that the wetlands should be avoided, i.e. mining could not occur in wetlands because the type of wetlands prevalent in the Indian are fens and bogs which take thousands of years to develop; thus, mining damage cannot be mitigated.

Yukon's mining-friendly mining regulator overturned this recommendation, and decided that the miner could proceed.

However, the Yukon Water Board (YWB), which has to issue a water license before a mining permit can be issued, agreed with YESAB, the First Nations and YCS that the value of the wetlands was such that the wetlands should be avoided, and issued a water license that contravened the government's decision document.



The government was incensed and took the YWB to court. The YWB eventually backed down, but in the interim, an agreement was struck between the First Nations and Yukon that before a mining license could be issued, the mining company had to produce a scientifically defensible wetlands reclamation plan.

Bear with me here; this is where it gets really important.

Before wetlands Reclamation Plans can happen, there need to be some guidelines on what a wetlands reclamation plan should include.

Currently, guidelines for placer mining in wetlands – that is, guidelines for wetland reclamation – are the subject of intense negotiations between the placer miners and the old guard at Energy, Mines and Resources on one side, and the First Nations and the more forward-thinking folks in government on the other.

I am very concerned by how these guidelines are shaping up; they are essentially a blueprint for how to mine in wetlands, rather than rules about how to look after our wetlands.

It is not too late to turn things around, however it will be much harder to do so if we continue to:

- Make wetlands mining rules before we have wetlands protections in place
- Exclude the public from the process.

Therefore, consistent with its mandate, and acknowledging the importance of intact wetlands, YCS is calling on all governments in Yukon to commence a public consultation, leading towards the ultimate goal of a world-class, nation-leading, made-in-Yukon *Wetlands Protection Act*.

Sebastian Jones, Energy Analyst

Walk Softly

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Editorial

by Christina Macdonald



Dear Yukon Conservation Society Members and Supporters,

After seven amazing years at YCS I've decided to step down as the Executive Director. This isn't an easy decision – I'm passionate about the work I do at YCS and still am. However, the distance from my family on the east coast has been hard and I am following the tug at my heart to be with them.

I have learned a tremendous amount in my time at YCS: about the land, water and wildlife of the Yukon and what we must do to protect these precious things; about how to keep a charitable organization sailing smoothly; about myself; and about what it means to be Canadian and a treaty person. What a rich experience this has been!

The people I have worked with – my co-workers, Board members, volunteers, supporters, and colleagues – have been one of the best parts of my job. Your wisdom, humour, deep caring, and vision are sources of inspiration to me every day and make me so grateful to be part of this vital and connected organization.

It has been a privilege to lead YCS for the past 3.5 years and I will forever be a proud member.

In the coming months I will be supporting the YCS Board to help ensure a strong transition to new leadership.

With love,
Christina

Welcome to Marjolène, our new Financial Manager!



Marjolène grew up in the Montréal suburb of l'Assomption, Québec. After graduating from Université de Montréal in 2006, she realized her English wasn't good enough to get a job in her field of communications. She then decided to head west and there started her journey up North. After a brief stay in Vancouver, she spent two years in Fort St. John, B.C., improving her English while working in cultural events management. After two years, she decided to head to the Northwest Territories to work with the Francophone Association in Hay River, and visited Yellowknife.

In 2008, she moved to Whitehorse for a 6-month contract as a Cultural Officer with the Association Franco-Yukonnaise (l'AFY), and like many others she fell in love with the Yukon and has never left. While working at l'AFY and volunteering for events such as the Frostbite Music Festival and the Yukon River Quest, Marjolène discovered a lot about herself. In 2010, she took a year off to travel to Mexico and Bolivia, and then returned to Montréal for a one-year diploma in Arts Management at HEC (Hautes Études Commerciales). Right after finishing her Master's in 2012, she travelled back North and started working with Gwaandak Theatre. There, she gained valuable experience in the non-profit world.

Today, she is an ecoholic trying every day to reduce her impact on the planet. She is living a fulfilling life in a tiny house off-grid with her husband, Philippe, and her bear dog X Corgi, Yooky. She has a deep respect for the land and its treasures. She enjoys vegan cooking, gardening, theatre, graphic design, Japanese tea, sci-fi movies, walks in the forest, and social & environmental books. She is a strong advocate for homemade goods, the slow-food movement, zero waste initiatives, and the simple life, and she believes in the transition movement.

