

Daiiniidadhan gwinjik nan hai' gwits'an àatsih / Dan k'éhte mahsi ts'ę nan (Giving Thanks to the Land Our Way)

Feasibility Assessment Report for the Proposed National Park in the
Teet'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed

September 2025



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COVER PHOTO: Snowmobiles on Edigii (Caribou Mountain) during the Teet'it Zheh (Fort McPherson) to Mayo snowmobile trip, March 6, 1998.
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Introduction

I will tell you a story.

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 5 (1973)

This document tells a story.

It tells a story about a large area—approximately three thousand square kilometers—found in what is today known as Yukon, Canada. This area has a significant river running through it, a river called **Teet’it Gwinjik**¹. For a time, this river has also been known as the Peel River. This area, and this river, are important to the Gwich’in and the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, who have made a living and a home around the river and its watershed since time immemorial.

This document tells a story about why this area—which remains largely unaffected by modern development and industry—should be taken care of as a new national park in Canada².

It tells a story about the people who have connections with this area, and who can mark their histories by the names of the rivers, mountains, and sacred places.

It tells a story about the plants and animals who share these lands, such as **vadzaih/hudzi**³—the caribou who travel across the land in herds numbering in the hundreds of thousands to find the lichen and other foods they need to thrive—and the **nat’at/nintl’at**—the cranberry plant, which has leaves that stay green all year and berries that are edible all year, despite the sub-Arctic winters.

It tells a story about the rocks, and the water, and the ground which, in places, stays frozen all year.

It highlights the story of how the Gwich’in and the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, alongside the other Peel Nations, have worked tirelessly over the decades to protect this area, and how they want it protected into the future.

We welcome you to sit and read our story and learn about this special area. We welcome you to ponder why we want it protected as a national park. We welcome you right into our story, so join us.

1. Throughout this document, Gwich’in place names have been linked to the [Gwich’in Place Names Atlas](#) for readers to listen to pronunciation, locate places on a map and learn additional information.

2. This report has primarily considered the potential to designate this area as a national park. National parks can overlap or co-exist with Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs). In these cases, the two designations are complementary and allow the area to be protected under both Canadian and Indigenous law.

3. When Indigenous-language words are showcased in this document, they will typically be Teet’it Gwich’in, followed by Northern Tutchone translations when available, unless otherwise indicated or implied.

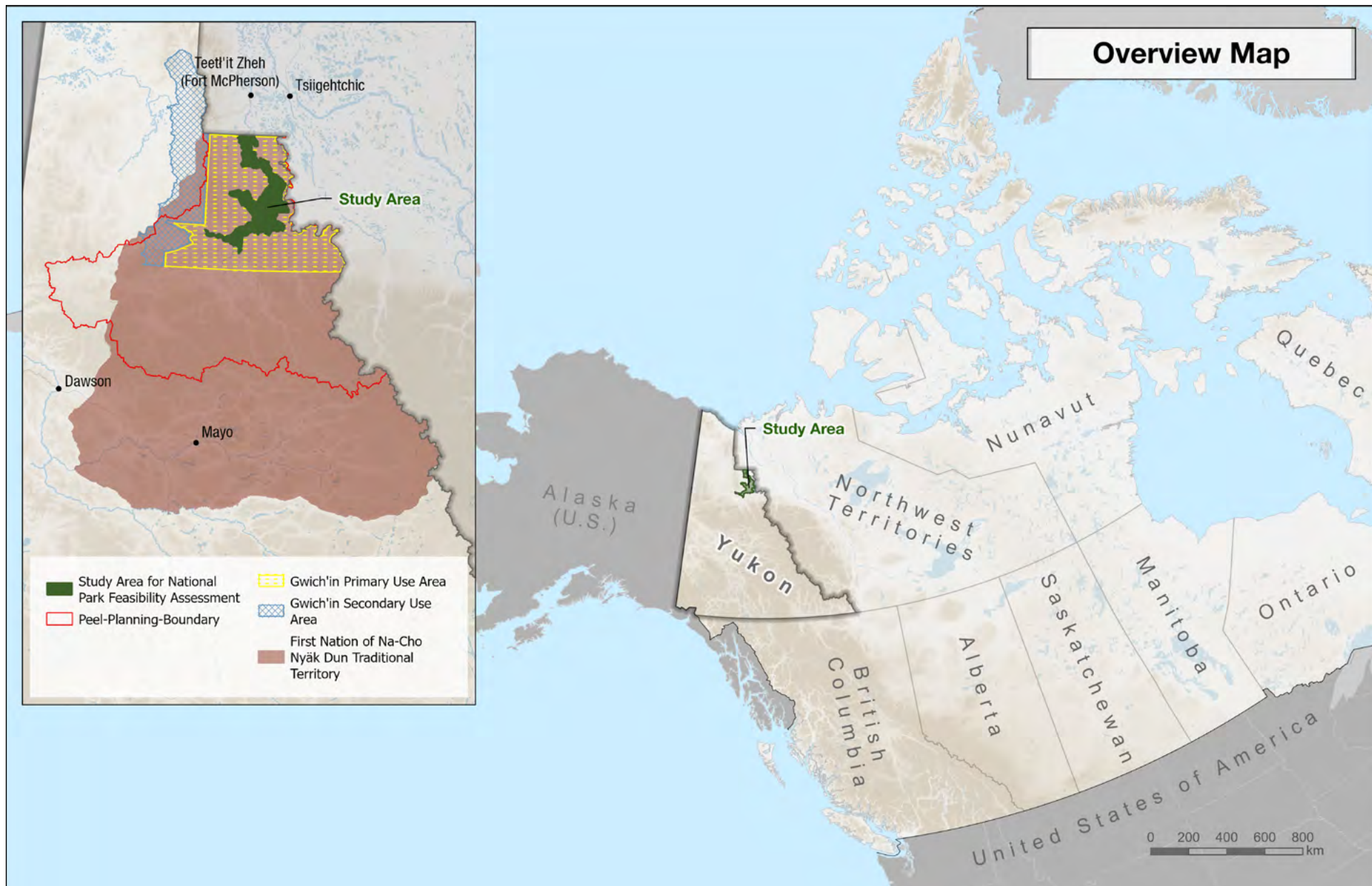


Figure 1. Overview map of the proposed national park in the **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River) Watershed.

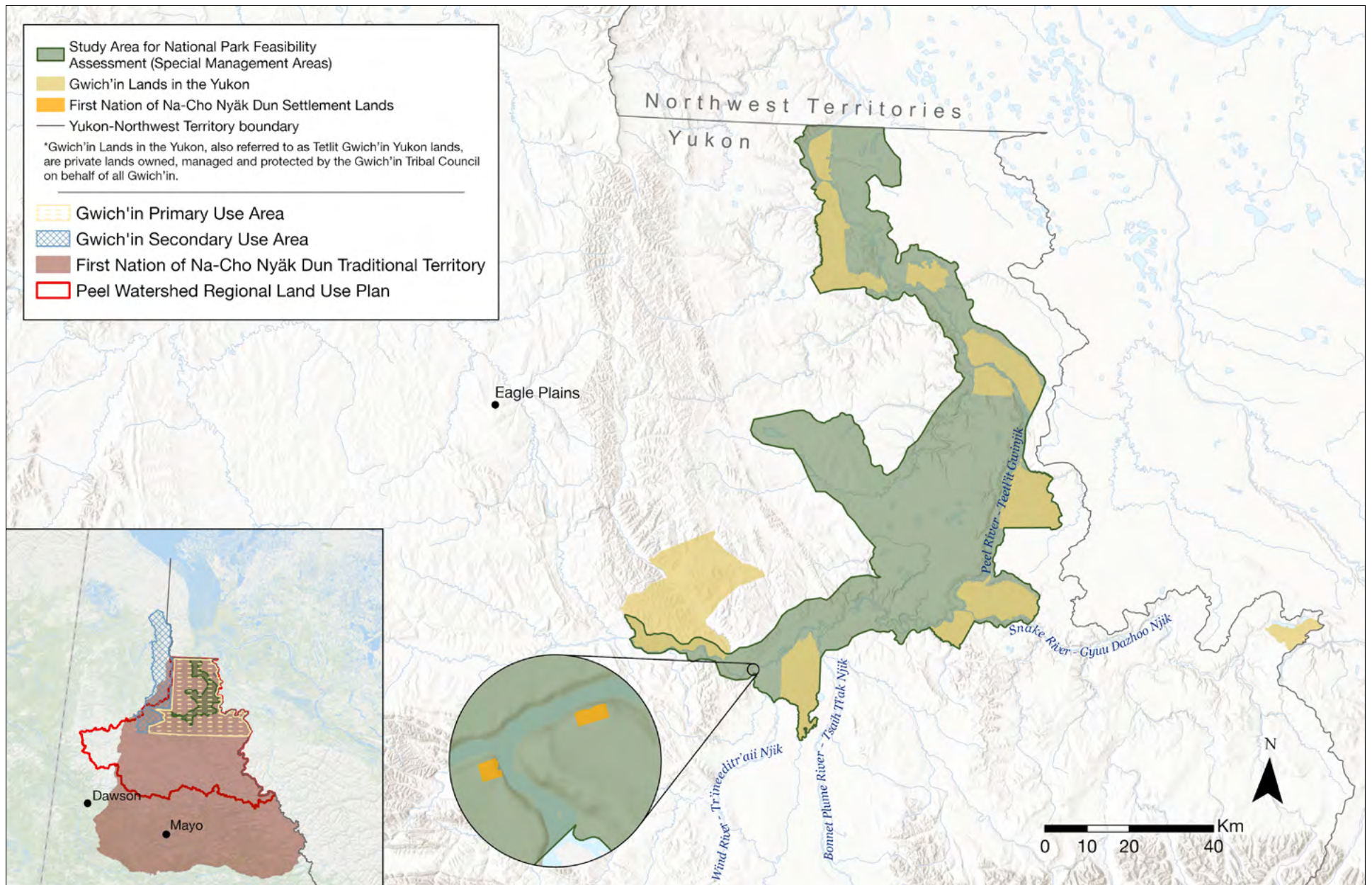


Figure 2. Map of the study area.

The study area for this feasibility assessment is almost 3,000 square kilometres in size. It includes **Nihtal Gyit** (Turner Lake Wetlands), the **Edigii Njik** (Caribou River) area, and a large section of the **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River) Corridor. This area is situated within the Gwich'in Primary Use Area and within the Traditional Territory of the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun.



vadžaih/hudzi – Porcupine caribou herd.
©Parks Canada



Natt'at (cranberries) in summer.
©Alestine Andre.



Mary Snowshoe harvesting **natt'at** (cranberries) during a berry harvesting camp in September 2023.
©Arlyn Charlie, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage



©Peter Mather

“A Story I Remember” – Gwich’in Elder Christopher Colin’s Travels in Teetl’it Gwinjik

I will tell you a story.

A story I remember—from when I was 12 years old.

*People from Old Crow, Dawson and Fort McPherson used to always go moose hunting together. Me and my mother and some of the local people (among them were Big Simon and Big Francis), we used to go and do some fishing. At that time, I was a little boy. I made a bone arrow and used to shoot little birds. When everyone used to return from hunting, they all would meet down at **Chuu Tr’idaoodich’uu** (Peel Canyon). At that time, the food was very plentiful. No one would ever want to waste food. Plenty of dried meat was made.*

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 5 (1973)



Source: Sarah Simon, Fort McPherson, N.W.T. A Pictorial Account of Family, Church and Community. Whitehorse, YT: CYI, 1982. p. 17, T/L: “Left to right: Simon Diindzik (catechist), Christopher Colin (catechist), Rev. James Simon”

This section is structured around a series of stories told by Teetl’it Gwich’in Elder Christopher Vittshekk Colin.

Christopher Colin was born on December 25, 1886 to Old Colin Vitshikk and Annie T’ok Tsal. In November of 1911, when Christopher was 24, he married Enna Koosh, who was around 18 at the time. Enna was born in 1893 to William Koosh and Sarah Shananzhaa. Christopher and Enna adopted three children together.

After a long life spent caring for his family on the land, Christopher passed away on July 5, 1980, at the age of 93.⁴ He was an accomplished hunter and provider, and a great storyteller.

4. Snowshoe, Sharon and the Gwich’in Enrolment Board. 1998. “Jijuu: Who are my grandparents? Where are they from? Our People, Our Names: A Genealogy/History of the Teetl’it Gwich’in of Fort McPherson”. Fort McPherson, NT: Gwich’in Enrolment Board.

Christopher is one of the many thousands of **Dinjii Zhuh/Dan-dha k'e** (Indigenous peoples) who travelled extensively in the area being proposed as a new national park. We have decided to use his stories and knowledge of the land to share why this area should be taken care of into the future as a new national park.

Christopher Colin told these stories on the radio in the mid-1970s.

