

Dehcho Land Use Plan – Comments
Douglas Tate, Conservation Biologist, NNPR

Overall

It is great to see the work being done by the committee. Land use planning is by no means an easy task and you have made great progress. The opportunity to feed into the process is appreciated, and I hope you find these few comments helpful.

Park Expansion Study Area

Nahanni National Park Reserve's primary concern was with respect to identifying the area under study for future park expansion in the draft land use plan. That issue seems to have already been addressed at our meeting, and we appreciate that.

If the decision is made to consider the entire park expansion study area as a separate planning process, and it will be shown on maps as a gray area in the manner Edehzhie does, then some of the wildlife issues below may not be of concern, since they pertain largely to the South Nahanni Watershed. These issues can be addressed through the Nahanni Expansion Working Group's planning process.

Land Use Options

With respect to the land use options, our initial concern was with the representation of these models as 'options' being misleading; this was addressed at the meeting as well. In the draft plan, this type of scenario could perhaps be presented as theoretical economic benefits from developing a percentage of land base, as opposed to marking areas on a map.

Alternatively, since the development of 'options' is part of what the Land Use Plan process is intended to do, it might serve the public best to provide some real feasible options for discussion. The mathematical models can help to guide this process, but should not be left to do it entirely in a computer-generated fashion. Conservation biology theory, including the concepts of core protected areas, buffer zones and corridors could be used to develop several proposed land use options that are practical and meaningful to the public. I have seen this approach used in land use planning consultations in other jurisdictions.

The Dehcho has already come a long way in this respect; the interim land withdrawals have set up a basis for protected areas and connecting corridors, and there are a number of community-driven protected area proposals. Progress in both of these areas has made the Dehcho region the subject of high praise in the national and international conservation community. Since the land withdrawal areas and candidate protected areas have both been developed directly from the communities' input, they should certainly be central in the development of the Land Use Plan.

These initiatives, in conjunction with information on areas already under development, as well as known and suspected high potential resource areas, provide an excellent basis to design a range of practical land use options allowing for substantial economic development opportunities and viable conservation areas.

Economic Analysis

There are aspects of the option descriptions that seem to be misleading. The statements claim that social problems with alcohol, drugs, etc., may increase at the highest development option; but also state that such problems may increase at the lowest development scenario. What is the best way to decrease it then? Most actual case studies I'm familiar with show that social problems (alcohol & drugs) are more likely to increase with rapid increase in development.

It would seem that the Dehcho will ultimately accrue the most local benefit by developing resources only at the rate required to maintain full employment in the region. Otherwise, the majority of the benefits will go to transient workers. A longer time frame for extraction allows for two additional benefits: local people can be trained for high-skill jobs before the resource and work is gone, and as industry techniques improve over time, then these new methods can be implemented, thus reducing environmental damage. In the economic analysis, Option 5 has the lowest rate of in-migration to fill the jobs, yet still requires over 700 people to move into the region. Therefore, this would likely be the preferred option, and at the same time this option will allow the greatest chance for conservation of wildlife, and traditional culture, which is tied so closely to the land.

Rankings for Wildlife

Dall's Sheep – many of these animals spend their entire life on one mountain block. Therefore, their breeding and lambing areas will be in that block, as well as summer and winter ranges. These are often given a 'general range' label, and ranked Low. Other sites which provide only one of these functions (i.e. lambing) for another herd/population are considered 'critical habitat' and given a ranking of Very High – three ranks higher.

Considering these aspects of sheep biology, any identified sheep habitat would seem to require an increased ranking - perhaps High.

Mountain Goats – same situation as sheep, perhaps even more limited in their habitat choices. Also, the Dehcho contains almost all (maybe 80%?) of the goat habitat in the NWT, and therefore has a greater responsibility to conserve them. The Wildlife Working Group admittedly had little knowledge of the western Dehcho where the goats are, yet the only Very High ratings came from lick sites provided by the WWG.

For these reasons, any identified goat habitat requires an increased ranking - perhaps High.

Caribou – there are additional probable migration corridors identified in the South Nahanni Watershed; west to Coal River, south to LaBiche Range. I believe David Murray or Steve Catto will be providing this information.

Wildlife Map – some areas south of NNPR showed Moderate on the EBA map, while on the new composite they have been downgraded to Low.

Is there any additional consideration in planning for COSEWIC listed species?

Examples:

Western Toad – a Special Concern species identified in Ft Liard area (contact CWS Yellowknife, Mike Fournier or Craig Machtans, for details), probable at Yohin Lake, and likely elsewhere in the vicinity.

Short-eared Owl – a Special Concern species. Observations along upper SNR (Sahtu), but also at RKL in migration. Several sightings along Mackenzie Hwy wetlands west of Ft Providence turn. CWS may have observation details.

Yellow Rail – a Special Concern species, identified along Liard Hwy in 2004. Contact CWS for details.

Karst features and thermal springs – it is great to see that these features are represented on the maps. Some of these sites, however, may require a higher conservation ranking. Thermal spring sites typically contain a high diversity of plant and animal species, often rare species, and are very important to other wide-ranging wildlife in the area due to their minerals or simply the presence of ice-free water in winter. There is a spiritual significance associated with many spring sites, and some historical significance with some as well. Some of the karst features and thermal spring sites are quite large, and may exceed the 0.5km or even 1.0-1.5km area proposed for their conservation. The fact that these maps do at least identify the sites may be adequate for the draft plan, if it is possible to revise conservation ranks and extent as sites are mapped in more detail and further investigated.