Marjolène is proud to be part of the Yukon Conservation Society team and to help protect our Yukon land and our planet through assuring healthy financial management and keeping the office running smoothly.

Bananas?

Hello, you there. Standing in the fruit and vegetable section of the store. I see you puzzling over the purple plastic at the top of the bunch of the organic bananas. What's with the plastic you are wondering?

I may have the answer. I was recently in Costa Rica. In the course of travel around the country with a guide, we saw bananas being harvested. The field workers removed (ripped off) the purple bags that had been protecting the bananas from contamination. They then discarded the bags, throwing them on the ground. The ditches along the road and the fences were lined with drifts of purple bags. The tops of the bags remained on the bunches.

I asked the guide about the purple bags and he told me that they were put on all the organic bananas and removed before shipping.

The bottom line is: organic bananas = purple bags littering Costa Rica.

You decide.

Mary Whitley



... and yet not so simple...

Public-paid road access for large mining corporations is bad news for the environment

On September 2nd, the Yukon and Federal Canadian governments announced the Yukon Resource Gateway Project. It will provide over \$360 million in combined federal and territorial tax dollars to create new or improved road access in the Dawson Range in central Yukon and the Nahanni Range Road in southeastern Yukon.

The Yukon Conservation Society (YCS) understands and supports some aspects of this project, such as the Carmacks bypass, which could be a benefit to local communities. Currently, large trucks drive through Carmacks in order to access exploration projects along the Freegold Road and towards Mt. Nansen for the taxpayer-funded cleanup of that abandoned mine. The bypass would route this industrial traffic around the community, making it safer for its residents.

The rest of the Yukon Resource Gateway Project seems aimed at directly benefiting private mining corporations with taxpayers' dollars. And we are talking a lot of dollars: nothing comes close to the Yukon Resource Gateway Project amounts in the 2016-17 Yukon Government budget forecast, which does not appear to mention the project at all.

The Yukon Resource Gateway Project money will be spent in two ways: upgrading existing public roads and creating new public roads. The existing public roads that will be upgraded include the Nahanni Range Road, which runs from the Robert Campbell Highway to the NWT border. Once over the border the road continues onto the abandoned Tungsten Mine, currently under the care of the Federal Government.

Along the Nahanni Range Road are numerous existing exploration projects that will no doubt take advantage of the road upgrades to move equipment in and out. That includes the 3 Aces project currently being run by Golden Predator. The wealth of Golden Predator was on display at a mining investment conference recently held in Toronto this September. The Yukon Premier proudly displayed a gold bar one assumes was produced by this company, titled a million dollar gold bar. No word yet on how much in royalties the company paid to the Yukon for that gold, or how many of the Yukon Resource Gateway Project tax dollars will go to support the road this company will make use of and benefit from.

Should the Selwyn project on the NWT/Yukon border, equidistant between the Nahanni Range Road and the North Canol Highway, ever proceed, the People's Republic of China state-owned company that currently owns it will make full use of and benefit from the upgraded Nahanni Range Road.

The Nahanni Range Road is an existing road, and it is deemed an existing public highway (although there are no Yukon communities along it). By improving this road there are going to be many marginal exploration projects that will now start spur roads of their own to access their mineral properties.

This will make it so much easier for hunters from all over the region to access previously difficult to get at areas. The wildlife in the region is going to be severely negatively impacted. Hunting, traffic and disturbance in general will reduce the quality of life for wildlife (leaving aside the numbers that will be killed), resulting in lower birth rates and calf survival, and caribou in particular will be alienated from swathes of their range.

Moving to the central Yukon, creating new mining roads on the taxpayers' dime in the Dawson Range is completely inexcusable from an environmental as well as economic perspective.

Extending the road system past the Freegold region to the Casino Mine project is indefensible. Contemplating a connector from the Casino Mine to the Coffee Gold area is irresponsible. No matter what one thinks of the Coffee Gold project, at least they had the sense to choose a route south of Dawson using the existing placer mining road grid. The environmental impacts of such a route are less than the Casino Mine route.

The proposed Casino Mine route cuts through the heart of the Klaza Caribou herd grounds. This very scenario was examined in a report published by the Yukon's Department of Environment in 2016. One of the key objectives from this report is to "maintain a large, intact part of the Klaza herd winter range in a condition relatively undisturbed by human development and activities." Woodland Caribou herds like the Klaza have been shown to avoid roads and mines. A public highway that enables massive mine expansion would seem to be the antithesis of the stated objective.