Although many Gwich'in continued to live on the land much of the year well into the 1960s and 1970s, settlements such as **Teet'it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) were increasingly becoming the permanent home of many Gwich'in people, due to changes in family life and wage economy work, along with forced residential schooling. Radios, including battery-operated radios used while out on the land trapping or at a fish camp, were becoming popular at this time. Radio was quickly adopted by Gwich'in families as a way to share their culture, language, and knowledge. Radios were "a vital link that connected people with their family and friends; with the outside world through local, regional and national news; and to friends and families in their camps through the daily Announcements and Messages program."⁵

I was one of the best hunters in McPherson. I made my living mostly in hunting caribou, moose, bear; also fishing.

Now I am an old man, I don't hunt anymore. I stay in McPherson and live on pension. Still, in the summertime I go down the river and make dryfish for the winter. I still cut wood, and I don't consider myself old.

I am still active, but as I said before, I don't hunt anymore but I still eat meat every day because when I used to hunt, I shared with everybody. Now, my people are paying me back and this should be a good example to our young people.

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 4 (1970s)

In the 1960s and 1970s, local radio hosts at the CBC radio station in Inuvik invited many Gwich'in Elders to talk about their lives in their own language, on a program called "A Long Time Ago". Christopher Colin was one of the guests of this show, and the stories we have included in this report come from his time speaking on the radio, sharing his life and knowledge with his friends, family, and neighbours, who were avidly listening on their radio at home or on the land. Two stories are used here: *A Long Time Ago Part 4*, and *A Long Time Ago Part 5*, and the recording of these stories can be found on the NWT Archives website.⁶

You may note that the stories included in this report are not the full and rich translation which might be expected today. Instead, they are a loose summary translation which were created in the 1980s.⁷ Christopher Colin's stories have been lightly edited and updated for the purpose of this report.

*Everybody stayed at **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik** (Wind River). They made four mooseskin boats there. My uncle, named Giiikhii (he talk), and others stayed near the mouth of **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik** near **Van Choo** (Hungry Lake), and there they made two more skin boats. They put the four mooseskin boats in the water. Meanwhile, they brought another two mooseskin boats from Van Choo. They all shot their muzzle-loaders and hence there was smoke all over.*

*At that time, there were lots of people. People from **Tsiigehnjik** (Arctic Red River), **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River), were all there; I remember that there was many people. Many good people were there but today they are all gone. All of us who were kids them days are today old people in their 80s.*

*At that time, Skinny Abraham's father was Chief of the Hudson's Bay. When the boats were launched, the women, children and dogs raced through the portage after the boats came down to **Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu** (Peel Canyon). Only the men went by the boats. Skinny Abraham's father and Nerysoo's father were among them. Nerysoo—he was made the pilot of the boat. He didn't know how to do it for them, so*

5. Alestine Andre (p XV), in Benson, K. (editor). 2022. "Gwich'in Stories and Legends as told to the Committee on Original People's Entitlement". Fort McPherson, NT: Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage.

6. <https://gnwt.accesstomemory.org/n-1992-253-0777>.

7. Alestine Andre, in Benson, K. (editor). 2022. "Gwich'in Stories and Legends as told to the Committee on Original People's Entitlement". Fort McPherson, NT: Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute).

the Chief took over. They then proceeded to **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik** (Snake River). At **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik**, six more boats were put into the water. At **Gyuu Dazhoo Tshik** (the mouth of the Snake River), all camped for the night, which is 150 miles up **Teetl'it Gwinjik**. Then the next day, they loaded up the six skin boats with dried meat and dogs and all the family. They all gathered above John Charlie's place on **Vihl'òo Tshik** (Road River). From there, everyone gathered at Fort McPherson.

Christopher Colin: *A Long Time Ago Part 5* (1973)



Photo taken at **Dèeddhoo Gòonlii** during a fishcamp hosted by the Department of Culture and Heritage. This place name refers to a hill upriver from **Shildii**, but on the right bank of Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River). "Around on the ground [on this hill] there are rocks that look like scrapers," said Sarah Simon. "Long ago people used to make scrapers for hides, it looks like that, the stone looks like scrapers . . . that's why they call it Dèed-dhoo." [Gwich'in Place Names Atlas]

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What we call the places on the land: Traditional place names

There are many places in the **Teetl'it Gwinjik** area that have names in the **Dinjii Zhuh Ginjik** (Gwich'in language).^{8,9} These names form an important history of the land, telling us how people live, where they travel, and how to make use of the plants and animals to get enough to eat and stay healthy.

Many of the names describe the physical appearance of a feature, or describe what is available there, such as caribou. The names may also describe other resources, such as ochre (a clay pigmented by hematite and used to dye many items) or flint (a type of stone that can be shaped into knives or arrowheads). Some names refer to the technologies used to harvest from the land, such as fish traps or netting areas. Other names refer to a particular person, either from legendary times or from more recent stories over the last several hundred years.

There are place names that appear in the rich legends told by the Gwich'in about a time so far in the past that people and animals could speak to each other and exchange forms, and when great creatures and powerful people roamed the land. Some of the names are so old that the meaning and translations have been lost, names which are referred to as **tsii deii**¹⁰, a term which implies great antiquity, reaching back hundreds or thousands of years.¹¹

Teetl'it Gwinjik is just one example of an important place name. This name translates as "Head of the waters-along the course of", and the river has special meaning for the Teetl'it Gwich'in. **Teetl'it Gwich'in** itself is a phrase that means, loosely, "people of the headwaters of **Teetl'it Gwinjik**", so close is their association and so long is their history with this river.

But there are many other Teetl'it Gwich'in, Gwichya Gwich'in, and Takudh/Dagoo Gwich'in place names in this area as well, along with names from many other neighbouring Indigenous nations.

For example, if we were able to travel back in time to accompany Christopher Colin as he travelled down **Teetl'it Gwinjik** in a flat-bottomed scow, a moose-

8. See <https://atlas.gwichin.ca/index.html>.

9. See Aporta, Claudio, Ingrid Kritsch, Alestine Andre, Kristi Benson, Sharon Snowshoe, William Firth, and Del Carry. 2001. "The Gwich'in Atlas: Place Names, Maps, and Narratives." In: *Developments in the Theory and Practice of Cybercartography*, Second Edition, pp 229-244. Edited by D.R. Fraser Taylor. Published by Mercury Series Canadian Ethnology Service Paper 136, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

10. Teetl'it Gwich'in dialect.

11. Kritsch, Ingrid, and Alestine Andre. 1997 "Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge and Heritage Studies in the Gwich'in Settlement Area." In: *At a Crossroads: Archaeology and First Peoples in Canada*, pp. 125-144. Edited by George Nicholas and Thomas Andrews. Archaeology Press, Simon Fraser University.

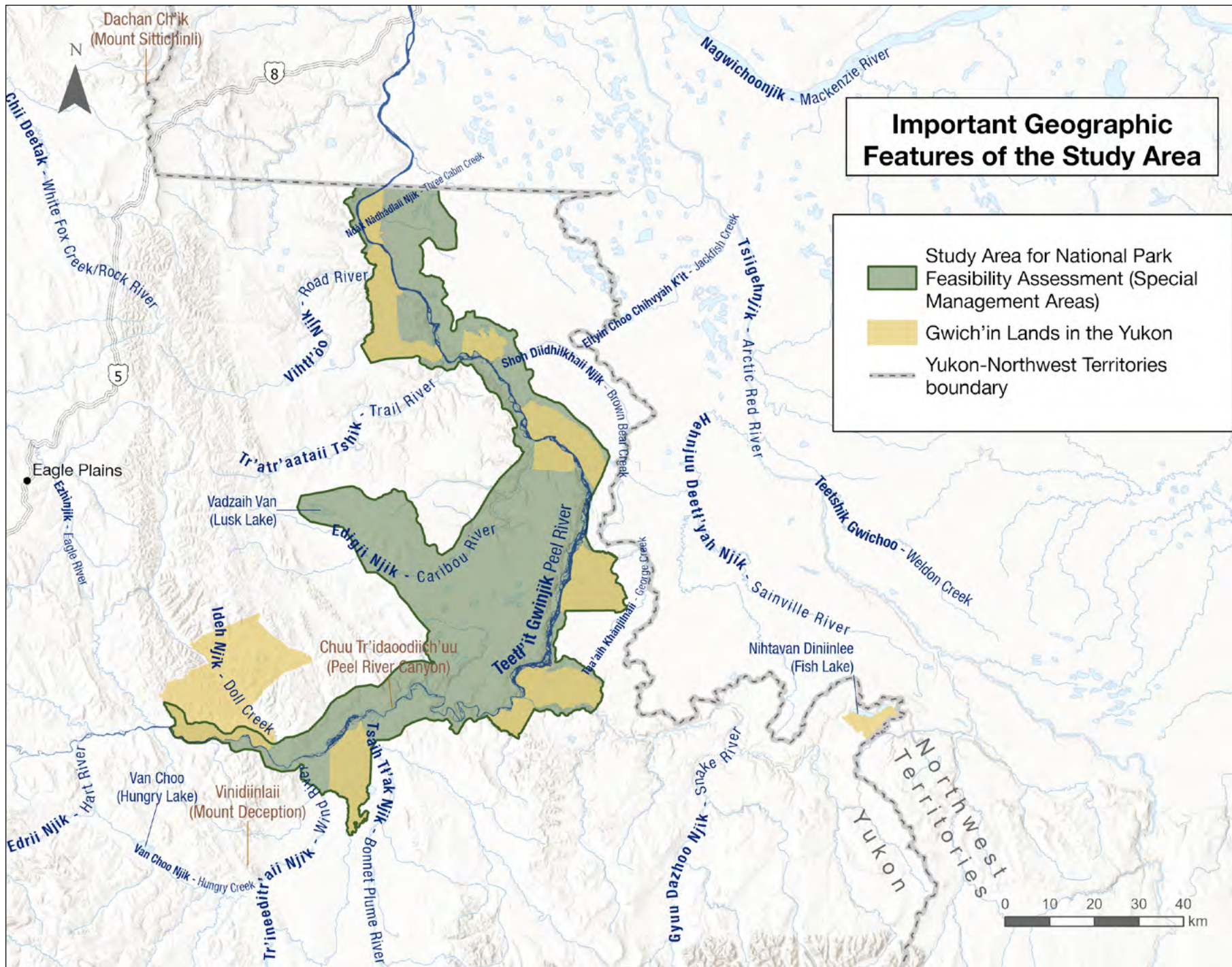


Figure 3. Map of important geographic features of the study area.

skin boat, or perhaps a large canvas canoe, after hunting in the mountains, he might point out many important places as we travel along.

The first major river we'd see emptying into **Teetł'it Gwinjik** from the south would be **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik**, which translates as "Wind is blowing through-river". This river has also, for a time, been known in English as the Wind River. There is always a wind blowing here, so we might feel the wind on our faces as Christopher navigates us downriver in his boat.

He might throttle the kicker (outboard engine) to tell a story about the last time a moose skin boat was made at the mouth of **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik** in the spring of 1927. These large boats were made high in the mountains and used to travel to Teetł'it Zheh, where they were met with much celebration and the firing of rifles into the air as a way to greet those who had successfully and safely undertaken the dangerous trip.¹²



Neil Colin—a confident canoeist—on **Teetł'it Gwinjik** (Peel River).
© Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council.

After **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik**, the next two major rivers we would pass flowing into **Teetł'it Gwinjik** would be **Tsaih Tł'ak Njik**, which translates as "Ochre-sparkling (or dark)-river" or "Black sands-river", and **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik**, which translates as "Worm-hairy-river". **Tsaih Tł'ak Njik** has, for a time, also been known as the Bonnet Plume River, and **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik** has been known as the Snake River.



Proud fisherman. Troy Alexie with his catch of grayling from a small backwater near a camp located upriver from the mouth of **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik** (Snake River), July 16, 1996.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage.



Trip down **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik** (Wind River), 2003. Left photo: Sharon Snowshoe
Right photo: Captain Neil Colin, Gladys Netro, Sharon Snowshoe, and a participant joining from Mayo.
© Katherine Bouvin

William Teya driving his scow on **Teetł'it Gwinjik** (Peel River) with Jimmy Jerome beside him and Alice Blake (left) and Sarah Jerome in the foreground, June 16, 1996.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage.



12. Neil Colin, Teetł'it Gwich'in Place Names Project, Tape 8A, June 17, 1996; Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute/Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, "Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik".



Confluence of **Tsaih T'ak Njik** (Bonnet Plume River) and **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River), July 22, 2008.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage.

Christopher Colin might tell us about how his friends, family, and neighbours travelled through these areas, and hunted moose, sheep, geese, and caribou from the numerous good camping spots found here. In the past, people moved between these two rivers, and met with others from **Tsiigehtshik**, Mayo, and Fort Good Hope, and even people who travelled here from as far away as Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in lands near the present-day Dawson City.

Christopher might point out locations around **Tsaih T'ak Njik** where numerous cabins were built. The cabins were used by Gwich'in who stayed here in the fall to fish, or in the winter and spring to trap. The fishing is particularly good here—the small whitefish that the Gwich'in call “herring” are loaded with roe, and graylings can be found in small eddies. It is easy to see sheep from some of the areas along this stretch of **Teet'it Gwinjik**, and they are known to produce a very nice meat to eat. The mouths of these rivers, where they meet and join waters with **Teet'it Gwinjik**, are also trailheads for well-known routes inland¹³.

