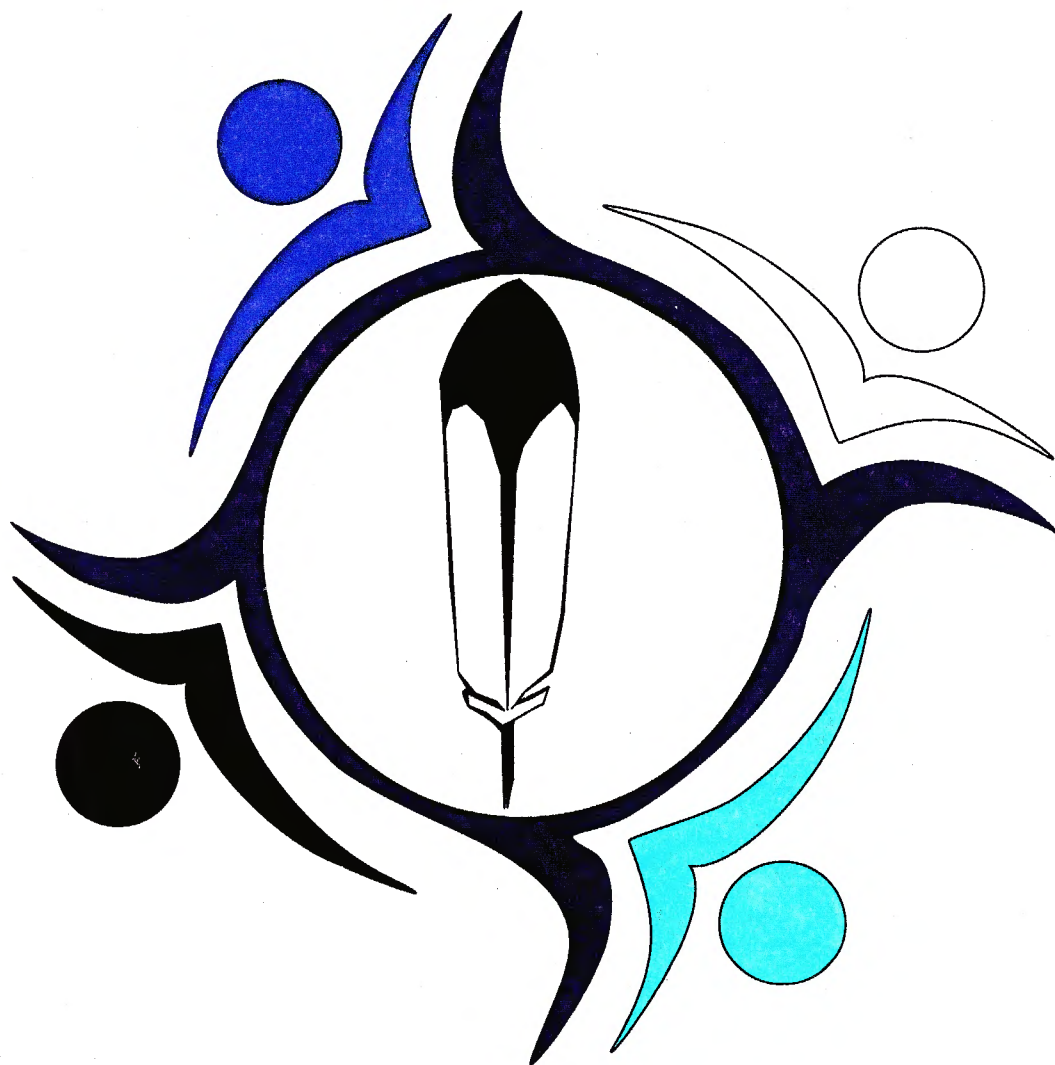


E78.C2

C752

[v.9]

201



Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

Canada

Yukon Region Module

This section is used for the facilitator to become familiar with some of the general issues of the region. It is Section Six - Part Two of the Facilitator's Guide and is to be used in conjunction with that section. As the regional sessions are designed to be presented by speakers from the community and region, this section is informational, but could be used as a basis for a presentation if necessary.