It is understood that many details of the Yukon Resource Gateway Project have yet to be released, including exact routing of some of the new roads. Also yet to be understood is how the environmental assessment process will apply, and how mining projects currently undergoing environmental assessment will be affected. Some of these projects had included privately funded and designed road access, which would now appear to be superseded by the Yukon Resource Gateway Project roads.

Proclaiming that pre-paid resource extraction roads will be inserted into areas of the Yukon before adequate land use planning and community consultation have taken place, means that environmental considerations have not been taken into account. This is unacceptable: it will threaten entire interconnected ecosystems, from caribou herds to fish habitat.

The huge amount of public dollars, \$360 million, being spent on roads that will directly and immediately benefit large mining corporations could be a massive lost opportunity for the Yukon. But imagine if these funds were spent in a different fashion.

Yukon desperately needs to develop in ways that support communities and minimize environmental damage. We need to create energy efficiency and renewable energy programs that provide local jobs while helping the Yukon become much less reliant on fossil fuels.

YCS believes that any federal and or territorial public infrastructure dollars should be invested in projects that help Yukoners adapt to climate change, reduce our contribution to climate change, increase our resilience and energy security, and diversify the economy. These 'roads to resources' projects do none of these, and by and large benefit mining companies exclusively.

Spending a third of a billion dollars on resource roads for large mining companies would appear to show a remarkable lack of environmental and socio-economic awareness by those who initiated this project and by those who are carrying it forward. The Yukon Conservation Society takes the position that without adequate land use planning and public consultation the Yukon Resource Gateway Project presents a clear and present danger to the Yukon's environment.

Lewis Rifkind, Mining Analyst (this article originally appeared in the Oct. 4th edition of the Yukon News)



Summer Neighbours

The raven flew through the spruce trees and disappeared. What?! Where did that raven go? That piqued my curiosity. I watched the area for a few more minutes and another raven did the same. Then a raven suddenly appeared and flew back the way it had come.

To unravel this mystery, I crossed the street to the bush on the other side armed with binoculars, watching for activity. There it was! A stick nest up in a spruce tree right across the busy street. This was putting a lie to the understanding that ravens nest away from people in the remote cliffs, or in trees in secluded areas.

I continued to watch the nest from a comfy spot at the base of a spruce tree over the next week or more. Eventually I was rewarded with the sight of little fuzzy heads moving around up there. Nestlings! The eggs had already hatched. Over the course of the next weeks the nestlings grew and more of them could be seen. There were four in all. And an active bunch they were.

One weekend there was a strong wind which may have blown two nestlings out of the nest. I rescued one from the middle of the street two days later. It was being attacked by a small dog followed by his screaming owner. The adult ravens were diving on the dog. All this commotion at 6 a.m. I put on leather gloves and grabbed a big thick towel, thinking I may have a fight on my hands. But the nestling was passive.

Bringing him into the house, I put him in a big box and covered it with the towel. He didn't look too good. No movement I could see. But after about an hour he showed signs of life. Later that day he went to the Wildlife Preserve where he was checked for injuries and rehydrated. He was brought back the next day and, although he couldn't fly, released near the nest tree.

The good news and the bad news: he survived (a sibling was found dead under the nest tree) and he and his nestmates chose the top of a big spruce tree right outside our bedroom window to congregate and squawk to be fed. Noisy neighbours. Raven neighbours.

Parliament, the Senate, and Bill C-17

The Yukon Environmental and Socio-economic Assessment Act (YESAA) is, in the humble of opinion of the authors of this article, without peer in Canada. It is one of the most progressive Environmental Assessment legislations in the country, and it is suspected that the previous territorial and federal governments HATED it!

In hindsight, it looks like they wanted to emasculate it so their corporate cronies could stride unencumbered across Yukon's verdant valleys, leaving spoil piles and reeking pools in their wake. They saw their opportunity when YESAA came up for its review in 2015.

They nodded and smiled, sniggering behind their hands, as they and Yukon First Nations carefully examined how well YESAA was working, agreed to a list of modifications and tweaks, and then the previous government presented them to Parliament – with four extra clauses, which had not been discussed with anyone, especially the Yukon First Nations.