The trip between **Tsaih T'ak Njik** and **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik** is not an easy one, however, and as we navigate down this stretch, we would want a guide with skill and experience. That is because just below the mouth of **Tsaih T'ak Njik**, we would enter **Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu**, a canyon that is dangerous and complex to navigate. This name translates as “Water-angry and wicked (or dangerous and cranky)”. For a time, this canyon has also been known as the Peel Canyon—one of two important canyons in the proposed park.

Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu is one of the most significant named places in this landscape, as attested by the number of stories about it. The stories remind us of how dangerous and beautiful it is, as they recount travels down **Teet'it Gwinjik** in mooseskin boats. In these travels, families would stop and split up at the top of the canyon. Only some of the men would take the boats through, laden with supplies and furs, as the others, including children and dogs, portaged safely on land. When everyone met at the lower end of the canyon, it was a celebration of another journey safely travelled.¹⁴ “Ah, when they land there, they say, the best dry meat, the best bone grease, the best food you got! Big fire and big celebration.”¹⁵

As we travel further downstream, we would pass dozens of other named places, trails, and important camping and fishing spots, both along the banks of the river and further inland.

For example, on the left bank of **Teet'it Gwinjik**, we would pass **Ditsii Deek'it**, a name which translates as “(Everyone's) Grandfather-his place”. There is a **tsii dei** story about this place, telling of a time of an important battle.

There is also **Ok Chi'**, which translates as “Eddy-at the head”. This place is along a bend in the river where there is an eddy. Eddies are good places to fish because they are a resting spot for the fish, and this spot was so productive that people knew to come here when they needed enough fish to feed a large group of people for ceremonies. Because there is a productive eddy here, and because the land above this site is large and flat and open, this was an important



Scow entering the lower part of **Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu** (Peel Canyon). Left to right: Franklin Ross, Troy Alexie, Neil Colin, Robert Alexie Sr. (driver), July 17, 1996.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage.

13. William Teya, Teet'it Gwich'in Place Names Project, Tape 5A, June 15, 1996; Teet'it Gwich'in Place Names Project Elders meeting, March 1999; William Nerysoo (Land Use Research Files, Gwich'in Language Centre); Jimmy Thompson (Land Use Research Files, Gwich'in Language Centre); Robert Alexie Sr., TGP96/97, Tape 13A, June 18, 1996. Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute/Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Tsaih T'ak Njik”.

14. William Teya, Teet'it Gwich'in Place Names Project, Tape 5A, June 15, 1996. Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute/Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu”.

15. Robert Alexie Sr., TGP96/97, Tape 13A, June 18, 1996. Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute/Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu”.



Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu (Peel Canyon) on **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River), July 22, 2008.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council
Department of Culture & Heritage.

Remains of canvas covered canoe beside
warehouse near **Vihit'òo Tshik**
(Road River), July 12, 1996.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council
Department of Culture & Heritage.



site where many people gathered together. While gathered, people would dance, play games, and feast, staying for up to several weeks—indeed, this area served as the main Gwich'in gathering spot until **Teet'it Zheh** itself took over that role.¹⁶ The area remains a great place to travel to and stay at, and there are several cabins here.

Further down **Teet'it Gwinjik** close to **Vihit'òo Njik** (“Blue/green-creek”, for a time also known as Road River), Christopher Colin might pull the canoe over at **Colin Vizheh**, a name which translates as “Colin-his house”. This is a place where Christopher’s father, Old Colin Vitshekk, had a cabin and a church. There were many other

cabins here as well, and even a cemetery. A cabin at this location was used by the four men of the “Lost Patrol”, just before they died—one of them even left his mail and belongings inside of Old Colin’s cabin. Shell Oil also had a large camp here when they were doing exploration in the area.¹⁷

In those days, there was no sand bar at McPherson and there were no trucks and white men. There was only the Hudson’s Bay Manager who was white¹⁸ and the old Archdeacon McDonald, Anglican Minister, who was at Fort McPherson. People stayed there in the summer to fish. No one knew about gold miners in those days.

No one knew about money or white people.

*Some whale boats were coming in down **Nagwichoonjik** (the Mackenzie River) and **Teet'it Gwinjik**. Only white people were on this boat. The white people challenged our people to a football game, and we won the game. They stayed at Fort McPherson all winter and fall. They used to track their boats all the way up **Teet'it Gwinjik**. They stopped on the other side of **Tsaih T'ak Njik** over to **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik**; that is where they passed winter [at Wind City]. There was a lot of native people here from the Dawson area and **Teet'it Zheh** and **Tsügehtshik**. There was a lot of people with these white people. They hunted caribou and moose. And I remember one particular white man named Old Campbell. He was an old miner and also a millionaire. He had twelve men and two doctors travelling with him. One time, Old Campbell was going to pay his men and doctors. One of his men brought in a small suitcase filled with small bills. And them days, nobody knew anything about money. The money they had was paper money. And on the money was a picture of old Queen Victoria. So, Campbell paid all his men. Old Campbell was going to the Gold Rush. That was way back in the year 1898 in Dawson.*

I am pretty old now and I can hardly remember what I did long ago. I am 87 years old.

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 5 (1973)

16. Slobodin 1962. Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute/Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas <https://atlas.gwichin.ca/>, “Ok Chi”.

17. William Teya, TGNP96/97, Tape 4A, June 15, 1996; Neil Colin, TGNP96/97, Tape 7A, June 17, 1996; Walter Alexie, TGNP96/97, Tape 15B, June 19, 1996. Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute/Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas <https://atlas.gwichin.ca/>, “Colin Vizheh”.

18. John Firth (Ingrid Kritsch, pers. comm. 2025).

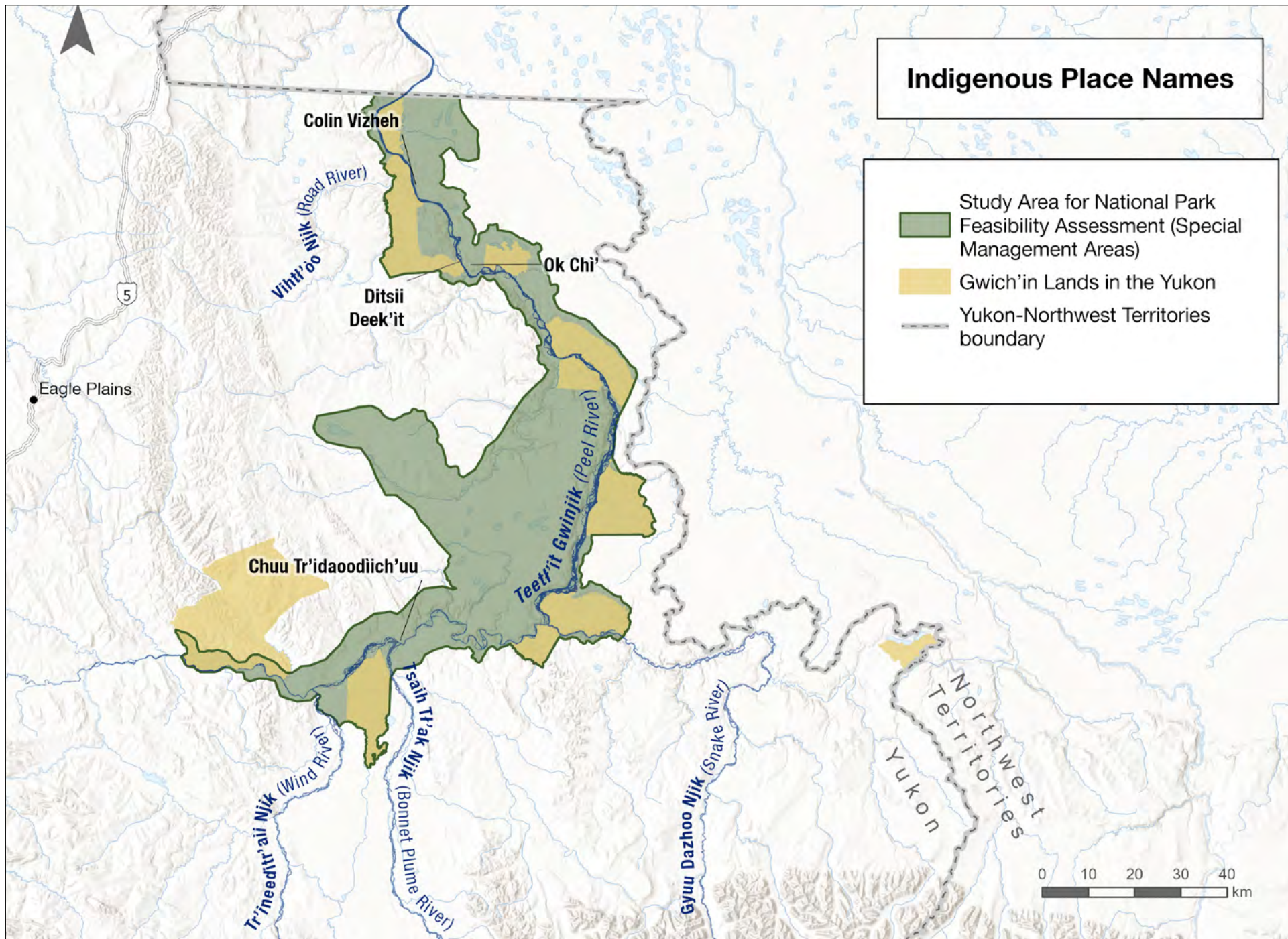


Figure 4. Indigenous place names near the study area.



Chuu Tr'idaoodlich'uu (Peel Canyon), just below the confluence of **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River) and **Tsaih Tl'ak Njik** (Bonnet Plume River)
© Peter Mather

How we have always made a living here

Christopher Colin, and his parents as well, lived through times of great cultural change for the Gwich'in.

Before the fur trade and enforced residential schooling dramatically changed the patterns of life in the **Teet'it Gwinjik** area, Christopher's family and neighbours travelled extensively and seasonally to make use of the plants, animals, and good living areas from the head of **Teet'it Gwinjik** near **Gwazhal Njik** (Ogilvie River) and throughout the proposed park area. It was only with increasing participation in the fur trade in the second half of the 19th century that the Gwich'in started to orient more towards the lower **Teet'it Gwinjik** and **Ehdiitat** (Mackenzie Delta) areas to the north.¹⁹

Christopher would have met with friends and family during his travels in the **Teet'it Gwinjik** region, from many places near and far. He would have travelled with people from his home community of **Teet'it Zheh** (Fort McPherson), but he would have also met **Van Tat Gwich'in** people from what is now known as Old Crow, **Shuta Got'ine** from the mountains up **Nagwichoonjik** (the Mackenzie River) to the east, the **Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in** from what is now known as Dawson City to the west, and Northern Tutchone people from the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, who now make their home in Mayo, south of the upper reaches of **Teet'it Gwinjik**.

Christopher Colin's grandparents would have told him stories about the annual seasonal round that was both sophisticated and complementary to the changing patterns in weather, sunlight, and habits of the animals and plants. In the colder months of the winter, the temperatures can stay around -30° Celsius for weeks on end—and this can bring with it many challenges and opportunities. The snow and frozen lakes and rivers can make travel on established trails efficient and fast, despite the short daylight hours.

Christopher Colin might tell us about an important fall and winter-time activity: the hunting of **vadzaih/hudzi** (caribou), moose, and sheep. Traditionally, the Porcupine Caribou herd and the northern mountain caribou herds were important for feeding Gwich'in people, and their skins, organs,

bones, hair, hooves, and antlers were also used for clothing, shelter, and a vast array of tools that made life easier, more healthy, more interesting, and filled with beauty.²⁰

Although moose, bear, sheep, beaver, fish, ducks and geese, and other small animals such as rabbits, ptarmigan, and ground squirrels provided meat for the Gwich'in, **vadzaih/hudzi** (caribou) are of particular importance. Long ago, in tsii dei times, caribou and humans could speak the same language and make decisions together about how the world should be. "Long ago, human was caribou and the caribou was human."²¹

When caribou and humans had to separate, every caribou kept a piece of human heart inside their heart, and every human kept a piece of caribou heart inside their heart, which is why the Gwich'in and the caribou have partial knowledge of what the other is thinking.²²



Mrs. George Vittrekwa, Annie B. Robert, Caroline Kay (?) and her grandson, and Muriel Billington in sled after visit to **Chii Deetak** (Rock River) camp.



William Vittrekwa cooking lunch and dog food on a wood jam on **Gwatoh Taii Njik** (Stony Creek). All photos this page: ©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council

Although Christopher Colin would likely have been hunting with a more modern rifle, he would have heard stories from his own Elders about the changing hunting technologies over the years, from bows and arrows to muzzle-loader style rifles, and the use of caribou fences and corrals in elaborate communal hunting strategies.

19. Kritsch, Ingrid, Sarah Jerome, Eleanor Mitchell. 2000 (revised 2003). "Teet'it Gwich'in Heritage Places and Sites in the Peel River Watershed". Fort McPherson, NT: Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute): p6.

