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Northwest Territories

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In the Northwest Territories (NWT), the land, plants, animals and humans hold a kin interrelationship that has consummated livelihoods for generations. Resilience is central to this landscape whereby traditional knowledge, experience, skills, language, interconnections with the land, and resource care have all sustained the health of local people for generations. Abundant interpersonal relationships define daily life fostering a connection to place that defeats a sense of remoteness. The NWT tends not to be talked about under the binary oppositions of rural and remote; however, while both factor into its make-up, neither truly captures the essence of this vast and diverse territory. A better descriptor might be 'cultural landscape'^{*}, which incorporates into a single concept small urban settings that are widely dispersed in a vast rural landscape.

^{*} According to the World Heritage Center, cultural landscape defines the interaction between humans and their natural environments. This definition is most appropriate for the NWT where 51% of the population are indigenous peoples who have an extensive relationship with the land ^{1,2}



The NWT is a vibrant place to live where you feel connected to place through the positive connections and relationships you make with the land and the people. In contrast, it is also a region where many communities lack even the most basic service provisions most Canadians take for granted, such as: food that is both reasonably priced and regularly accessible; access to necessary health and social services; access to reliable telecommunications services; job opportunities in a wage economy; security of affordable housing and, in some communities, community-based police services. It is a region with long and complicated history of relations with the federal government and of the struggle for Aboriginal self-governance. It is the dynamics between these that characterize the continuing political realities of the NWT.

Demographics and Human Capital

The NWT is located in northwestern Canada to the east of Yukon, west of Nunavut, and north of Alberta, Saskatchewan, as well as the northeastern corner of British Columbia. The entire population of 43,500 citizens could count as a small city, and Yellowknife, the capital, approximately 20,000 citizens, would be a town relative to the other provincial capitals. This tiny population lives in a land mass that is approximately 1.3 million square kilometers characterized by rugged terrain consisting of exposed rocks, tundra, and boreal forest scattered with many lakes including two of the largest lakes in the world, Great Bear and Great Slave. Thirty-three communities are the homeland of this sparse population³. Another quarter of the citizens live in four regional centres in other parts of the territory[†]. The rest of the communities, ranging in size from 100-1000 people, are dispersed across the vast land mass. These smaller communities are largely Aboriginal and established in traditional meeting places or in locations formerly associated with the fur trade. Within the capital and regional centres, there is a great deal of diversity including new immigrants, Euro-Canadians, and Aboriginal people, while in the smaller communities there is a greater homogeneity of indigeneity. There are 11 official languages: English, French, Cree, Inuktitut, Gwich'in, North Slavey, South Slavey, Innuinaqtun,

[†] 2014 populations of regional centres: Fort Smith (population, 2536), Hay River (population, 3689), Fort Simpson (population, 1244) and Inuvik (population, 3396)³.

Chipewyan, Tłı̄chō and Inuvialuktun.

The NWT has a youthful age structure, with about one fifth of the population under 15 years of age[‡] and an additional 16% under 24 years of age. Individuals sixty-five years and older account for only 6% of the population, which is half as many older adults as the Canadian average (16%). Partly, this is due to the transient nature of the larger centres where individuals of retirement age frequently relocate to southern Canada. Only Nunavut has a younger population structure than the NWT. In recent years, however, there has been an upward trend in our older adult population and a downward trend in the under 15 years of age category. An improvement in health status for older adults seems to be implicated in this aging trend and health education could be contributing to a lower birth rate.

Governance

Governance within the NWT is complex and unique. Historically there has been significant control of territorial governance by the federal government. As late as 1967, the seat of the government was in Ottawa, with appointed federal officials administering all aspects of NWT from afar. Jock McNiven was the first northern resident appointed to the Executive Council in 1947. Over time, more power has been devolved to the NWT including the recent devolution of control and management of crown lands. This ongoing process of devolution is an important issue facing the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT)[§].

The territorial government has many but not all of the same authorities as provincial governments[¶]. Uniquely, there are no political parties in territorial politics; instead individual members represent their constituencies in a consensus-style of government. There are 19 elected officials, from which Premier, cabinet and regular members are chosen. The electoral jurisdictions are culturally and geographically divided and population does not figure significantly into the formula. In addition to the GNWT there are seven

[‡] This is in comparison to the national population of 0-14 year olds which is 16%. No other province or territory, with the exception of Nunavut, has populations with over 19% 10-14 year olds (Statistics Canada, 2014).

[§] See Andrews⁴ for a broader discussion of NWT history and relations between state and indigenous populations.

[¶] Unlike provinces, territories do not have the authority to amend their constitutions and control the management and sale of public lands.

regional Aboriginal governments** and in the south of the territory, two reserves (Hay River Reserve and Salt River First Nation).

