

Grizzly Bear Viewing in Ni'iinlii'Njik (Fishing Branch)

A cooperative Eco-Tourism Venture with the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, Vuntut Development Corporation, Yukon Parks and Bear Cave Mountain Eco – Adventures

Background

This case study of Ni'iinlii'Njik illustrates the positive role land claims can have in conservation and the effectiveness of partnership in management especially as it relates to the developing of a new, highly specialized activity within the eco-tourism industry.

Ni'iinlii'Njik (Fishing Branch) is a large complex of four land management types: a wilderness preserve; a habitat protection area; an ecological reserve; and First Nation Settlement land. The Fishing Branch is located in the Ogilvie Mountains of northern Yukon, approximately 100 km south of the community of Old Crow, and has been established through the 1995 Vuntut Gwitchin Final Agreement. The main objective of the area is the protection of cultural and natural heritage (the salmon and grizzly bear) in a beringian karst landscape. A unique feature of this protected area is the significant contribution of First Nations Settlement land (143 km²), a first in Canada if not North America.



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Considered of high ecological significance, all four areas (6,400 km²) are jointly managed as an ecological unit. The Fishing Branch area is known to have 30–50 resident grizzly bears that congregate at the Fishing Branch River to feed on spawning salmon. There are natural caves in the limestone crags and tors that rise from the river on the south face of Bear Cave Mountain and on Tsi'it'toh'Choh. The caves are used by grizzly bears as winter dens.

For time immemorial, the Vuntut Gwitchin of Old Crow have maintained close ties to the land, and continue to practice the traditional harvesting lifestyles. Elders view the Fishing Branch area as a source of life. The salmon is one of the most important food sources for the Vuntut Gwitchin people. Three salmon species (chinook, coho, and chum) travel up the Porcupine River on their way to spawning areas on the Fishing Branch River.

Initiative

To ensure co-operative management of the protected area a Committee of Managing Agencies (CMA) has been established representing the governments of Yukon and Vuntut Gwitchin. Because of the diverse land designations within the protected area, both Parks Branch and Fish and Wildlife Branch are represented on the committee. The committee reviews all aspects of the management of the area, working out the operational details and advising their governments on the implementation of the two approved management plans (1. the Ecological Reserve and Settlement Land R-5A and S-3 A1; and, 2. Wilderness Preserve and Habitat Protection Area Management Plan).

Grizzly bears and their habitats have been one of the primary concerns related to management and protection of the area. While viewing the bears at close range during their salmon feeding period in the late fall is a remarkable and desirable experience, the presence of humans can create stress for the bears and cause them to abandon a habitat. Also viewers may be at risk if they do not take special precautions. However, with effectively managed viewing opportunities public appreciation of bears and bear ecology may increase, public understanding of appropriate human behavior in bear habitat may also increase, and tourism activity could provide economic benefit.

A decision was made to work towards the development of the special tourism opportunity and at the same time protect the bears and their habitat. Implementing such a decision required extensive preparatory work. The Committee directed a series of activities: assessing the resource characteristics; describing the nature of the tourism experience; identifying the possible impacts of the tourism activity; calculating the potential economic benefits of the activity; developing a risk management plan; establishing the terms and conditions for a potential commercial operation; selecting a commercial operator; and, designing a controlled pilot trial before committing to long-term commercial access. In all aspects of the preparatory work, experts were involved providing their advice and direction.