20. Kritsch, Ingrid, Sarah Jerome, Eleanor Mitchell. 2000 (revised 2003). "Teet'it Gwich'in Heritage Places and Sites in the Peel River Watershed". Fort McPherson, NT: Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute): p6.

21. Mary Kendi in Kofinas, Gary, "The costs of power sharing: Community involvement in Canadian Porcupine caribou co-management". PhD Dissertation, University of British Columbia. 1998: 448

22. Kritsch, Ingrid. 2023. "Teet'it Gwich'in Lookout – February 15, 2023". Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage: Fort McPherson.

Stories and legends are of great importance to the Gwich'in and other Indigenous peoples, as they are the best way to teach and learn history, science, and how to live a good life. Perhaps one cold winter's day Christopher Colin, along with his wife and family, may have been staying at a gathering site high in the mountains near **Teet'it Gwinjik**, making plans to go caribou hunting with some cousins or friends from the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. Just as the Gwich'in have many stories, the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun also have many—stories from long ago about how the earth came to be, but also stories about hunting and travelling in the cold months in the mountains. Christopher Colin would likely be looking forward to listening to his cousins or aunts tell him these stories.

Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elders remembered that when they arrived at a gathering site in winter, they would arrive with a dog team pulling a sled with their belongings. As they approached the gathering site and in anticipation of seeing people they may not have seen for many months or even years, they would stop and put on

their most beautiful dog 'blankets' (small jackets that are placed over the dogs' backs, sometimes decorated with embroidery, beading, and even bells). The bells on the dogs' blankets could be heard for miles, and upon hearing the bells from the approaching dog team, the people already in the gathering site would wait anxiously to see who was coming.²³

Over the following days, they may have travelled away from the gathering site for many miles on snowshoes through the mountains, following caribou sign, before a successful kill. After a hard day butchering caribou and preparing the meat and hides, Christopher might have roasted some fresh caribou ribs 'to the fire' while speaking with his family and friends about the hunt.

As they sat down to eat the caribou ribs, one of the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun **eyéndyá**²⁴ (women) sharing the meal with her family and perhaps known to be a keeper of their history and legends may have told a story about how the world works, such as this one:

Ptarmigan and Caribou teach Dan how to make snowshoes²⁵

Ptarmigan (*K'ahme*) made a camp for himself under a cottonwood tree (*t'o tso*).

Sometime later when he is out gathering wood, he sees a man who is hunting (*tenazhe e*) and wading through deep snow (*zha*). The man is having a hard time walking.

A long time ago Ptarmigan and some other animals could talk to Native people. Ptarmigan said to the man, **"Why are you walking around the deep snow like that? You should just walk on top like this."**

So Ptarmigan showed him how he could walk on top of the snow. The hunter tried, but still had a hard time. Ptarmigan could see that the man could not walk on the snow without his help. **"I will show you how to make round nose snowshoes (*e tthí sanamá*)"**

So Ptarmigan told the man to go cut a willow. Ptarmigan bent it to make a hoop for a round snowshoe frame (*e nazhan*). The hunter asks, **"How are you going to fill that hole in the middle? I can't walk on that."**

Ptarmigan said to him, **"Look up that way, there are some caribou (*hudzi*) way up there on the hillside."** Then Ptarmigan points to one of the caribou looking at them and tells the hunter to go and talk to the caribou.

When Caribou talked to the man, he said, **"Kill me so you have food for your family, and you can make babiche for your snowshoes. With the rest of my skin you can make a coat (*yak*) or moccasins (*kechän*) or pack-sack."** So the hunter did what he was told and he killed Caribou and brought it all back to camp.

Ptarmigan showed the hunter how to make different kinds of babiche and lace up a snowshoe with it. Then he showed the hunter how to put them on.

Ptarmigan tells the man, **"Put them on now so you can walk on the top of the snow."**

The man was surprised because when he put them on he could walk on top of the snow (*zha*) just like Ptarmigan showed him.

The hunter went back to his own camp (*man kún'*) and finished making another pair of snowshoes.

Later the hunter came back to Ptarmigan's camp to show him the snowshoes (*e*) he made.

23. Joella Hogan, pers. comm. May 5, 2025.

24. Northern Tutchone language

25. Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation. (2014) "A Northern Tutchone Story from our Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elders: Ptarmigan; Big Fish". Mayo, Yukon: Dooli Dan K'I: traditional stories

William Vittrekwa pounding **vadzaih/ hudzi** (caribou) bones to boil them for fat. ©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council



Much needed fresh moose meat. William Teya and Neyuk help cut up a moose that George Robert shot. ©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council



Joanne Snowshoe making **uutsik/ lyok gan** (dryfish) at **Dèeddhoo Gòonlii**, during a fish camp hosted by the Department of Culture and Heritage. ©Arlyn Charlie, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage



Harriet Stewart at 8 Mile filleting fish. Mary Vittrekwa has her back to the camera. ©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council

Vadzaih/hudzi (caribou) skins freeze drying at John and Carolyn Kay's camp. ©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council



Mary Mitchell harvesting **jak zheii/ nanindhe** (blueberries). ©Arlyn Charlie, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage



Wanda Pascal explaining traditional plants and uses. ©Arlyn Charlie, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage



Emma Kay harvesting **ts'iivii ch'ok/ ts'ek'i jak** (juniper) during a fall berry harvesting camp in September 2023. ©Arlyn Charlie, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage



Teetl'it Gwich'in elder Agnes Neyando at her fish drying shack on **Teetl'it Gwinjik** (Peel River). ©Peter Mather

In the summertime, smaller family groups would make their way to the fish camps along **Teetl'it Gwinjik** and its tributaries. Once at their fish camps, and before the widespread use of cotton or plastic nets, the Teetl'it Gwich'in used other technologies to harvest large numbers of whitefish: fish traps, spears, fishhooks and willow bark nets were all common. They also caught lake trout, grayling, arctic char, loche, herring, suckers, northern pike and coney.²⁶

Plants and berries were also harvested, both for food and for their medicinal purposes, and food storage was sophisticated and widespread.

The proposed park area has many resources that are needed to live a good life, and on our trip downriver with Christopher Colin, he might point some of these out.

Christopher might point out an area where his father may have collected flint, which is a special type of rock used to start fires. These flints are found around **Vihtr'ih Njik**, a tributary of **Edigii Njik**. **Vihtr'ih Njik** itself translates as “Flint-creek”. The sparks from striking the flints ignited fungus, which was collected specifically to start fires.²⁷ Fires were absolutely vital to both cook food and heat a living space, especially in the winter months.

Far above the confluence of **Edigii Njik** and **Teetl'it Gwinjik**, Christopher Colin might have pointed out an important wintering site known as **Ezhinak'àn**. This place, the name of which translates as “Burning hill”, was an important winter gathering area where many families would stay. There are hot springs and other geothermal features, and the caribou hunting was known to be good around here.²⁸

Christopher Colin would not have been alone in his extensive knowledge of the area, and his desire to protect his way of life. Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elder Jimmy Johnny also made the **Teetl'it Gwinjik** his home. Jimmy was in the **Teetl'it Gwinjik** area for more than 50 years, first travelling here in the late 1950s.

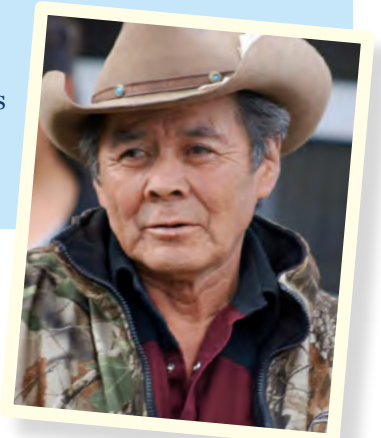
I want protection in the Peel for all the trails I have walked, the mountains I have sat on, creeks and rivers that I have drunk from and places where I have camped. This isn't because I am selfish.

This is because our ancestors have been in that area for years and years. They hunted and fished and followed where the game was and doing that they travelled the Wind, Bonnet Plume and Snake River areas. From the Bonnet Plume River they went up to the headwaters and over to the headwaters of the Stewart River. Then they walked above the canyon and when the canyon ended they built moose-skin boats or rafts and paddled down to Lansing Post. From there they headed down to Mayo.

There are old camps, stone-axe stumps and gravesites in many places in the Peel. I want to keep all these areas intact for future generations to go out there and learn how to survive.²⁹

Jimmy Johnny

Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elder Jimmy Johnny
© First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun



26. Kritsch, Ingrid, Sarah Jerome, Eleanor Mitchell. 2000 (revised 2003). “Teetl'it Gwich'in Heritage Places and Sites in the Peel River Watershed”. Fort McPherson, NT: Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute): p6.

27. Robert Alexie Sr., TGNP96/97, Tape 12B, June 18, 1996; Walter Alexie, MAP Workshop, November 2010, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Vihtr'ih Njik”.

28. Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Ezhinak'àn”.

29. Johnny, Jimmy. 2012. “Peel guide shares his passion”. Yukon News, Mar 9, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2025. <https://www.yukon-news.com/letters-opinions/peel-guide-shares-his-passion-6989617>

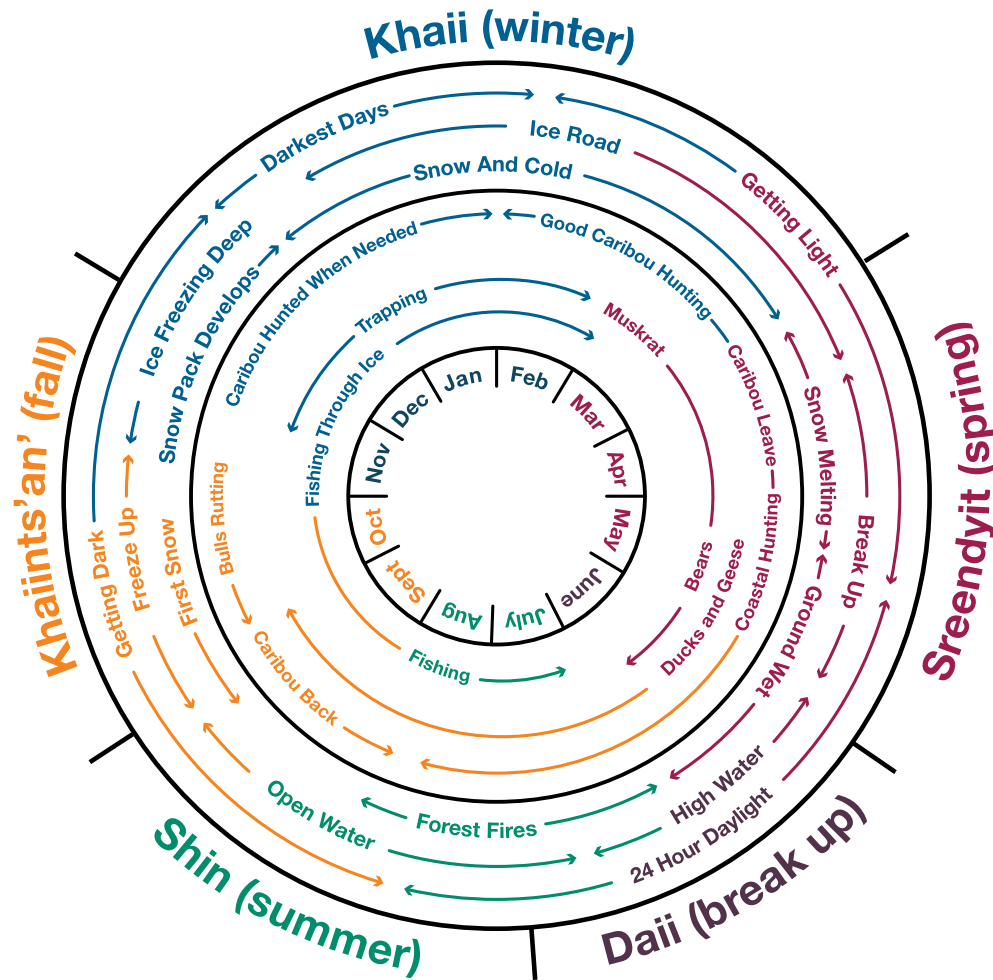


Figure 5. Gwich'in Seasonal Round. © Gwich'in Tribal Council.

There were many changes to the way the Teetl'it Gwich'in lived, starting in the early 1800s. The fur trade, the missionaries, the gold rush, and later, enforced residential schooling and the introduction of the wage economy were all large-scale economic and social factors that the Teetl'it Gwich'in navigated carefully while maintaining strong ties to their culture, their lands, and their families.

Now I am going to tell you of the time I tipped a canoe up **Teetl'it Gwinjik**. This happened to me and my brothers. Me and my two brothers and three other men. I was the youngest of all the men. Those days, we use to hunt beaver in September. My brother, Justin, and Charlie William Thompson and David. There was six of us and we were hunting beaver and caribou. That was around **Edigii Geeghanh** (Caribou River Hills); there is a few lakes around there. Four of the other guys went in one direction and me and my brother went in the other direction hunting beaver. As we were coming back, we didn't have a canoe so we made a raft with logs and we floated down the Peel. The other four guys had a canoe. A canoe made of canvas, homemade. And these men paddled down and they thought we were still up river, but we were ahead floating down with a raft. When we were floating down, the men in the canoe caught up with us. One of the men wanted us to get into the canoe with them, but we didn't want to because we were all loaded. We told them we were alright on the raft. But anyway they forced us to get into the canoe. We got into the canoe. It was a twenty-foot canoe and there was six of us.