There are 9 separate modules available, each relating to a different region.

Alberta Region Module
Atlantic Region Module
British Columbia Region Module
Manitoba Region Module
Northwest Territories Module
Ontario Region Module
Quebec Region Module
Saskatchewan Region Module
Yukon Territories Module

Table of Contents

General Overview: Yukon	1
History of the People	3
Regional Concerns	6
List of Yukon Aboriginal Communities	10

General Overview: Yukon

Profile of the Aboriginal Peoples of Yukon¹

The Yukon is a huge land that one associates with legends - a land that has been the subject of romance and adventure; it is the land that Jack London wrote about, that Robert Service eulogized, and Pierre Berton exalted. However, Yukon history has been dominated, unfortunately, by the arrival of whites and the subsequent Gold Rush of the late nineties. Lost for the most part in the preoccupation with the Gold rush and the tales of the Klondike, is the story of the original people of the region.

Judging by conventional accounts, to some it may be a startling revelation to learn that there were people in the Yukon before the 1890's, but archaeologists have found evidence of human habitation in the Old Crow area of the northern Yukon, dating back as far as 20,000 years.

Indeed, during the Ice Age, the land mass Beringia was a bridge for traffic that flowed westward into what was to become known as the New World. Scientists also theorize that east-west movement was carried out by skin boats which brought hunters and fishermen across the Bering Strait in search of new hunting and fishing grounds. Some of these people were to settle in the severe, unrelenting Arctic region and develop the skills to survive, albeit precariously, in an age that scientists assure us was far more frigid than we know it today. There was periodical migration to the south but many remained to foster the present day generations of Natives who still live in the Yukon.

The Land and Its Climate

The Yukon Territory is situated in the extreme north-western part of Canada. On the North it is bounded by the Beaufort Sea; on the west by Alaska; on the south by British Columbia and the Alaskan Panhandle; and to the east by the Northwest Territories. In size, the Yukon consists of 482,515 square km which is approximately 5% of the total area of Canada. Of this, 4,481 square km are freshwater and 281,031 square km are forest.

¹ These notes were prepared by CROSS CULTURAL CONSULTING, INC. for use at Aboriginal Awareness workshops organized by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The points of view expressed in these documents are those of the author, who is solely responsible for them. In some instances, the masculine "men" is used for ease of writing. This is not a reference to the male gender but rather includes both men and women. Additional copies of this material can be obtained at the nearest regional or district office of INAC.

The capital city of the Yukon is Whitehorse which took over from the fabled Dawson City in 1952. The entire population of the territory is about 23,075. Of this number, some 14,000 live in Whitehorse while another 4,000 live in the other towns of Faro, Watson Lake and Dawson City (Statistics Canada, 1981). The other 5,000 or so inhabitants are scattered from Old Crow in the north to Teslin in the south, over a huge and diverse land with gigantic mountains, long winding rivers, and tough, irregular plateaus.

Mount Logan, the highest point of elevation in Canada lies to the south-west of the Yukon in the Cordilleran region. This complex of mountain belts forms part of the Rockies and extends as far south as Chile in the Andes of South America. The other geological feature that dominates the landscape is the Yukon Interior Plateau which rises from 600 to 1000 metres above sea-level and is drained by the Yukon, Pelly and Stewart rivers. In all there are 20 peaks in the Yukon exceeding 3000 metres and between these and the Beaufort Sea (which represents the lowest point in Yukon), can be found some of the most awesome scenery in all of Canada. As well, one of the longest rivers in Canada, the Yukon (3185 km) flows from its source in northern British Columbia through the Yukon to its mouth in Alaska.

