

Champagne-Aishihik First Nation & British Columbia Ministry of Environment

Collaborative Management of Tatshenshini-Alsek Park: A World Heritage Site

For over ten years, representatives of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations and BC Parks have forged an effective joint working relationship dedicated to protecting and managing the natural wilderness environment and heritage values of the Tatshenshini-Alsek Park in perpetuity. Considering the international and trans-boundary nature of this land, plus its size and status as part of a World Heritage site, the work to date can be considered as a successful example of collaborative wildland management.

Background

The Tatshenshini and Alsek Rivers are considered to be one of the most magnificent river systems in North America, and form the basis of the British Columbia provincial park that bears their names. The park contains nearly one million hectares of rugged glacier-cloaked peaks, wild rivers, grizzly bears and a range of ecologically diverse plant and animal communities. This is the homeland of Champagne and Aishihik First Nations (CAFN), and it is a land of great natural beauty and biological richness.

Prior to the 19th century the Southern Tutchone and Tlingit First Nations inhabited the Tatshenshini-Alsek area. The Tatshenshini River was used as a major travel and trading route, with the village of Neskatahin, located near Dalton Post, Yukon, serving as an important focal point.



Michael Jim, Champagne-Aishihik First Nation Ranger, guiding a raft on the Tatshenshini River, BC. Photo copyright Anne Hetherington, BC Ministry of Environment

In combination with adjoining national parks and World Heritage Sites of Kluane, Wrangell-St. Elias and Glacier Bay, the Tatshenshini-Alsek Class A provincial park completes the world's largest international park complex. The park was officially designated as a World Heritage Site in 1994.

The Champagne and Aishihik First Nations are descendants of these people.

In the 1980s and 1990s, concerns arose over a proposal to extract a rich body of copper ore from a site in the high Alsek Ranges. Under a coalition of over 50 conservation groups known as 'Tatshenshini International', a campaign was launched to achieve protection of the area from mining interests and to preserve it as wilderness.

By 1993 in recognition of all the potential environmental risks associated with the proposed mine and the world class wilderness values at stake, the government of British Columbia moved to protect Tatshenshini-Alsek as a Class A park. In combination with the adjoining national parks and World Heritage Sites of Kluane, Wrangell-St. Elias and Glacier Bay this completed the world's largest international park complex. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) subsequently proposed the Tatshenshini-Alsek area as an addition to the World Heritage Site and once the Champagne-Aishihik First Nation withdrew their original opposition to the proposal, the area was officially designated as such in 1994.

Initiative

In 1990, the CAFN had filed a land claim with the federal government that covered the area now demarcated as Tatshenshini-Alsek Park. In 1993, CAFN filed a Statement of Intent with the British Columbia Treaty Commission. The federal and provincial governments agreed to engage the CAFN in resolving outstanding land claims in British Columbia, including the entire park area, in 1994. In 1995, the CAFN and Canada signed a *Framework Agreement* to proceed with land claims negotiations in British Columbia, and in 1996, the CAFN and the Government of BC signed the bi-lateral *Tatshenshini-Alsek Park Manage-*

ment Agreement which, in part, directed CAFN and BC Parks to jointly manage the park.

The *Agreement* established the relationship between the Parties with respect to the use and management of the park. This primary management principle was written as:

It is the intention of the Parties to protect the natural wilderness environment and heritage values of the Park in perpetuity and to maintain and make use of the Park in a way which recognizes the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations rights, culture and history and protects and conserves the area for the benefit, education and enjoyment of all peoples in accordance with its designation as a Class A Park and the terms of this Agreement.

Specific recognition was provided for: the traditional & current uses of the Park by the Champagne-Aishihik First Nations and recognition of their oral history; intentions to integrate traditional and scientific knowledge in managing the Park; identification of economic opportunities for the CAFN, and provisions for the maintenance & operation of the Park by the CAFN.

The creation of a Tatshenshini-Alsek Park Board, comprised of two members representing the Province of British Columbia and two representing the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, was a vital component of the *Agreement*. Accountability for shared decision making is attained by having senior staff from both organizations hold designated positions on the board. Since 1996, the Park Board has operated in a consensus based manner and has been directing the management and operations of the park, in accordance with the British Columbia Park Act and the management principles set out in the *Agreement*.