We were going just below **Edigii Njik** (Caribou River) just above **Shoh Diidhilkhaii Njik** (Bear Creek). There was really strong water at this particular place. There is one small island in the middle of the river separated by two channels. When we hit the strong water, we couldn't decide which side of the channel to go. But before we could decide the boat sunk on us. I don't remember which way I was swimming; there was so big waves. I looked out after I got to shore and saw my two brothers holding each other crying and I kept trying to walk. When I got up and looked again, there was nobody left. I was stuck on this island alone. It happened in late September and there was little ice along the shore. There was a big spruce tree on the island. I rolled the tree to the river. The only thing I had left was my clothes and my gun belt. I tied my gun belt to me and the tree and floated down river. I got across the river and the tree got stuck into a really strong current among the rocks. I got loose and swam back to shore. I started walking along the bank of the river and I was all alone. When we were coming up we left a small birchbark canoe and gun powder, a shot gun and other things we had left under the canoe. When I got to the canoe, I put it in the water and found some beaver skins floating in the water. On the way, I came to an old fish house and I got some dry leaves and I wet the gun powder just enough so it could catch fire. I mixed

the leaves and gun powder together, then shot the gun and it caught fire. I took out all my clothes and I dried them just enough. Even though they were damp I put them back on. Before I started back on the river, it was really dark. But before I started again, I screamed into the darkness to see if anybody was alive. There was no answer; only the sound of the water.

When I got back home, the five men's wives were in a tent just laughing. It was on a Sunday evening. I went up to my father's house and told him what happened to the five men. So my father told the women what had happened to their husbands. They all started crying. It was really sad. The next day we went down to McPherson to report it to the Police. The Police went up with a whale boat, but nobody was found.

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 5 (1973)

Sacred and special places on our landscape

Christopher Colin might, if he were to take us downriver with him, point out the numerous sacred sites and cultural sites along the banks of the river as well as places where people lived, fished, hunted, and started their journeys inland. These places, most of them carrying traditional Gwich'in place names, hold many stories.

Christopher might stop to show us **Chitr'iniinjl**, the place where he lost his brothers to drowning. This place is close to where **Edrii Njik** flows into **Teetl'it Gwinjik**. **Edrii Njik**, which translates as “Heart-river”, has for a time been known as Hart River. There are other places across this landscape with names relating to drownings and starvation or indicating that the final resting places of Gwich'in ancestors are located there, once again attesting to how Gwich'in lives and livelihoods are imbued across this landscape.

But Christopher could show us many other places as well. Some of these sites tell stories about things that happened within the last few hundred years, in stories told by grandparents and great-grandparents.

For example, **Taa'aih Khànjlinaii** (which translates as “Paddle-many broken up”) is a river that flows into **Teetl'it Gwinjik** below **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik**. At this site, Christopher might tell us about how the Inuit used to make excursions this far up the river. Although the Teetl'it Gwich'in and the Inuit were mostly peaceable, there were some battles in the past between the two groups. Immediately downriver from this place is characterised by fast and rough waters, and the Inuit kayakers' paddles would be worn out by the time they reached **Taa'aih Khànjlinaii**, they would come ashore and carve new paddles. The Gwich'in would find the broken and worn-out paddles at this location, giving it this name.³⁰

Other battle sites refer to more recent times, when fighting became more common between neighbouring groups with the pressures of the fur trade economies and colonisation, or they may refer to times long in the past, when battles were waged between people with special powers.³¹ For example, **Ekèhtsii Va'àn** (“Ekèhtsii-his den”), is a place that a powerful man named Ekèhtsii fled to as he was being pursued by an adversary who had killed his family. Ekèhtsii “shouted out to the cliff which immediately opened up to permit him to enter and escape the fate which had befallen his kinsmen.”³²

Christopher Colin might also point out sites where special technologies were used to hunt, trap, or fish, such as at **Ok Choo** (“Eddy-big”), close to Christopher's father's camp. This large eddy is a good place to fish for whitefish, crookedbacks, loche and jackfish, and this was one of several sites where fish traps were built.³³

“Long poles with their bark still on were driven into the creek or river bed in two parallel rows, and an opening was left between them. Poles with the bark stripped off were then placed horizontally between the two rows of upright poles—this was similar to a fence. A basket closed the opening at the downstream end of these two ‘fences.’ Fish swam into the eddy on their way upstream in the fall, and many would be funneled into the trap and the basket.”³⁴

There are also places and sites that are known from more recent times, such as from the fur trade, gold rush, or the presence of the Royal Northwest Mounted

30. Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute/Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Taa'aih Khànjlinaii”.

31. Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Ekèhtsii Va'àn”.

32. Ritter, 1976:12, in Kritsch, Ingrid, Sarah Jerome, Eleanor Mitchell. 2000 (revised 2003). “Teetl'it Gwich'in Heritage Places and Sites in the Peel River Watershed”. Fort McPherson, NT: Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute): p29.

33. Neil Colin, TGP96/97, Tape 7A, June 17, 1996, Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute/Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Ok Choo”.

34. Heine, Michael, Alestine Andre, Ingrid Kritsch, Alma Cardinal and the Elders of Tsiigehtchic. Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak: The History and Stories of the Gwichya Gwich'in As Told By The Elders of Tsiigehtshik (2nd revised and expanded edition). Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, NWT. 2007: pp74.



Model of a Gwich'in fish trap. © Canadian Museum of History, VI-I-51, photo by Marie-Louise Déruaz, IMG2010-0112-0009-Dm. Model made by Brian Francis, Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories, collected by Richard Slobodin, 1963–1964.

Police, after the Gwich'in met newcomers to their lands from as far away as Europe, England, and Scotland. For example, “Wind City” was a gold-rush gathering site occupied for only a single winter. Its exact location is still to be discovered and is believed to have washed away, although it is known to be close to the confluence of **Tr'ineeditr'aai Njik** and **Teet'it Gwinjik**. Even if Christopher Colin couldn't point out the exact place on the land where Wind City was, he might tell us about the gold seekers—around 70, based on the history books—who wintered here in cabins from September 1898 to spring 1899. They were on their way to the Klondike to make their fortune and find their fame. The Gwich'in were welcomed by the gold seekers as experienced guides, and they also traded amongst themselves for needed items.

A story that shows how knowledgeable the Gwich'in were in the domain of medicine can be found in a popular history book. George Mitchell, a gold seeker who was staying at Wind City, had seriously injured his knee while cutting down a tree, splitting his kneecap. Likely under the direction of Christopher Colin's mother, Annie, a young woman performed surgery on him. She used the extremely sharp edges of flint flakes—sharper than today's surgical steel—to cut into his knee and then attach the halves of his kneecap using small pins made of caribou bone. The kneecap was then pulled back together with careful stitching using fine caribou sinew, and the wound dressed with a poultice of herbs and the inner bark of a tree to prevent infection. Angus Graham wrote, “its drawing power was so great that the whole wound healed perfectly, without a trace of pus”.³⁵

For the Gwich'in, the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, and the other Indigenous people who have always taken care of the sacred and special places across **Teet'it Gwinjik**, there is no real separation between taking care of each other, taking care of the land, and taking care of Indigenous languages, histories, and cultures.

For example, the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun have four pillars of traditional behaviour that the Elders teach the youth to preserve **Dän Ki** (“our way”). The Elders share with the young people to use **Nálats'int'ra** (respect) and **Lek'ats'ete** (care) in their actions, and to **Leyáts'ele** (share) and **Häts'edän** (teach) others.³⁶

These values are shared by the Gwich'in, who include among their core values **Yiinjinihletr'ichil'eh** (respect), **Chigwijuu'ee Tr'igwindaii** (honesty), **Nakhwigwandak** (our stories), **Yiinjitr'ichil'eh** (honour), **Tr'eedlaa** (laughter), **Zhuh Ghat T'igwidich'uu** (kindness), and **Nihk'atr'inaatii** (sharing and caring).³⁷

Dän Ki – Our Way

-First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun 2024

Respect—Nálats'int'ra

Treat people the way you would like to be treated, using kindness in your heart. Behave as you would like others to behave. Never assume, always ask, tell the truth, be honest, be patient, and show compassion to one another.

Care—Lek'ats'ete

Take care of yourself, your family, pets and community. This was a value taught to us from our ancestors, it is our duty as First Nation citizens to carry on this virtue with caring for our people.

Share—Leyáts'ele

Share your traditional knowledge to the younger generation. As First Nation's people, we were taught to share with others, especially the youth so that our traditional ways are never lost.

Teac—Häts'edän

Ensure your children know their traditional values by teaching them. If you do not know, ask an Elder. It is important to know who you are as a First Nation citizen so that you can pass on this virtue to the next generation.

35. TGNP Elders workshop, March 1999; Robert G. Moyles (editor). “From Duck Lake to Dawson City : the diary of Eben McAdam's journey to the Klondike, 1898-1899.” Western Producer Prairie Books, Saskatoon. 1977; Angus Graham. “The Golden Grindstone: The Adventures of George M. Mitchell. 1935:192”, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Wind City”.

36. First Nation of Na Cho Nyäk Dun. 2024. Dän Ki – Our Way: Na Cho Nyäk Dun Four Principles 2024. Unpublished document from First Nation of Na Cho Nyäk Dun.

37. Gwich'in Tribal Council. N.D. “Mission, Vision & Values”. Website accessed 2025-05-12. <https://www.gwichintribal.ca/mission-vision--values.html>.

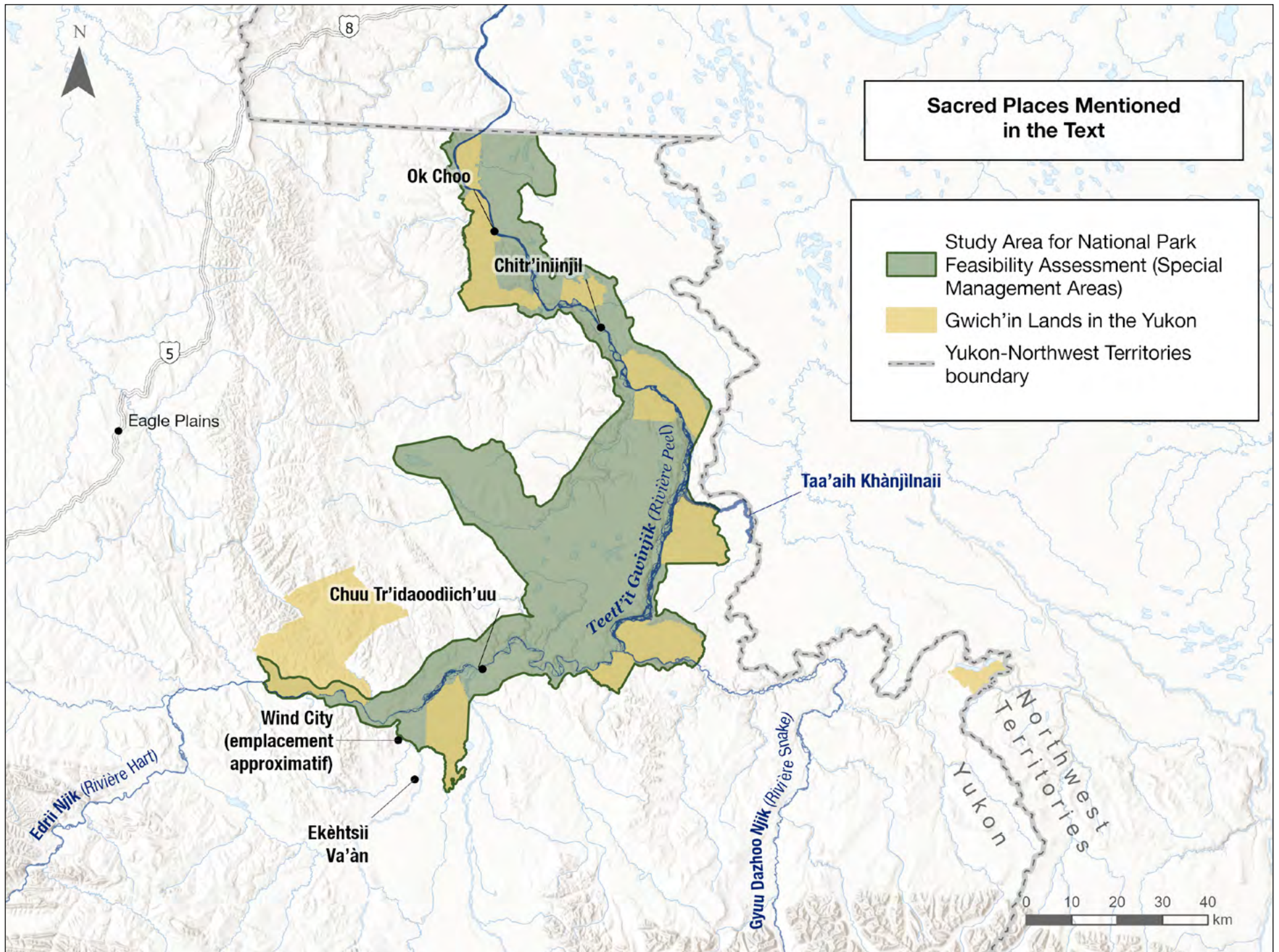


Figure 6. Map of sacred places mentioned in the text.