As far as the climate is concerned, there may be huge fluctuations from year to year as this subarctic region is influenced by cold air masses moving in from the arctic, and sometimes by warm pacific air heading in a northward direction. Nevertheless, the climate consists primarily of cold, long winters with dark nights, and short, mild summers with long, sunny days. The dry winds that blow over the Yukon, however, have a moderating effect on the coldness of the winters, making conditions more tolerable than places that experience greater humidity.

History of the People

The recent history of the Yukon would show that the region was inhabited by a people of the Athapaskan language group about 500 years ago. The snowshoe and the canoe were major aspects of their culture. There were six Athapaskan groups who lived in the interior forests and were characterized by their mobility and flexibility. Because they lacked a stable, predictable economic base, they had to follow their prey and, as a result, their material culture was simple and easily replaced.

The six groups of aboriginal people consisted of the Kaska who lived in the south-east; the Kutchin of the north-central region; their neighbours the Han of the central area; the North and South Tutchone of the central and south-western region; and the Tagish and Tlingit people of the south. These Aboriginal communities had much in common and a major characteristic shared by them was a fusion with the land. Like most other North American Natives, their subsistence activity, patterns of settlement, dress, religious beliefs, social organization and tools they used, reflected in an uncompromising manner, their harmonious co-existence with the land. In addition, these people were nomadic since the relative scarcity of sources of sustenance compelled them to travel in search of food. Hence, their reputation as experts with the canoe. Of course, the canoe had to be light and so it was the birchbark canoe that became a part of the Athapaskan culture, as did the snowshoe with upturned toes secured by a lacing of caribou skin.

The main concern for the Athapaskan Indian was the struggle to subsist in an unrelentingly harsh environment. In the summer those who lived along the rivers caught fish, particularly salmon, which was smoked and stored for winter. In the fall caribou were hunted, usually in communal groups; in winter, moose, rabbits and grouse were sought, and in the spring waterfowl were the popular game.

Athapaskan Indian tribes, including the Kaska of the southeast, all had a strong sense of community. This was reflected in their communal patterns of hunting and fishing. Family and friendship ties were also very important. The family structure emphasized a division of duties and cooperation. The male was the hunter and trapper and travelled lightly, while the female bore the packs as they moved to different camps. The female dominated the home and the male was dominant when the family travelled from camp to camp.

Due to the extreme temperatures experienced in the subarctic, housing arrangements also had to be flexible, and here again the spirit of community was evident. For instance, in winter two families shared a 25 square foot house covered with moss and bark, and in the summer months they lived in lightweight skin covered shelters of a semi-spherical shape.

If there was one feature that distinguished the Athapaskan speaking Indians from other North American Native peoples, it was the fact that their social groups were not tribally determined. Rather, their different Aboriginal communities evolved from kinship-related groups sharing a common dialect as the Athapaskan language underwent changes in different parts of the Yukon. This led to newly defined boundaries as Aboriginal communities coalesced into communities based first on blood relationship and secondly on a common dialect.

Generally, each Aboriginal community exploited the resources of its own well-defined territory. Even within Aboriginal communities there were territorial rights given to some families, but usually these rights were flexible with fishing and hunting privileges being shared especially because of alliances created through marriages. Contact between different Aboriginal communities did take place, sometimes for trade or sometimes for marriage. Occasionally, contact between Aboriginal communities would lead to intense fighting in the interface zones. This sort of hostility occurred when a wrong was perceived to have been committed against a family member.

About 200 years ago a non-Athapaskan speaking group appeared in the Alaskan Panhandle area and gradually worked their way northward. This group was the Tlingit, a powerful and warlike tribe whose superior organizational skills and commitment to inland expansion led them to engage in battles against the Teslin and the Tagash for economic hegemony in the southern Yukon. They were excellent traders who adapted their coastal way of life to suit the inland environment. The Tlingit absorbed the Teslin and the Tagish then spread their own language and customs in the south. They also held off the Hudson's Bay Company and ruled the southern interior until the late 1890's when the influx of whites during the Gold Rush broke their dominance.