Two treaties, signed in 1899 (Treaty 8) and 1921 (Treaty 11), covering most of the NWT, ceded Aboriginal land rights to the Dominion of Canada in exchange for reserves and other provisions. However, as Canada failed to fulfill most of its historical obligations under the treaties, particularly in the area of granting reserves, the Dene have successfully argued that they serve simply as peace and friendship agreements, leading to several decades of modern treaty making in the NWT, with negotiations beginning in the 1980s. Today, across the NWT, there are both settled and unsettled land claims and self-government agreements. The claims, negotiated between the territorial and federal governments and a specific Aboriginal group, generally include provisions for self-government, shared land management, hunting rights, shared wildlife management, and cultural preservation. Land claims and the establishment of self-governments have enhanced the identity and self-determination of indigenous groups. In the words of John B. Zoe⁵, an Aboriginal leader, agreements were constructed on “the traditional view of co-existence, respect, collectivity, representation and recognition, and it is also grounded in the requirement to prepare the next generation to ensure the continuance of these perspectives.” The territorial geopolitical environment has shifted with each new agreement. The 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement led to the creation of two territories, Nunavut and a smaller Northwest Territories dividing the former Northwest Territories into two. Continuing land claim and self-government negotiations are taking place across the NWT today.

NWT Economy

The NWT is a resource rich area, with significant oil, gas and mineral resources. However, traditional hunting, fishing, and land-based activities are central not only for subsistence, but for cultural, community and spiritual well-being, and are often in conflict with development scenarios. Resource development has challenged traditional ways of life and remains contentious. For example, shale oil fracking exploration

in the Sahtu region of the territory was approved by the National Energy Board in 2013 though the Dene Nation, and others, remain concerned about potential impacts⁶. The territory’s existing mining operations include a tungsten mine, diamond mines at Ekati, Diavik, Snap Lake and Gahcho Kwe (still in construction), oil-producing fields, with more new mines expected in the next decade. Currently, the NWT is the third largest diamond producer in the world accounting for 17 percent of the NWT’s 2013 GDP and projected to grow to 31 percent by 2018⁷. Oil and gas production, however, has slowed territory-wide from its peak in the late 1990s. The GNWT, another major employer in the NWT, employs approximately 4,700 public servants⁸. Retention and northern capacity building remain key issues in NWT employment strategies with an ongoing effort to decentralize government positions from the capital into communities.

Traditional foods, such as caribou, fish, birds, and berries are central to the diets of many in the communities. In a survey addressing the consumption of country foods, many community households’ dietary intake of country foods is well above fifty percent of their diet^{††}. Fifty-two percent of Aboriginal people hunted or fished in 2013⁹. The importance of traditional foods is not just for food security, it is connected to cultural persistence. The skills and knowledge related to traditional food collection is linked to the broader understanding of the land¹⁰. Threats to traditional food stocks including environmental change, contaminants, and climate change have placed significant pressure on subsistence hunting. The Bathurst Caribou, a central animal for the Tłı̄cho, has seen declines from 472,000 head in the 1990s to 32,000 head today⁸. Significant no-hunting zones have been established by the GNWT to protect the herd, but the strategy is controversial and Aboriginal communities that rely on caribou as a prime part of subsistence are directly impacted by the population decline.

Access to goods and services in the NWT is a challenge that is defined by the scale of the NWT. This is most noticeable when visiting community grocery stores. The cost of standard food items like eggs and milk range can be as much as four times higher than southern jurisdictions. While the cost of fresh produce is often too much for families in remote northern communities to bear, the lower prices for processed foods has given local people little option in their store-bought food choice, leading

** These include Akaticho Territory Government, DehCho First Nations, Gwich’in Tribal Council, NWT Métis Nation, Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated, Tłı̄cho Government, and Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, as well as three community-based governments: K’at’l’odeeche First Nation, Salt River First Nation, and Acho Dene Koe First Nation.

†† Fort McPherson, 76.5%; Paulatuk, 74.7%; Tsiigehtchic, 79.9%; Fort Resolution, 69.4%; Kakisa, 94.4%; Łutselk’e, 91.9%; to name a few (Statistics Canada, 2008)



to obesity and chronic disease¹¹.

There is movement in the NWT to reclaim local economies and self-sufficiency. For example, the Łutselk'e First Nation is engaged in a Solar PV Project that is projected to supply 20% of power to the community; an on-line Tłıcho store is supporting local arts and crafts nationally and internationally; The Farm Training Institute in Hay River has been created to provide education and training; and wood harvesting in Fort McPherson has prompted local business development.