Climate Change

Climate change in the **Teetl'it Gwinjik** (Peel River) Watershed and the broader region is projected to have significant implications for the land and northern communities.

Historically, mean annual temperatures in this area hovered around -5°C, but they are expected to rise substantially in the coming decades due to a phenomenon known as Arctic amplification. This process causes the Arctic to warm two to three times faster than the global average, directly altering the region's physical environment by warming lakes, rivers, and tundra soils.

This warming threatens the stability of continuous permafrost, a defining feature of the region. Increasing temperatures are accelerating its thaw, leading to terrain instability and erosion related to permafrost thaw. The loss of permafrost further exacerbates climate change through the release of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane from previously frozen organic material. This region holds vast stores of carbon in its tundra soils, often referred to as a potential “carbon bomb”, which could be rapidly decomposed and emitted under a warming climate.

These environmental changes have far-reaching implications for local communities who rely on the land for subsistence, cultural practices, and transportation. Infrastructure built on permafrost is at risk of damage, and traditional harvesting practices may be disrupted by shifting animal migration patterns and altered seasonal cycles. Migratory birds that nest in the watershed may also be affected by changing water levels and habitat loss, potentially reducing breeding success and altering migration timing.

Climate projections indicate not only warmer conditions but also an increase in total precipitation in the northern Yukon. For the barren-ground caribou within the Porcupine range, these changes are expected to result in deeper snowpacks in winter, more insect activity in summer, and delayed snowfall in fall. Such shifts could alter migration patterns and increase the likelihood of caribou being exposed to overhunting, disease, and industrial development.

Arctic National Strategy (Issue October). (2023). https://sencanada.ca/Content/Sen/Committee/441/POFO/briefs/POFO_SS-1_Brief_ARF_e.pdf.

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Zolkos, S., Tank, S. E., Striegl, R. G., Kokelj, S. V., Kokoszka, J., Estop-Aragonés, C., & Olefeldt, D. (2020). Thermokarst amplifies fluvial inorganic carbon cycling and export across watershed scales on the Peel Plateau, Canada. *Biogeosciences*, 17(20), 5163–5182. <https://doi.org/10.5194/bg-17-5163-2020>.

After I got married we stayed at **Tr'atr'aataii Tshik** (Trail River). People had moved there when the Chief was there. From there the people moved. After I got married, my father-in-law, Old William Koosh, made snowshoes for me and the people started moving through the mountains. I put my snowshoes on and I remember Old Snowshoe was moving with us, he and his family. We moved over to **Edigii** (Caribou Mountain) and hit **Edigii Njik** (Caribou River) and we went right up to **Van Choo** (Hungry Lake). It's about halfway from Dawson to McPherson. And the people were staying around **Van Choo**.

I remember one time we were moving over and the people used to move during Christmas and New Year's. I remember on New Year's Eve, everybody went out hunting. I shot one big bull moose. I came back late at night. Everybody had bad luck and came back empty-handed. My father-in-law used to come over to my tent and look for me to come back. When I came back, my father-in-law told all the people that I shot a moose. Even Chief Julius thanked me. The Chief told a few men to get their dog teams and to go and get the bull moose while it was good moonlight. The men went out and loaded up their sleds and returned with sleds full of meat. The meat went to Chief Julius' tent. The meat was then distributed to all the people for a New Year's feast. Everyone had a fun loving time.

Christopher Colin: *A Long Time Ago Part 5* (1973)

How we move from place to place: Traditional trails

Christopher Colin, if he were to take us on a journey down **Teet'it Gwinjik**, would point out many places where there were trailheads.

Wherever important rivers or creeks flow into **Teet'it Gwinjik**, there is likely to be a trailhead for travel further inland. Of course, many of the trails that cross this area follow the rivers—the imaginary trip we are on, down the river, is itself along an important trail. Trails along the rivers are travelled by boat or on foot in the summer or along the shores in the winter, or if the ice is safe, along the ice of the river itself.

When a trail follows a river, there are occasions where it makes sense for it to leave the river and cross a section of land. These sections may be needed for a trail because the river is dangerous, or they may be a short-cut for efficient and quick travel. These on-land sections of longer river trails are known as “portage trails”.

The trails that head inland from **Teet'it Gwinjik** travel in all directions: some trails go east, to trapping areas or even over to **Tsiigehnjik**, a large river that has for a time also been known as the Arctic Red River. Many trails head south, following the large rivers that flow into **Teet'it Gwinjik**, and leading to prime harvesting areas and locations where people gathered to spend winter together. Some of the trails heading south are portage trails between **Teet'it Gwinjik** and **Edigii Njik**.



Walter Alexie preparing his sled beside a standing cache at his **Tr'atr'aataii Tshik** (Trail River) camp. A view of the hills across **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River) is visible in the background. Taken on a snowmobile trip from **Teet'it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) to Mayo, March 6, 1998. ©Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage



Travelling at the head of **Edigii Njik** (Caribou River) with deep snow and view of high hills from the trail. Taken on a snowmobile trip from **Teet'it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) to Mayo, March 1998. © Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage



William Teya clad in a caribou skin parka on **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River). ©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council

In addition to seasonal travels to and from camps and harvesting locations, the Gwich'in also used their finely honed knowledge of how to cross their landscapes to travel long distances. For example, they can make their way to places as far away as what is now Alaska, Dawson City, and the Arctic coast, to visit or carry out business.

Some trails are important enough, and well-used enough, to have their own traditional name. For example, **Yiditshyuu Theetoh Taii**, a name which translates as "Something soft-portage-trail", is in the far northern part of the proposed park area close to the border with the Northwest Territories. The name refers to a portage trail that is a short-cut along **Teet'it Gwinjik**. This trail cuts down the travel time by about half and has a good fish lake along its length.³⁸

The map below shows trails recorded in the 1970s and 1980s through numerous interviews with Gwich'in hunters and trappers, as a part of what has become known as the Dene Mapping Project.³⁹ Christopher himself was interviewed by his son, Neil Colin, and some of the hundreds of trail lines on the map represent his travels from the 1880s to the 1950s.

The trails were recorded on the familiar green NTS mapsheets taped together into large mosaics, which were used to show the extent and intensity of Gwich'in use of their lands for land claim negotiations purposes. A sample of 30% of Gwich'in men were interviewed for this project—if every Gwich'in person's lifetime of travels were recorded, the trail lines would be even more numerous. When discussing the maps with the trails drawn on them and speaking to Justice Thomas Berger in the original enquiry about the Mackenzie Gas Project in 1976, Gwich'ya Gwich'in hunter Robert Andre said, "Soon you won't see any green in there...I tell you, once you have covered all the maps, it will be just a black sheet of paper."⁴⁰

The people were very religious in them days. The minister travelled to these camps. I remember that everyone used to listen to the Chief's orders. From here, we moved further to Hungry Lake. And one place I was hunting moose close to the Peel River. I was chasing five moose and I killed all these moose. While I was shooting these moose, I heard a dog team. In those days, R.C.M.P. use to make patrol from Dawson to McPherson and back. Well, Sergeant Dempster and one young constable was there and with them was their guide, Charlie Stewart. They were coming so I was in a hurry and never skinned those moose. All I did was cut the moose open and took the main parts of it and filled a pack sack and then went home. The patrol made it to my tent when I arrived. Everyone was waiting for my return. Just before the patrol reached my house there is a steep hill. The young constable didn't put any chains or rope under the sled and he went down the steep hill with his dog team and he had a heavy load. The sled hit a bit of a big tree and the sled and the head of the sled was broken right off. Also, a dog was killed during the collision. After, they had a good meal of moose with us. Dempster told me, "I know you travelled around here and you are always moving around with your family and friends. And I know you really need your dogs and sleds. Me, myself, I am travelling from Dawson to McPherson and I am stuck. I have to ask you for a dog and sled." I said, "Alright, you're stuck; I will have to give it to you." So I went outside and picked out my leader among the dogs and that is the dog I gave to Dempster. I gave Dempster my birch sled. In those days, everything was so cheap. I sold Dempster the dog for twenty-five dollars and the sled for another twenty-five dollars.

The next day, they pulled out. The patrol pulled out heading for Dawson. A few days after that, my father-in-law, Old Koosh, had some furs and lots of meat and he went after the patrol to get some supplies for winter. While he was out there, along with him, he had Andrew Koe staying with him. Two of them lived around there hunting caribou. One time, he and Andrew shot eleven caribou with eleven shots. They bought a spy glass from Dawson and they spotted seventeen caribou. They trailed the caribou and then we shot all the seventeen caribou. In those days, everyone was a good hunter and we never missed our game.

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 5 (1973)

38. Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca.

39. Nahanni, Phoebe. "The Mapping Project", in Mel Watkins, Editor. Dene Nation: The Colony Within. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977, pp21-27.

40. Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry Before the Honourable Mr. Thomas Berger, Commissioner. Arctic Red River, N.W.T. March 13, 1976, Volume 47, pp 4615.

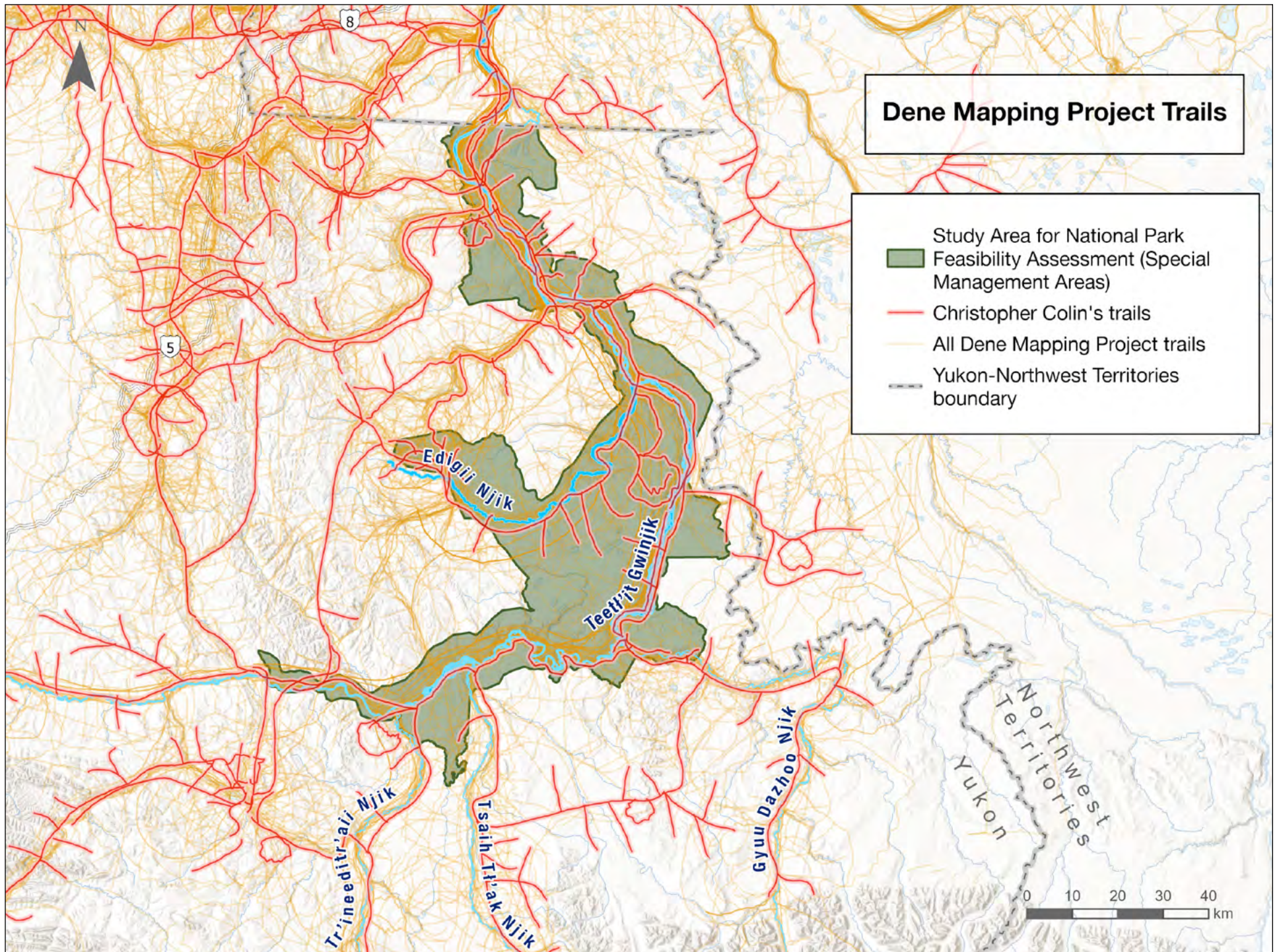


Figure 7. Map of trails within and near the study area, from the Dene Mapping Project.