The Gold Rush years not only reduced the domination of the Tlingit but threatened to destroy the traditional way of life in the Yukon. The harmony that had been achieved as a result of hundreds of years of learning to adapt to a most intransigent climate and the wisdom gained about the imperatives of living with nature rather than trying to change it, were in danger of being eroded as thousands of speculators, their heads filled with stories from newspapers all over the world about the abundance of gold in the Klondike, flocked to the Yukon.

Actually, it was not the first time that the Natives of the Yukon had experienced an influx of strangers bent on exploiting their resource base. Vitus Jonassen Bering, a Dane serving in the Russian navy, initiated the exploration of the Alaskan coast in 1741, and his tales of the abundance of fur bearing animals to be found in the subarctic wilderness soon lured Russian fur traders into the region. They brought with them goods for barter such as metal tipped arrows which John Franklin, an English explorer, encountered in the possession of the handful of Inuit who lived just north of the Yukon on Herschel Island.

During this period, there was a great demand for furs in China and an intense rivalry developed between the Russians and the English for control of the lucrative fur trade. In 1867, however, with the decline in profits to the Russian traders, their government sold Alaska to the United States and this forced the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) to give up its outposts in Fort Yukon and northern Yukon. The HBC shifted its operations to the Northwest Territories and so the Yukon had a new neighbour to the west.

These two encounters with whites resulted in the appearance of a new racial mixture in the Yukon. Alliances between Natives and whites produced the Metis. (This applies to all people who are a mixture of Native and white, regardless if the latter were French, English, German, etc.). The offspring of these relations were seldom acknowledged by their fathers and since they remained with their mothers from birth, they were regarded as Natives. They adopted the values, lifestyle and attitudes of their Native ancestry and they lacked the alternatives that were available to those few Metis children whose fathers chose to marry or live with their mothers.

Hence, the Yukon evolved as a bi-cultural society with whites and Indians. The progeny of these two cultures were obliged to choose between them and in most cases the choice was to be a part of the Indian heritage. This situation was further exacerbated by the presence in the Yukon of whites during the second World War. The construction of the Alaska Highway and the Canol Pipeline brought in thousands of American males who headed back south after the completion of their many projects, leaving behind children of mixed blood.

It is therefore quite obvious then that the Metis of the Yukon are a recent ethnocultural group, and they have no genealogical links with those Metis who fled the Repurchasing settlements to avoid the persecution following the Battle of Batoche. The Yukon Metis regard themselves as Indians and Metis, since they are almost totally immersed in the Indian cultural way of life. Indeed, recent distinctions between Indians and Metis in the subarctic are seen as an attempt by the bureaucratic elements of the federal government to create confusion among peoples of Native origin with the ultimate goal of denying them certain rights. But the inescapable fact remains that the Metis of the Yukon are referred to as "Metis Indians" by their brethren.

Regional Concerns

Three major concerns dominate the Native world of the Yukon.

1. Land Claims
2. Education
3. Self-government

Land Claims

In 1902 Chief Jim Boss of the southern Aboriginal communities filed a request with the government of Canada for a land treaty at what has been considered a bargain price and his request was refused. Since that time the Indians of Yukon have seen their land excavated, trees cut down, and their old hunting and trapping grounds destroyed. As a consequence, the Native population dwindled alarmingly from "several thousand" to about one thousand. Today, some 6,500 inhabitants of the Yukon call themselves First Nation People, approximately one quarter of the total population of the territory. In the Yukon the Metis are included in this number for they have always considered themselves and have been considered by others, as Indians. The struggle remains the same as Yukon Natives are still trying to squeeze out from under the thumb of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Not only does this bureaucratic body control health and education, but it also determines who is and who is not an Indian for land claim purposes.

