Aboriginal Involvement in the Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy

The Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy (NWT PAS) was developed and is being implemented by a partnership of organizations, including Aboriginal organizations. It explicitly accommodates cultural values and respects all Aboriginal and Treaty rights. Aboriginal communities and governments have a critical role in every step of the PAS, from the initial creation of the Strategy to the identification of candidate areas to the assessment of areas and the final development and implementation of management plans.

Background

In 1996, representatives from Territorial, Federal and Aboriginal governments, environmental organizations and the mining industry met to discuss establishing an NWT protected areas strategy. The impetus was in response to increasing development pressures in the Slave Geological Province (area between Great Slave Lake and the Arctic Ocean). During the development of the Strategy, there were regional meetings with large representation from Aboriginal organizations, as well as the other partners.

In 1999, the NWT PAS was approved by the Government of the NWT and the Government of Canada (through the Minister of DIAND). A Protected Areas Strategy Implementation Advisory Committee was established at the same time. The Advisory Committee was to guide the implementation of the Strategy, and included representatives...
from eight Aboriginal organizations, two industry groups, two environmental organizations and the Federal and Territorial governments.

The Strategy did not include an implementation plan, and funding was limited for initial work. In response to increasing development pressures in the Mackenzie Valley, a Mackenzie Valley Five Year Action Plan was developed by the Advisory Committee. The plan was approved in 2004, with a total budget of $17.8 million over a five-year period. About half of this amount comes from the Federal government and one third from the environmental organization. Aboriginal organizations contribute to the Action Plan through in-kind support and participation in candidate area advancement.

The need for overall community well-being is recognized throughout the process to establish protected areas. This is reflected in the Strategy’s subtitle: ‘A balanced approach to establishing protected areas in the NWT’. In addition, throughout the process, and in the establishment of any areas, all Aboriginal and Treaty rights are respected. This is explicitly stated at the very beginning of the Strategy.

The two goals of the Strategy are to protect:

1. Special natural and cultural areas of the NWT
2. Core representative areas within each ecoregion of the NWT

The NWT PAS process is driven by community decisions. The objective is to result in permanent, legal protection for areas. Protection can vary from areas with no development to areas with development allowed in such a way to ensure that the ecological and cultural values are preserved. Core representative areas must have no development.

Identifying areas of key cultural concern has been the focus of the work to date. Communities have identified, through community mapping projects, on-the-land and community meetings, land use planning initiatives and political decision making, various areas of cultural significance. While the Strategy allows that development could occur in such areas, to date the communities have been very clear that these areas of high cultural concern should have no development. The PAS process has eight steps, summarized as:

- Community support (e.g., through Band Council Resolutions or similar)
- Regional support (e.g., through a regional Land Use Plan or Regional Government motion)
- Gaining a ‘sponsoring agency’ (i.e., an agency with the legal authority to manage the land; to date this has been Parks Canada Agency or the Canadian Wildlife Service)
- Interim protection (if required)
- Detailed evaluations (ecological, cultural and economic values) through Working Groups
- Final recommendations on the designation, boundaries and management of the area
- Formal negotiations, approval and designation of protected area
- Managing and monitoring the established protected area

Since 1999, the Sahtu, Dehcho and Akaítcho have all been active in bringing forth a number of areas of interest through the PAS. The attached map shows the status of areas to March, 2007. Areas associated with Parks Canada that are either outside of the PAS process, or have now ‘graduated’ to being negotiations between Parks Canada and the appropriate First Nation, are also shown. Sahoyúé – ehdacho (western peninsulas on Great Bear Lake) was the first site to enter the PAS process in October 1999 (less than a month after the PAS was formally approved). March 11, 2007 Parks Canada, Délina First Nation and Délina Land Corporation signed a memorandum of understanding to negotiate cooperatively managing the area and permanent protection. More about the Strategy, steps and status of areas can be found on www.nwtpas.ca.
Lessons Learned

This co-operative process takes time. This is a strength and a weakness: strength because the local people are fully involved and all values are assessed; weakness because of third party interests can be established while parts of the process takes place. Some political challenges are presented because this is a Territorial strategy, yet the Territories is broken into regional claims. However, Aboriginal people and ecologists are all fully aware that air, water and animals don’t adhere to political boundaries, so the Strategy provides a framework for groups working together across political boundaries (e.g., Edéhzhie) to ensure important cultural and ecological values are protected. The goal of ecological representation has proven to be more difficult to tackle than originally anticipated, and work on this is only now being brought to communities. How this information can assist in decision making and the overall protection of the biodiversity of the NWT remains to be seen. It is clear however that areas identified by communities also contribute significantly to the goal of ecological representation. The PAS is only one land management initiative, and must work very closely with other groups, particularly land use planning boards/agencies. While this means a lot of work with other agencies, these co-ordination efforts help lessen confusion of overlapping initiatives in the communities and strengthen territorial conservation efforts.

Conclusion

The direct involvement of Aboriginal government, Bands, First Nations Land Corporations and communities was integral to the development of and is integral to the implementation of the NWT Protected Areas Strategy. To date, no protected areas have been formally established under the PAS. However, once established, any protected area should continue to have the full participation of the local people in co-operatively managing and monitoring the areas.

Any protected area should continue to have the full participation of the local people in co-operatively managing and monitoring the areas.

Wetlands in the Ts’ude niline Tu’eyeta Candidate Protected Area (west of Fort Good Hope), photo copyright Garth Lenz

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