Tsii dei time: evidence of the long-ago past

Travel through the **Teet'it Gwinjik** area has changed over time. Long in the past, people walked along established trails generally on foot, using snowshoes in the wintertime to set trails. Canoes, including those made with birchbark, were used on rivers and lakes.

When the Gwich'in began to participate in the fur trade economy, dogs—which were a feature of Gwich'in life before the fur trade but not in the same numbers—became much more common as a way to get around. Dog teams were used by trappers to check their lines and for general wintertime travel, and dogs could also carry packs.

When snowmachines became available, they were also quickly adopted by those travelling across the land, and they remain popular today. The pace of change accelerated in the 19th and 20th centuries, but the Gwich'in have always been adept at improving their lives by adopting new technologies, according to both the legends and stories that Christopher Colin would have heard from his Elders, and from the archaeological record.

The archaeological record of the **Teet'it Gwinjik** area is not as well-known as neighbouring areas, as there has not been as many archaeological surveys. Christopher Colin may have heard of the travels of early archaeologists into the Gwich'ya Gwich'in area in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s from his friends and family there.

If an archaeologist were to travel the river with him, Christopher may have been interested to learn about how archaeologists work, and keen to share with the archaeologist his knowledge of the river's banks, the high meadows and plateaus, and the low, braided channels.



William Vittrekwa leaving camp to go hunting for **vadzaih/hudzi** (caribou).
©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council



William Vittrekwa and Bill Antaya skirting open water on a creek.
©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council

Christopher may have also learned about the practice and theory of archaeology from the anthropologists who came to stay in **Teet'it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) to live and learn about the Gwich'in, such as Richard Slobodin. Slobodin first went to **Teet'it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) in the late 1930s, when Christopher Colin was in his early 50s, and continued to visit right up until the 1970s. Slobodin wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Gwich'in and recorded many of his observations about how Gwich'in lived, showcasing the knowledge, lifestyle, tools, and stories generously shared with him by the Teet'it Gwich'in.⁴¹ This includes, for example, tools and practices such as the caribou corral that an archaeologist looking for archaeological sites in the area might seek out and record.

Far up the river, before it takes a turn northward below its confluence with **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik**, the river runs through an area where the bedrock is rich with carbonates. Carbonates are light-coloured rocks that erode in specific ways and are known to have caves. There is also limestone around **Vadzaih Van**, and both these areas might have caves that the Gwich'in and their

ancestors would have used. Both Christopher Colin and an archaeologist surveying the area would have shared an excitement and interest in caves—caves tend to be very dry on the inside which allows for ancient tools and debris to be well-preserved even after many, many years, and they are used opportunistically by people passing by and hunting in the area.⁴² Christopher Colin would be keen to share that there are caves in the region, such as **Ekèhtsii Va'àn**, which are sacred and

41. Damas, David. 2005. RICHARD SLOBODIN (1915 – 2005) [obituary]. *Arctic* 58(4) pp. 438 – 439; Slobodin, Richard. 1959. Band Organization of the Peel River Kutchin. Columbia University.

42. Wadsworth, William T. D., Benjamin Jones, Duncan McLaren, and Kristi Benson. 2025. "Heritage Assessment for the Proposed New National Park in the Teet'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Area, Yukon". Unpublished manuscript report prepared for the Gwich'in Tribal Council. Northwest Territories: Fort McPherson.



Line of snowmobiles stopped to enjoy the view in the **Ddhah Dik'ee** area. **Ddhah Dik'ee** is a range of sharp mountains north of **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River), across from **Tsaih T'ak Njik** (Bonnet Plume River), March 8, 1998.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich'in Tribal Council
Department of Culture & Heritage

have stories attached to them. Caves in adjacent areas, such as Bluefish Caves close to the Gwich'in community of Old Crow, have important archaeological remains dating back more than ten thousand years.⁴³

Other parts of the **Teet'it Gwinjik** area—which is very geologically diverse—are interesting to archaeologists for other reasons. The main river itself is stable: it doesn't move sideways across its valley as it erodes, which means the banks of the river may hold archaeological sites that could be very old. However, the large tributaries such as **Gyuu Dazhoo Njik** are braided, and the riverbed moves from side to side over time, eroding away and re-shaping its own banks. This means that archaeological sites probably don't exist on the shores even if the Gwich'in and their ancestors stayed there, as these sites and the debris they contain would be washed away downriver.⁴⁴

Although the trails, place names, and legendary sites that Christopher Colin could tell an archaeologist about would be of interest, Christopher might also tell stories about the large legendary creatures from the tsii deii times far in the past.

These stories have been passed down for so many generations that their origins may be lost, but they might refer to the large land-dwelling mammals that have long captured the imaginations of children watching morning cartoons and archaeologists alike: huge ice-age animals such as mammoths and mastodons, and large predatory cats with long, dagger-like teeth. These animals were alive

during the time when glaciers, coming from the east and the west, covered the **Teet'it Gwinjik** area. Remains of such animals as the woolly mammoth, saiga antelope, and even the steppe lion were found in Bluefish Caves to the west of the river, and a steppe bison was found in the Gwichya Gwich'in community of **Tsiigehtshik** to the northeast of the river.⁴⁵

The glaciers that covered the land at this time were massive and changed the landscape in many ways. They changed the route of the river more than once, and they pushed the land around, carving out valleys and depositing vast amounts of rocky debris. Upon hearing from Christopher Colin about the large mythical animals, an archaeologist might share that the whole **Teet'it Gwinjik** valley is part of a north-south corridor that appeared when the glaciers from the east and the glaciers from the west started to slowly retreat and melt. It may be that this area was a corridor within which people in the far north travelled south before any area to the east or west was ice free—very exciting to the archaeologist!⁴⁶

As the stories of glaciers covering the land and then melting over tens of thousands of years suggest, things change in the environment, and culture also changes. The types of tools and how they are used changes, which is one of the ways archaeologists study and understand ancestors. For example, around 15,000 years ago, people frequently used tiny, thin and rectangular stone flakes with very sharp edges as a useful cutting tool. These tools then became unpopular for several thousands of years before becoming popular again.

Archaeologists also look at the changing shape of 'projectile points', or the stone tip that is lashed onto spears, throwing spears, and finally, arrows. For example, early versions of projectile points in areas close to **Teet'it Gwinjik** are shaped into a noticeable teardrop shape. Later, these tools changed in their appearance: some had a distinctive stem which was used to attach them to the spear shaft; others had a long channel running up and down the spear point on both faces. The shape and size then changed yet again, to projectile points having a rounded base, and finally to have notched corners.

43. Wadsworth, William T. D., Benjamin Jones, Duncan McLaren, and Kristi Benson. 2025. "Heritage Assessment for the Proposed New National Park in the Teet'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Area, Yukon". Unpublished manuscript report prepared for the Gwich'in Tribal Council. Northwest Territories: Fort McPherson.

44. Wadsworth, William T. D., Benjamin Jones, Duncan McLaren, and Kristi Benson. 2025. "Heritage Assessment for the Proposed New National Park in the Teet'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Area, Yukon". Unpublished manuscript report prepared for the Gwich'in Tribal Council. Northwest Territories: Fort McPherson.

45. Bourgeon 2021 and Zazula et al. 2009 in Wadsworth, William T. D., Benjamin Jones, Duncan McLaren, and Kristi Benson. 2025. "Heritage Assessment for the Proposed New National Park in the Teet'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Area, Yukon". Unpublished manuscript report prepared for the Gwich'in Tribal Council. Northwest Territories: Fort McPherson.

46. Wadsworth, William T. D., Benjamin Jones, Duncan McLaren, and Kristi Benson. 2025. "Heritage Assessment for the Proposed New National Park in the Teet'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Area, Yukon". Unpublished manuscript report prepared for the Gwich'in Tribal Council. Northwest Territories: Fort McPherson.

All of these changes reflect shifting styles and preferences, but also are evidence, perhaps, of the way the Gwich'in and their ancestors made use of the wildlife around them, and how they both learned from and taught their neighbours. The changing styles may also show that families and communities were moving around to new places.⁴⁷

*Long ago, my parents used to stay above **Vihlt'òo Njik** in my father, Old Colin Vitshikk's cabin. All the people had moved to the mountains and we were there alone. My mother was sick and she wanted something good to eat so me and my brother went hunting for her. We shot a bull moose and we also killed one porcupine. We brought the porcupine home and some meat from the moose. My mother didn't want the moose meat. Instead, she wanted to eat the porcupine. I was cleaning and I fixed it up to cook. My mother was sitting up in bed telling me how to fix the porcupine to cook. While I was working with it, my mother laid back on the bed. Me, my brother and my father went to see her and that's where she died. The next day, we took my mother's body to McPherson. From my father's cabin to McPherson it was 48 miles. We brought my mother's body down to 15 miles from McPherson. We left her body there. The same night William Husky went up to get my mother's body. After the funeral, we stayed in Fort McPherson for the winter. For January and February, there was a patrol from Dawson. People from Dawson were coming in. Sergeant Dempster and I forgot who the guide was. They stayed in McPherson for a long time and when they were going back to Dawson, we went with them.*

*We camped at **Taiinlaih** (Three Cabin Creek). From there, the next day we went to my father's cabin up **Vihlt'òo Njik**. The next morning, the patrol kept going on its way. We stayed at the cabin for two days. After two days we started moving after them up the Peel. We went through **Taiinlaih** over **Edigii** across **Edigii Njik** and so on.*

*That time they brought my mother to McPherson the Anglican minister, Whittaker, buried her. From there, we started moving from **Edigii** over to the **Edigii Njik** through the country over **Teet'it Gwinjik** alongside **Vihlt'òo Njik** to **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik**. And then from there we went to this side of **Van Choo**. That is where all the people were staying. We got*

there and stayed there hunting caribou and moose. Everybody was living off the land. In early spring, my brother and I went to Dawson City. On the way, near 12 Miles, we were travelling down 12 Mile and saw a bunch of miners and that's the first time I have ever seen white men.

When the white people spoke, they sounded like birds to me.

My brother and I went to this white man's place to eat. They were setting the table to eat. They put round things on the table; it was coloured red. This was the first time I saw oranges. I didn't know how to eat it. My brother said you have to peel it before you eat it. I peeled it and ate my first orange.

*From there, we went to Dawson City and 12 Mile and got all our supplies for the winter. We went back to where the people were staying. We went past **Tth'oh Zraii Njik**; there was a bunch of people staying there. These people moved to this side of Hungry Lake. Justin and Alfred Bonnetplume were there with us, too. From there we were on our way to Dawson; we saw eight horses in harness...First time I saw horses.*

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 5 (1973)

The land, the water, and the plants that sustain us

Christopher Colin travelled so extensively in his life, from **Ddhah Zhit Han** (Rat River) on the west side of the Mackenzie Delta, all the way into the Yukon. He travelled to hunt and trap, and also to guide law officers, gold seekers, and others along well-established and well-known Gwich'in trails.

The Gwich'in have a long history of working collaboratively with others they have welcomed to their lands, including those that Christopher mentions in his stories, but also scientists such as biologists, palaeontologists, ornithologists—there is a lake named for a “Bug Hunter” closer to Aklavik, named for a particularly memorable scientist who worked there—and ecologists.

If Christopher Colin were to invite an ecologist with us on our imaginary trip down **Teet'it Gwinjik**, the two might discuss, from both a Gwich'in perspective and a western scientific perspective, many topics relating to the diversity of the lands, plants, animals, and waters around **Teet'it Gwinjik**.

47. Wadsworth, William T. D., Benjamin Jones, Duncan McLaren, and Kristi Benson. 2025. “Heritage Assessment for the Proposed New National Park in the Teet'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Area, Yukon”. Unpublished manuscript report prepared for the Gwich'in Tribal Council. Northwest Territories: Fort McPherson.

The ecologist might point out areas they would classify as Arctic tundra, alpine habitats, and boreal forests, and Christopher might explain how these different landscapes look, feel, and sound in the different seasons, and what plants and animals can be found there. The two might discuss how this is, in fact, a biodiversity hotspot in Canada, significant at a local, regional, country-wide, and even international level.

The area's special diversity relates in part to how often and how much of it has remained ice free through significant glacial events, on the edge of a corridor stretching from the mountains far to the south all the way across what is now the ocean separating our own continent from Russia. This ice-free corridor allowed for people, other animals, and plants to move between areas, and even to grow and change over many generations to be new, local species.⁴⁸



Chii Akàn, 1999. ©Ingrid Kritsch - Gwich'in Social & Cultural Institute, Gwich'in Tribal Council

Christopher Colin might share Gwich'in oral history about the ice age—for example, further to the west and up a tributary of **Teetl'it Gwinjik**, there is a hill known as **Chii Akàn**, which translates as “Rock-its (beaver) lodge”. Giant, now-extinct beavers once lived there thousands of years ago, when other large mammals such as mammoths, sabre-toothed cats, and bison—which the ecologist would call Pleistocene megafauna—shared these lands.⁴⁹

The ecologist might be keen to discuss the region's special landscape features such as the notable and steep escarpments, the plateaus and plains, the forested areas, and the wetlands. Christopher Colin would in turn provide the Gwich'in name for these habitats, such as **gwahshri'**, which is the name for open areas with sparse mixed spruce and birch. In an area known as **gwahshri'**, Gwich'in would know to look for cranberries to pick, and many types of animals, including migratory and resident birds, bears, and caribou.⁵⁰ Similarly, in the Northern Tutchone language, **chinkaak** means ‘meadow, open place’, and **hunsún** means ‘clear place’.