Infrastructure and Services

Infrastructure in the NWT is still under-developed. The NWT highway system consists of 2200 kilometres of all-season roads that reach to all regions except the Sahtu, providing road links to 17 of the 33 communities. These roads add 1,440 kilometers to the highway system, and provide avenues for heavier and cheaper supplies to be transported. The duration and stability of these essential ice roads is under threat by a warming climate. Regionally, methods such as boats, ATVs or snowmobiles, are used seasonally to travel between communities and access hunting areas, linking regional communities

despite limited road infrastructure. Marine barge service brings supplies to Mackenzie River and some coastal communities during the brief shipping season.

Quality and extent of telecommunications varies across the NWT. As late as the 1960s, some communities were unable to make long-distance phone calls. While now, almost all communities have cell service, telecommunications outside of municipal areas are limited. Internet connections are inconsistent or limited in many communities and within those that have a reliable connection, costly^{**}. The GWNT is currently undertaking a massive 82 million-dollar capital initiative to install over 1,000 kilometers of fiber-optic cable down the Mackenzie Valley. This will significantly alter the internet services along this corridor and provide opportunities for increased service provision through remote internet interactions.

Access to health services is limited. Health care in many remote communities is provided by registered nurses and local community workers in community health centres. There is a regional hospital in Yellowknife with some specialty care. Medical travel is a reality for birthing, for appointments

^{**} Access in 2014 to home internet by region: Beaufort Delta: 70%, DehCho: 52%, Sahtu: 68%, South Slave: 81%, Tłıcho: 50%, Yellowknife area: 90.4% ¹²

to see specialists for diagnostic services, and for critical care¹³. There are few women's shelters and counselling services for women fleeing violence is inadequate¹⁴. Mental health is a major concern with few services to address the needs of northerners. There are no treatment centres for addictions along with an overtaxed mental health counselling team that cannot keep up with the demands¹⁵. As noted by Christenson¹⁶, homelessness in both Inuvik and Yellowknife is on the rise leading to housing insecurity.

Education (kindergarten to high school) is provided in most communities, with strides in Aboriginal curriculum particularly the newly developed residential school curriculum¹⁷. There is a student attendance issue in many schools and graduation rates are below the national average but, evidence of student success can be seen, for example, in the pride of a small community, like Łutselk'e, where two students graduated from high school in their own community. Prior to this, students finished high school outside of the community. Recruitment and retention of teachers has been an ongoing difficulty that has been addressed somewhat through the Teacher Education Program at the local college. This decentralized college with three campuses (Yellowknife, Fort Smith and Inuvik) provides a variety of post-secondary programs (e.g., teacher education, nursing, social work, and business). Also, there are 23 Learning Centres in smaller communities across the north that provides adult basic education. Many university graduates are returning to the NWT and this enhances our homegrown workforce.

Aboriginal Issues

Colonial processes and the intergenerational impact of residential school have created what Irlbacher-Fox¹⁸ has referred to as social suffering for many Aboriginal people. As well, Moffitt¹⁹ described colonization as a health determinant resulting in disparities for Aboriginal people seen in greater proportions than in mainstream Canada. Some of the health issues particularly affecting the health status of the territory's Aboriginal people include chronic disease, (cancer is the leading cause of death); an increase in diabetes (200 new cases each year); arthritis is prevalent; substance abuse accounts for 58% of mental illness hospitalizations in the territory; suicide is 65% higher than the national average; family violence is the second highest in Canada²⁰. Despite these statistics, the resilience of the people is evidenced in their preservation of traditional

knowledge, cultural identity, and practices and in their efforts to create healthier communities.