Furthermore, the Province and the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations agreed to prepare a management direction statement for the Tatshenshini-Alsek Park based on a number of preservation and conservation principles. Also, as per the *Agreement*, the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations retained sole authority over the use of Aboriginal languages, provision of Aboriginal place names and heritage routes, and interpretation and depiction of Aboriginal history and traditional use. The agreement recognizes CAFN authority to use, manage, conserve and protect heritage sites in the park.

Since the signing of the *Agreement*, the Board has also been reviewing Annual Management Plans (AMPs) for the park and providing short-term planning direction to BC Parks personnel. Trained CAFN rangers monitor and patrol the park in the summer and oversee or conduct recreation and conservation project work. In 2005, another innovative management regime began. As a component of the agreement, the CAFN had an opportunity to take over the operations and

maintenance of this park. The first contract began in that year. Now, the CAFN hire staff, supervise and implement the AMP for the park. A significant portion of these operating costs are derived from user fees collected from river rafting visitors.

Lessons Learned

Notwithstanding typical growing pains that any collaborative management board may experience, the formal relationship established in 1996 has met on a regular basis and functioned strongly for over ten years. Because the Champagne-Aishihik had established themselves as a self-governing body in the Yukon, prior to park establishment, they found it easier to build a relationship with BC Parks in connection with Tatshenshini-Alsek Park. With their structure as a government already in place, working out differences and concerns proceeded relatively smoothly.

Members of the Champagne-Aishihik First Nations have served as rangers in the Tatshenshini-Alsek. The fact that they have the full qualifications

The creation of a Tatshenshini-Alsek Park Board was a vital component of the Tatshenshini-Alsek Park Management Agreement.

Tatshenshini-Alsek Park



Grizzly bear tracks on a Tatshenshini River sandbar, BC.
Photo copyright Anne Hetherington, BC Ministry of Environment



Province of British Columbia

of a park ranger (having completed a two year renewable resource management program and the BC Parks public safety and park security course) provides them the advantage of peer credibility.

In the Tatshenshini-Alsek, BC Parks has supported the rights of the Champagne-Aishihik First Nations to the use of cultural information and history on their terms. The *Agreement* recognizes the First Nation's sole authority over aboriginal languages, Aboriginal place names and the interpretation of their history. It goes as far as to state that the disclosure of information by B.C. regarding heritage sites and ethnographic objects will result in harm to relationships, negotiations, or the heritage site or object.

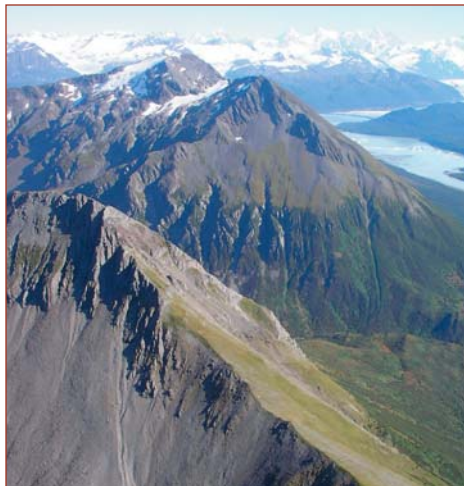
Government and First Nations involved in the Tatshenshini-Alsek had a constructive experience with culture and heritage management when an ancestor's ancient remains were found melting out of a mountain top glacier in the park in 1999. He was named Kwaday Dan T'sinchi which means

"Long Ago Person Found" in Southern Tutchone. There was great interest and joint effort from all involved with regards to cultural preservation issues and interpretation. Champagne Aishihik First Nations took the lead on the project management team working with the Royal BC Museum and BC Archaeology Branch.

Conclusions

The spirit and intent of the collaborative management model chosen in 1996 has endured to 2007 and is expected to stay in place into the foreseeable future. The relationship between the CAFN and provincial government remains strong and provides a firm management model for consideration by other agencies contemplating similar agreements.

BC Parks has supported the rights of the Champagne-Aishihik First Nations to the use of cultural information and history on their terms.



Flying over the Elias Mountain Range, Alaska, Photo copyright Anne Hetherington, BC Ministry of Environment



Evening at an Alsek River campsite, BC, Photo copyright Anne Hetherington, BC Ministry of Environment

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