In 1968, only a few years after the Indians of the Yukon obtained the right to vote, the Yukon Native Brotherhood was formed. This was the forerunner of the present day Council for the Yukon Indians (CYI), an organization that represents all Native peoples of the Yukon regardless of their political designation. Their mandate is to represent all Native people with regards to settling lands claims with the federal and territorial governments.

In 1984 the CYI had come close to signing an agreement with the federal government on land claims. However, there was one clause in the proposal that bothered the CYI; the clause dealing with the "extinguishment of Aboriginal rights". Negotiations broke off and the federal government hired Murray Coolican, a Halifax consultant, to hammer out a proposal that would meet with mutual approval. Coolican's Report was handed to both sides in December, 1985 and won immediate praise from the CYI. First of all Coolican saw no reason for Aboriginal groups to "extinguish" their rights and the main thrust of

the report was for government and Aboriginal peoples of Canada to share the country's land and resources, and to participate in a common citizenship.

This blueprint for cooperation also proposed that, should a consensus not be possible immediately, both sides ought to take the pragmatic alternative that would see Aboriginal rights set aside "for now". This would allow important projects, which are of mutual benefit, to proceed. In addition, the report called for First Nation People to retain the negotiating rights for access to waters adjacent to lands they now inhabit, as well as the subsurface rights to those same lands. In concluding, Coolican urged a position whereby the revenues from the land should be shared in an agreement based on mutual consent rather than coercion.

In the years since the Coolican report, negotiations between the CYI and the federal and territorial governments continued. Finally, in November of 1988, after nearly fifteen years of negotiations, the CYI signed an agreement-in-principle with both levels of government. Forty-one thousand square kilometers of land and 215 million dollars in compensation was agreed upon. This agreement was subsequently approved by both Whitehorse and Ottawa. The agreement set aside an area $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of Nova Scotia for the 6,500 Native people who live in the thirteen communities scattered across the Yukon. Presently, this agreement is being discussed and ratified in the individual communities.

Education

There is one area in which concern is constantly being aired. For instance, consider the following excerpt from an editorial in the Native newspaper, Yukon Indian News, (now entitled Dan Sha):

Since Native people comprise about one-third of the population of the Yukon territory and even a guy with the near-sightedness of the old cartoon character of Magoo can see that one-third of the youths are not Native, the educators have to look in a mirror and demand who is the fairest of them all - and they plainly are not Native youths. There are plenty of the youths of other races or do not get through Grade 11 or 12 either, but the Native record is the worst of all (YIN, Vol 12, Sept, 1985).

Furthermore Norma Kassi, then MLA for Old Crow, stressed that education has always been totally inadequate for Natives and even though in recent years conditions have improved considerably there is still a long way to go to bring the standard of education

for Natives closer to that of other Yukoners. Native leaders also want Athapaskan languages taught in the schools, as well as a bilingual system which replaces french or english with a Native language.

And there may be cause for optimism. In 1977, the Yukon Native Brotherhood lobbied for changes to the school curriculum which has led to the development of a curriculum designed particularly for consumption by Native children. They searched out books on Native subjects and even had books developed on Native issues. Talking books and posters were also developed and the educators went so far as to collect and record stories and folktales of the elders for later generation. As well, in 1980 a teaching module on Early Yukon Cultures was introduced at the Grade 4 level and later, a study supplement on the Athapaska/Tlingit Family and a kit on Native culture were made available to schools in the Yukon. Throughout the ensuing decades concerted and significant efforts have been made to adapt the non-Native school system of the territory to the traditions, history, values and current Native cultures of the area.