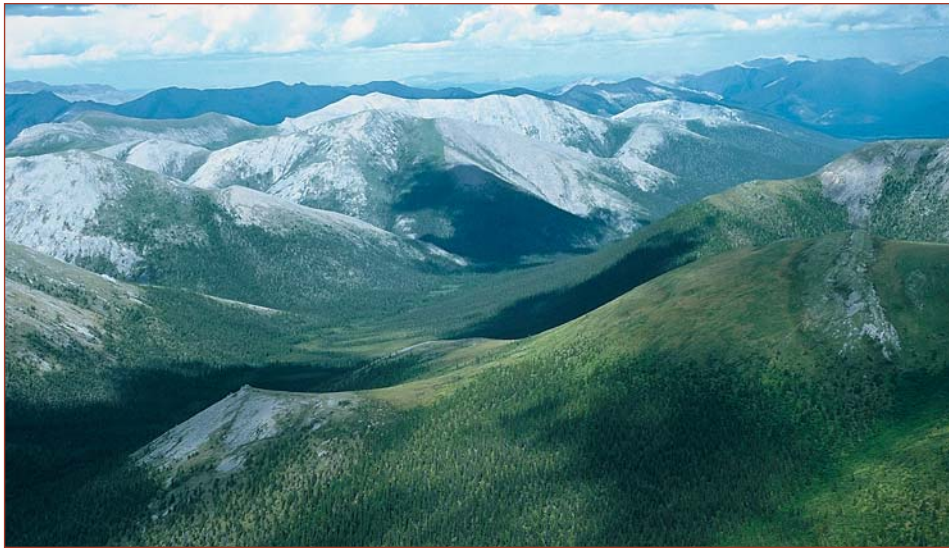
The company, Bear Cave Mountain Eco—Adventures under the management of an experienced bear viewing guide, was selected as the commercial operator because of the guide's expertise in bear behavior and tourism



ventures over the past 20 years in other remote wilderness areas. Facility development at the site was carefully planned and implemented to minimize the impact of use and to ensure safety of visitors.

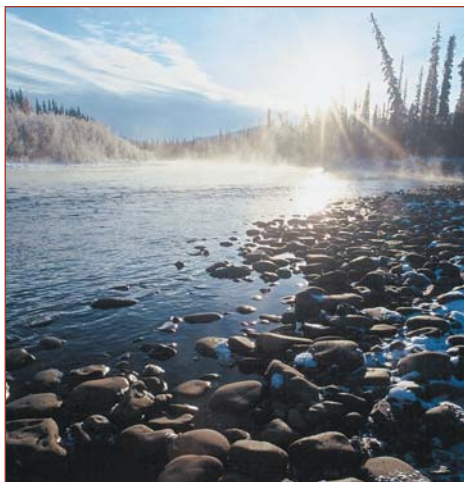
The company in partnership with Vuntut Gwitchin Development Corporation began their first

year of operations in the fall of 2006. The first two years will be conducted on an interim trial basis. Stringent requirements are in place to ensure that the operation is both safe and enjoyable. The total number of visitors on site, including the guide during the viewing season (September to November) will not exceed the five persons per day.



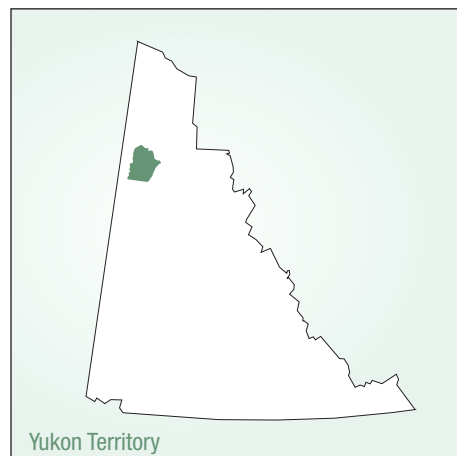
Fishing Branch River Valley, photo copyright Yukon Parks

The salmon is one of the most important food sources for the Vuntut Gwitchin people.



The Fishing Branch River, photo copyright Yukon Parks

Ni'iinlii'Njik (Fishing Branch)



Lessons Learned

Throughout the process of developing this eco-tourism opportunity, the partners were able to learn about the initiative in depth and share the experience of working together towards a common goal. Critical factors in the development hinged around the nature of bear behaviour and the facilities and controls on human activity that could be put in place. Having outside expertise in addressing this balance was absolutely critical in the process. Gaining from the experience of similar activities elsewhere was extremely valuable.

Facility development demanded careful planning and sensitive construction practices and scheduling. Similarly the thoughtful development of a risk management plan for the site and the activity was absolutely essential in achieving a level of confidence in the activity plan and providing definite guidelines for visitor operations. Monitoring the implementation of the activity will be similarly critical in addressing even the smallest of issues at a very early stage to ensure that protection of the area is assured.

Having the committee work through all of these stages together and share the experience of discussing and planning for these aspects of the operation was also very valuable. The familiarity generated through that participation will pay off in the on-going monitoring of the operation.

Conclusions

This bear viewing project demonstrates how partnership between First Nation's and Yukon governments can be an effective and constructive way to work together and with the tourism industry.

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Bear Cave Mountain above the Fishing Branch River,
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