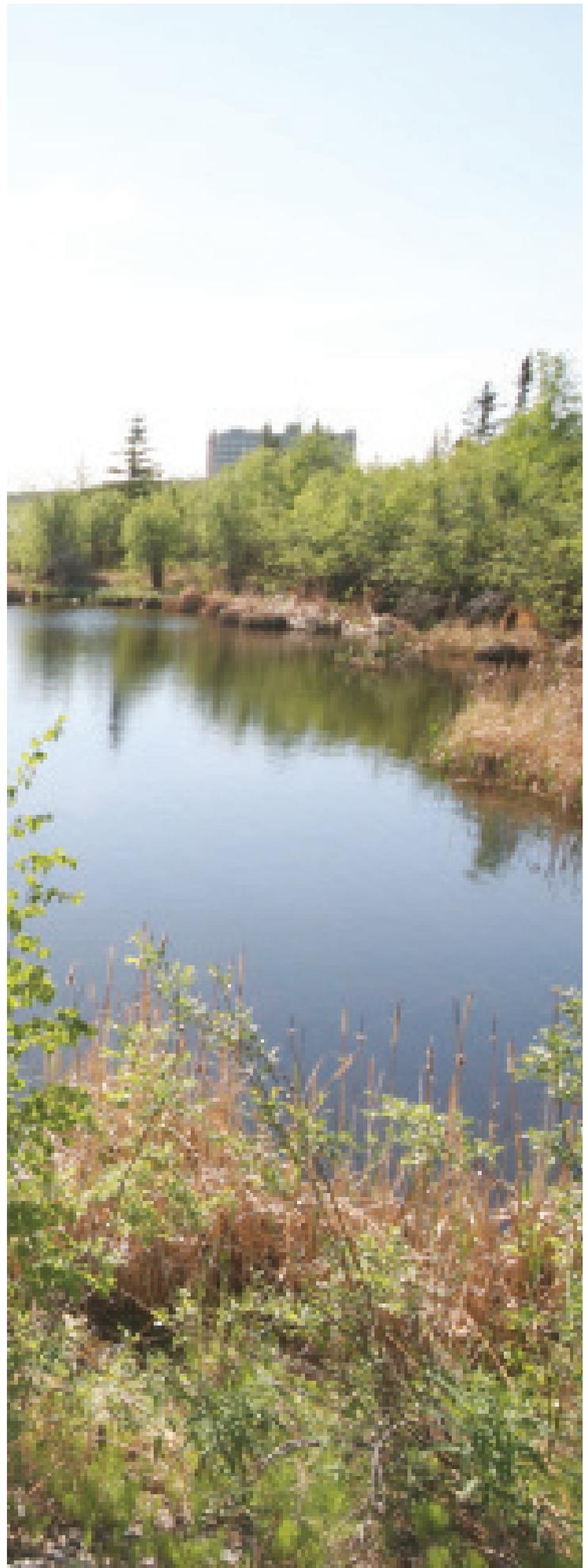
As noted earlier, there has been a great deal of progress by Aboriginal groups in the territory to settle their land claims. Indigenous people are gravely concerned about loss of their language. Local languages have been marginalized with a default to English in education, business, and territorial events. Although many Dene and Inuit languages are officially recognized in the territory, it is difficult and costly to obtain translation and interpretive services when language fluency is decreasing and the number of speakers are declining. Given the oral tradition of the Aboriginal people, there is concern with loss of stories and history as elders die without their words recorded and preserved.

A key issue for all peoples of the NWT, but particularly Aboriginal people, is climate change. Along with significant political, economic, and social impacts, warming of the north is a major concern for local peoples, since their way of life is threatened as they become dislocated from their past practices. Water levels are decreasing to such low levels that the barge [boats] bringing supplies to communities cannot make it up the river. Currently and in the recent past, we are experiencing an increase in forest fires due to hot dry summers. The lack of availability of water is threatening the forests. Air quality is causing respiratory issues for many and visibility becomes an issue for aviation. Furthermore, the effects of climate change have been described as far-reaching encompassing impacts to both health and the environment as they are crucially linked²¹. Changes to the water, ice, and permafrost are occurring at a faster rate than was expected causing increases in the level of sea water, a decrease in the ice cover, and a decrease in permafrost²², leading to landscape instability and impacts to traditional harvesting practices.

Accompanying climate change are the pollutants and contaminants that reach the north and damage the country food consumed by local people. Pollutants (e.g., heavy metals, DDT and PCBs) to country food are transported through atmospheric currents or from mining products or pesticide use. Contaminants are harmful to humans in early development and chronic exposure through consumption requires ongoing monitoring. For local people, this causes a quandary since the benefits of country foods must be considered against the risk through frequent assessments²³.

Conclusion and Implications

There is much to celebrate in the cultural landscape of our territory: the achievements of Aboriginal people to reclaim their land; the traditional knowledge held and shared by elders; entrepreneurs and artists who are maintaining the arts and cultures of the territory; the beauty and natural environment that attract tourists from many countries; and, the land resources that are plentiful. In spite of these benefits, disparities continue, particularly for Aboriginal people. The social determinants and limited resources invite action for change, such as, anti-poverty strategies, housing improvements, mental health programs, alcohol and substance programs that will improve health status and livelihood. Efforts to sustain Aboriginal languages must continue with the development of language strategies, the provision and creation of language classes, and the allocation of funding for language programs. Stewardship of the land is important to the peoples of the territory and there needs to be increased efforts to prevent the detrimental effects of climate change. At issue, there is a lack of true consultation between all governing groups to work together to transform the existing challenges and improve the lives of the territorial residents.



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