Contemporary Concerns

Perhaps the most important contemporary concern aired by the Indians of the Yukon is the fear of a total erosion of their culture and the loss of their rich traditions. Every time an elder dies there is concern expressed because of the fact that he/she is taking away a large chunk of Athapaska/Tlingit folklore. This invaluable treasure is not replaceable and unless the younger generations are encouraged to learn about and practice the ancient rituals there is a distinct possibility that a religion and a way of life that is hundreds of years old might just vanish. On the other hand, the work of the CYI in the past to introduce Native studies in schools and to keep tradition alive through oral histories bodes well for the Indians of the Yukon. In fact, an attempt is being made to initiate a flexible enough curriculum that would allow Native children to participate in the hunt without sacrificing too much of their formal education along the way. Also, there is an increase in Native radio broadcasting which features the six Yukon Native languages, Athapaskan and Tlingit oral history, myths, legends and songs.

Today in the Yukon territory six Aboriginal communities survive. They are the Kutchin, Han Southern and Northern Tutchone, Kaska and the Tlingit/Tagish. The first five are Athapaskan speaking while the last belongs to the Tlingit linguistic group. Their concerns like everywhere else are for their young ones whom they see threatened by drugs and alcohol and also by the gradual industrialization of the Canadian northwest. Although fishing, hunting and trapping are still popular, there have been fears expressed about the effects of mining, and oil and gas exploration on the delicate ecology and on the Native youth.

Fears have also been voiced about the loss of Aboriginal religions and, as has been mentioned many times before, the loss of the ancient rituals and languages. This is not surprising in view of the changes taking place in the environment. It must be remembered that the Natives sought to adapt to the environment rather than attempt to change it. They had great respect for the land and their religious ceremonies were often to praise a bountiful God in years of plenty, or to appease an angry God in times of scarcity. Native elders in particular, view the advance of modern day technology with great trepidation. They foresee imminent dangers to their society because of the neglect of Native spirituality and the adoption of mainstream ways. The following editorial, again from the Yukon Indian News, sums up the prevailing attitude of the older Native Yukoners:

"In the old Indian way the Yukon people lived in harmony with nature and in unity with each other. All people were respected and were looked to when one needed to know the ways of the seasons of life itself. If one did wrong he was placed amidst a circle of all the people and the wrongdoing was everyone's concern... together they would resolve the problem and when all agreed it was the solution, they would rejoice and celebrate the result" (YIN, Vol. 12, #21, Nov. 1985).

It is unfortunate that this idyllic way of life is in the process of being irrevocably changed. The wheels of "progress" are once again moving with the relentlessness of a juggernaut. In its path could be left yet another casualty for history to marvel at. Yet it is far too early to announce the demise of the Athapaskan/Tlingit people of the Yukon, or their way of life. This culture has shown the resiliency to rebound time and again from the grasp of strangers. It withstood, for example, the threat of the fur traders, the gold seekers, and the initial thrust of the war years construction boom.

Although there may be cause for guarded optimism in the future, a greater awareness has been generated in recent years by Native leaders and Native institutions. In the schools of the Yukon, we have Native issues being discussed. In the media, Native culture is going through a period of revival, and of greatest significance is the attempt being made by the Aboriginal peoples to participate in the political process.

List of Yukon Aboriginal Communities

Aboriginal Community	Linguistic Group	Language	Culture
Aishihik	Athapaskan	Southern Tutchone	Plateau
Atlin	Tlingit	Tagish	Plateau
Carcross/Tagish	Tlingit	Tagish	Plateau
Carmacks	Athapaskan	Southern Tutchone	Plateau
Champagne	Athapaskan	Kutchin	Plateau
Dawson	Athapaskan	Han	Plateau
Kluane	Athapaskan	Southern Tutchone	Plateau
Liard	Athapaskan	Kutchin	Mackenzie River
Mayo	Athapaskan	Northern Tutchone	Plateau
Old Crow	Athapaskan	Loucheux	Plateau
Ross River	Athapaskan	Nahani	Mackenzie River
Selkirk	Athapaskan	Northern Tutchone	Plateau
Teslin	Tlingit	Tagish	Plateau
Kwanlindun	Athapaskan	Northern Tutchone	Mackenzie River