The four contentious changes had to do with: ministerial authorization; exemption of projects from reassessment when an authorization is renewed or amended; establishing time limits for project assessments; and authorization of binding policy directions to the Yukon Environmental and Socio-economic Assessment Board. These changes essentially cut the legs out from under YESAA, and were fiercely opposed by the Yukon Conservation Society.

Yukon First Nations launched a lawsuit against the Federal Government, arguing that the changes to YESAA undermined the Umbrella Final Agreement and violated land claim agreements. After an Intergovernmental Forum in Whitehorse in the spring of 2016, an MOU was signed between First Nations, the Yukon Government and Federal government to repeal the four contentious amendments to YESAA made under Bill S-6. First Nations governments agreed to set aside their court case until the legislation to repeal the changes is passed, and once that happens, they will drop the lawsuit.

But that didn't stop a blatant attempt to protect the contentious changes. On October 3rd the Parliament of Canada Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs heard from representatives of the Yukon mining industry regarding an upcoming piece of Federal legislation – Bill C-17 – that would repeal the four contentious sections of YESAA.

The main request of the Yukon mining industry was that Bill C-17 should be put on hold until certain wording for reassessments and timelines that meets with their approval is inserted into YESAA. The Yukon Conservation Society strongly disagreed with the proposed delay.

Bill C-17 undoes the worst aspects of the 2015 changes that weakened YESAA, and Bill C-17 helps protect the Yukon's environment. To its credit (and with a shout out to the Yukon's MP Larry Bagnell for helping shepherd it unscathed through the parliamentary process) Parliament gave it a third reading on November 9th. Now the Bill goes to the Senate.

Thanks to recent political machinations there are no Liberal Senators anymore, they've all essentially become Independents. This complicates how they will vote as they do not belong to any party and therefore cannot be 'whipped' into voting the party line. It also means that the timelines they assign to voting on bills, including C-17, are extremely unclear.

YCS will repeat what it said to Parliament a few months ago but now we say it to the Senate. The Senate of Canada should not delay approval of Bill C-17. Undo the historical wrongs of 2015, protect the Yukon's environment, and pass Bill C-17 now.

*Lewis Rifkind, Mining Analyst and
Sebastian Jones, Energy Analyst*



More roads, less wilderness

Yukon is synonymous with wilderness in Canada and the world. That's why we have a multimillion-dollar tourism industry. That's one of the reasons we love it up here. Our Prime Minister just announced millions of dollars for building new roads in the Yukon. If this materializes, the Yukon will no longer be the same.

I have been studying the effects of roads and other types of so called "development" on ecosystems for almost 10 years, in Canada and overseas. My findings, and those of others, tell us a strong and consistent message: roads damage ecosystems in multiple ways. In the first place, life in the soil and above is removed; life is scraped off the land.

Roads change how materials and energy flow through the landscape. For example, the ground becomes a heat sink, degrading permafrost (if you have driven the Alaska or Klondike highways, you have experienced it; watch out for pink flags!). It also changes how living organisms move through the landscape. For many, roads are barriers for movement. Those that try to cross may end up roadkilled. Those that make it across, do not usually stay around for long (I cannot blame them; I prefer to walk through the forest than along the highway).

But most importantly, roads improve access to otherwise remote areas. As science has shown us over and over again, access means extraction (often over-extraction) of natural resources: wildlife, trees, oil, minerals, you name it.



More roads = more human disturbances

We have been extracting resources faster than the planet can produce them since the early 70's, particularly those that are not renewable within a time frame that is meaningful to us (namely oil, gas, coal, and minerals). Often, we are digging these out of the land and transforming them into something else, just to put them back in the land (fill) months later, when they do not end up on roadsides, or in the ocean, or sitting in a bank doing nothing for people.

This is a waste of energy and time, and fundamentally unsustainable, which basically means that it cannot continue indefinitely. The further we go down this business as usual road, the one that the Federal government is so eager to support, the harder it will be to turn around. And we will need to, sooner or later.

The Yukon has remained wild because road access is limited. If you are skeptical, just look at this map of road corridors in Canada and reflect on how it feels to be in those places with lots of roads. Roads will damage the Yukon wilderness, as they have damaged the wilderness of most other places in the world.

I want all Yukoners, including those that are here and those that will join in the future, to have a happy life. Resource extraction and consumption does not bring happiness. We can show the world how to do better. It is time to value the types of capital that truly make us happy, such as our relationships with other human beings and with the land, our skills and knowledge, and our precious wilderness.

We are creative and innovative, and can certainly come up with effective ways to use the resources that are already available to us, which are plentiful, and use them over and over again, instead of continuously producing new things and disposing them shortly after. We can show Canada and the rest of the world that we value our environment more than roads.

Alberto Suarez-Esteban

Youth on the Peel



Tayu Hayward

This summer, the Youth of the Peel made it back onto the rivers, in partnership with Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning. A team of German activists from Wilderness International paddled the Snake River with Gwich'in youth to raise awareness about the watershed. It was a beautiful summer in the watershed, and many people shared with us their photos and videos of paddling adventures on the Wind, Snake, and Peel Rivers.

We received some stunning photos from photographer Tayu Hayward's 2016 trip on the Snake. Hayward's moody photos show the watershed as you've never seen it. To see the photos and to get regular updates of amazing footage, please visit our Facebook page at "Protect the Peel" (www.facebook.com/protectpeel).

'Snow'

Robert Frisch
(1930-1985)

Snow is magic, stuff spun in the sky to cover the earth and protect it. When you are snowshoeing, it's a magic carpet that will carry you wherever you wish, if you are patient and take your time. Or more truly, if you take snow time, which you learn by watching it fall. You can't learn it easily; you must plod and sweat. But at the end of the day when you have made your bed on that same snow and melted the snow for your tea and watched the snow reflect the light of your fire, you will suddenly realize that you have come far - farther than any jet ever carried you. You moved across some unmarked boundary into another dimension where space and time are measured by the depth of the forest and the uncounted steps you took. And if you sit very still and look up, you can see that you are still moving. The stars have shifted among the spruce boughs. It takes stillness to sense that kind of movement. The world is big, the woods go on and on, and the snow, and the light from the stars...


Yukon Conservation Society

YES! I want to protect the Yukon's environment and support the Yukon Conservation Society!

I'd like to make a tax deductible gift!

- \$60 \$200 \$500 \$1000 Surprise us! _____
- I'd like to make a monthly pledge by credit card of \$_____ (charged on the 15th of each month)
- I have made a bequest to YCS in my will

Please, sign me up as a member:

- Student \$10 Individual \$25 Family \$40 (2 or more people)
- I am a **new** member!
- I am **renewing** my membership for 2018!

Memberships are activated on day of receipt and good for 1 year, and include a subscription to the Walk Softly newsletter. Both donations and memberships are tax-deductible.

Do not send me newsletters. Instead, **notify me by email** when they are online.

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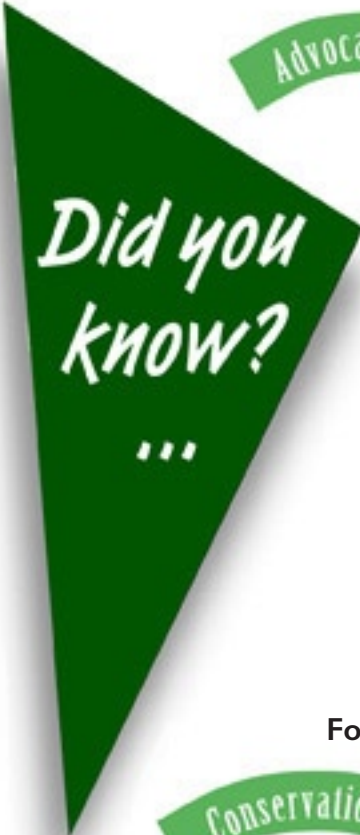
Thank You Volunteers!



The Yukon Conservation Society wouldn't be the vibrant, active organization it is without your help!

Thanks to:

- Tanya for working on the newsletter and keeping our mascot looking good
- Luiza for helping with office tasks
- Mary and Julie for helping the Shaun Loney event run smoothly
- Mary A. for her tireless work with our membership database
- The members of the Energy and Mining committees for their work



YCS Year End Party

Friday December 15, 5pm

302 Hawkins St, Whitehorse

As 2017 ends, join us to celebrate YCS members, supporters and volunteers, and the environmental successes we've achieved together this year.

All are welcome. Refreshments are provided.

The recipient of the 2017 Gerry Couture Stewardship Award will be announced at 6pm

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