The ecologist might make notes in their notebook about the vegetation surrounding the river: dry to wet shrubs and coniferous forests dominated by spruce, paper birch, aspen, and balsam poplar, as well as willows and alder shrubs.⁵¹ For many of the plants that the ecologist adds to their notebook, Christopher Colin might point out how it could be used for food, as a tool, or as medicine.

For example, spruce is a very common tree in the forests along the river, and if Christopher and the ecologist stopped for a meal ‘cooked to the fire’ in one of the many beautiful spots along the shores, Christopher might gather some spruce to explain to the ecologist how to use it, after leaving a gift of tobacco or matches behind in thanks for the medicine he collected.

48. Brodie, J. F., & Berger, J. (2009). The Peel River Watershed: Ecological Crossroads and Beringian Hotspot of Arctic and Boreal Biodiversity.

49. Sheila Greer, 1990, CANOMA 16(2):4. “Place Names in Heritage Site Research, Dempster Highway Corridor, Yukon”, as quoted in the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca.

50. Banci, Vivian 2023. Prepared for the Department of Culture and Heritage, Gwich'in Tribal Council 2023. Gwich'in Community-Led Boreal (Woodland) Caribou Traditional Knowledge Studies to Support Range Planning. Report I. Gwich'in Habitat Classification. August 31 2023. Gwich'in Department of Culture and Heritage, Fort McPherson NT.

51. Brodie, J. F., & Berger, J. (2009). The Peel River Watershed: Ecological Crossroads and Beringian Hotspot of Arctic and Boreal Biodiversity.

Paleontology

The **Teetl'it Gwinjik** area holds rare and scientifically significant palaeontological remains dating back to the Late Cretaceous period, approximately 100 to 66 million years ago. Fossils from this era are extremely uncommon in the Canadian Arctic—only six other sites are currently known to contain similar material.

In the late 1960s, geologists made a remarkable discovery in the Bonnet Plume Formation, located between **Tsaih Tl'ak Njik** (Bonnet Plume River), **Teetl'it Gwinjik** (Peel River) and **Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik** (Wind River): three fossilized bones belonging to juvenile hadrosaurids, or duck-billed dinosaurs. These herbivorous dinosaurs, sometimes called “the cows of the Cretaceous” due to their ability to grind vast quantities of plant matter with hundreds of tiny teeth, thrived in a much

warmer climate than today. At the time, small, furry mammals scurried beneath their feet, but they played only a minor role in the ecosystem.

Further palaeontological surveys conducted in 2008 and 2009 uncovered an abundance of plant fossils from just after the mass extinction event that ended the age of dinosaurs. In addition, the remains of another duck-billed dinosaur were found, along with a fossil likely belonging to either a crocodile or a turtle, dating to around 65 million years ago.

These discoveries highlight the **Teetl'it Gwinjik** region as a site of considerable scientific interest, with outstanding potential for future exploration and the possibility of uncovering even more insights into Arctic prehistoric life.

Vertebrate fossils (Dinosauria) from the Bonnet Plume Formation, Yukon Territory, Canada.

David C. Evans, Matthew J. Vavrek, Dennis R. Braman, Nicolás E. Campione, T. Alexander Dececchi, and Grant D. Zazula - Can. J. Earth Sci. 49: 396–411 (2012).

Paleontology of the Bonnet Plume Formation, Yukon Territory, Canada – David Evans NRS proposal 272394 – Oct 27, 2007.

CBC news report June 30, 2009.

Natural History Museum.

- **Dzih ant'at/ ts'ok dzi'**, or spruce gum, has many uses and is known in many forms. It can be used as a medicine for cuts and scratches, made into an ointment, or boiled for internal issues. It can also be chewed as a type of gum.

- **Ts'iivii leegat/ ts'ok aw' dagat**, or spruce needles, are also useful. The needles can be boiled to create a wash for skin ailments or taken internally for illness.

- **Dineedzil/ ts'ok dahdzyón'**, or spruce cones from the tops of smaller trees, can be boiled as well to treat illnesses.

- **Ts'iivii neech'uu/ ts'ok t'ún'**, or the white, inner form of spruce bark, can be pounded and dried and then used to treat wounds. It can also be chewed or made into a tea.

- **Thoo'ah/ ts'ok aw'**, or spruce boughs, can also be boiled and made into a medicinal tea. The boughs are also used as flooring in tents.⁵²



Dzih ant'at/ ts'ok dzi' (spruce gum).
©Alestine Andre



Dineedzil/ ts'ok dahdzyón' (spruce cones).
©Alestine Andre



Mary-Ruth Wilson harvesting **dzih ant'at/ ts'ok dzi'** (sticky gum). ©Arlyn Charlie, Gwich'in Tribal Council Department of Culture and Heritage



Spruce gum tea. ©Alestine Andre

52. Wilson, Lucy, Bertha Francis, Eleanor Mitchell, and Betty A. Vittrekwa. "Traditional Medicine Book: Dinjii Zhuu Agoondaii". Gwich'in Language Centre, Fort McPherson, N.W.T. 1998.

I am old and can't remember much. People stayed in the bush those days. All they did was hunt, trap and then they go to Dawson to get supplies for the winter. By the time they get back to their camp, it is pretty late in the spring. I remember one time people were moving; they hit a moose. A moose came sliding down a mountain. I remember the people feeding the dogs out of the dead moose. It was pretty late in the spring. There was water all over the creek.

*One time I shot a rabbit with rifle and when I went to pick it up, there was two more dead rabbits; I got three rabbits. I told my mother and she made a fire and cooked and ate it. So that was the time I got three rabbits with one shot. Another time, I shot one grizzly bear with three cubs on the side of a mountain. I also shot three lynx with three shots. I also shot one grizzly bear at Grasshouse through **Gwatoh Taii Njik**. It was in September when caribou were going south. I saw a big grizzly sleeping on the flats. I fired six shots and only then the bear fell. I went over and I poked it and the bear was dead. I forgot my knife.*

*I once shot thirty caribou. Across from **Divii Daaghoo Njik**, which is through **Ddhah Zhit Han**, there is a creek full of rocks. I went hunting through there. I saw seventeen sheep. My father-in-law, Old William Koosh, was there watching me. I fired seventeen shots and got all seventeen sheep. That's the time my father-in-law was really proud. I was married to his daughter, Anna.*

*Another time I was hunting caribou at **Van Choo** this side of Yukon. I saw and shot eighteen caribou and skinned them all. I never got tired. I was young them days. All my life, a person as old as me, killed lots of moose, caribou and sheep. It's pretty hard to count them. I killed over 108 moose and 50 sheep. I also killed lots of caribou. One time when the people were moving upriver with their families, I shot five moose. We made lots of drymeat.*

*One time around **Tsaih T'ak Njik**, I shot four moose. I gave it to the people and the people divided up among themselves. One time, too, I shot seven moose in one day; I also gave it to the people. When a person is old like me, it's hard to remember all what I did all my life. One time, I had a schooner and that was long ago at the mouth of **Teet'it Gwinjik**. I had a good 12 horse universal engine in it. I used to be a mechanic, too.*

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 5 (1973)

The animals and birds that share our lands

After a nice time having a meal and some **lidi maskit/ts'ago** or **dän ledyät** (labrador tea) with Christopher Colin, our ecologist friend may wish to speak



Lidi maskit/ts'ago or **dän ledyät** (labrador tea).
©Alestine Andre



Andrew Neyendoo, shopping for tea and **vadzaih/hudzi** (caribou) on trail. ©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council

in greater depth about the mammals, birds, and insects that make their homes in the proposed park. Christopher could tell them about the animals that are hunted, including moose, boreal caribou, barren-ground caribou, grizzly and black bears, and the animals that are trapped or snared, including beaver, American marten, snowshoe hare, lynx, and wolves.⁵³

Both Christopher and the ecologist might settle in with a tin mug of steaming **lidi maskit/ts'ago** or **dän ledyät** to share their knowledge about the Porcupine caribou herd—a large herd of barren-ground caribou that passes through the proposed park during their yearly migration.

Christopher might point towards the west, to an uplands over the left bank of **Teet'it Gwinjik**. This area is considered as particularly important for Porcupine caribou. Within it, you can find Vadzaih Van, or Caribou Lake, which drains

53. Brodie, J. F., & Berger, J. (2009). The Peel River Watershed: Ecological Crossroads and Beringian Hotspot of Arctic and Boreal Biodiversity.

first into **Vadzaih Van Njik** (“Caribou-lake-creek”), and then into **Edigii Njik**, which translates as “(Caribou) calving (place)-creek”.

Nearby is **Edigii**, a large hill which was a calving area for the Porcupine caribou in the past. The caribou calved here because it is always windy and so keeps the mosquitoes down—in fact, the same changeable, difficult weather that makes it good for caribou makes it difficult for people to travel over it. The hill is a well-known landmark on the trail between **Teet’it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) and Dawson or Mayo, and the changeable weather means that travellers knew to cross over the hill with speed as it was a dangerous place to be stuck.⁵⁴ Today, the Porcupine caribou herd—one of the largest in North America—calves on the Arctic coast in Alaska, far to the north.⁵⁵



vadzaih/hudzi —Porcupine caribou herd.
©Peter Mather



Youth checking out the overflow on **Edigii Njik** (Caribou River) during the **Teet’it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) to Mayo snowmobile trip, March 6, 1998.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich’in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage

Snowmobiles on **Edigii** (Caribou Mountain) during the **Teet’it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) to Mayo snowmobile trip, March 6, 1998.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich’in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage



Hannah Alexie standing behind the sled on **Edigii** (Caribou Mountain) during the **Teet’it Zheh** (Fort McPherson) to Mayo snowmobile trip, March 6, 1998.
© Ingrid Kritsch, Gwich’in Tribal Council Department of Culture & Heritage



54. Gwich’in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca.

55. COSEWIC. (2016). COSEWIC Assessment and Status Report on the Caribou Rangifer tarandus Barren-ground population in Canada.

Species at Risk

The **Teetł'it Gwinjik** (Peel River) Watershed is home to numerous species at risk, reflecting its ecological richness and vulnerability.

Several birds found in this region are recognized as at-risk, including the bank swallow, buff-breasted sandpiper, horned grebe (Western population), olive-sided flycatcher, red-necked phalarope, rusty blackbird, short-eared owl, and the lesser yellowlegs. These species depend on the region's diverse habitats, wetlands, riparian forests, and open tundra, for breeding and migration.

Aquatic species such as the Western Arctic population of Dolly Varden are also of Special Concern due to climate-induced changes to freshwater systems.

Invertebrate populations, including the gypsy cuckoo bumble bee, transverse lady beetle, and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee, face habitat loss and ecosystem imbalance.

Particularly significant to both ecological function and Indigenous cultural identity is the coming-together of three separate caribou herds in this area: barren-ground caribou (Porcupine caribou herd), boreal caribou, and Northern Mountain caribou. Caribou are central to the culture and way of life of the Gwich'in and First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, who have depended on them for generations for sustenance,

clothing, tools, and spiritual practices. Presently, boreal caribou are federally listed as "Threatened" under the Species at Risk Act, while Northern Mountain caribou are listed as "Special Concern".

The Porcupine herd of the barren-ground caribou is one of the largest caribou herds in North America. It overwinters in the **Teetł'it Gwinjik** area every year before returning to Alaska. Population numbers of the Porcupine caribou herd have increased over the past few years to approximately 200,000. However, the status of the herd is still assessed as Threatened by COSEWIC and Vulnerable/Apparently Secure by the Yukon Government. Threats to all three caribou populations include climate change, disease, wildfires, mineral exploration, development, and environmental contamination.

Other at-risk mammals in the watershed include the Western population of grizzly bear and the wolverine, species that are sensitive to environmental disturbances and human development.

Protecting these species is vital not only for maintaining ecological integrity, but also for preserving the traditional knowledge and practices of the Gwich'in and First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, who have long relied on this land and its wildlife.

Anderton, I. (2006). Peel River Watershed Fisheries Information Summary Report-Preliminary Assessment.

COSEWIC. (2010). COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Dolly Varden *Salvelinus malma malma* (Western Arctic populations) in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada.

COSEWIC. (2012). COSEWIC assessment and status report on the buff-breasted sandpiper, *Tryngites subruficollis*, in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada.

COSEWIC. (2014). COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*) in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada.

COSEWIC. (2016). COSEWIC Assessment and Status Report on the Caribou *Rangifer tarandus* Barren-ground population in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada.

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GTC. (n.d.) Gwich'in History. Gwich'in Tribal Council. <https://www.gwichintribal.ca/history.html>.

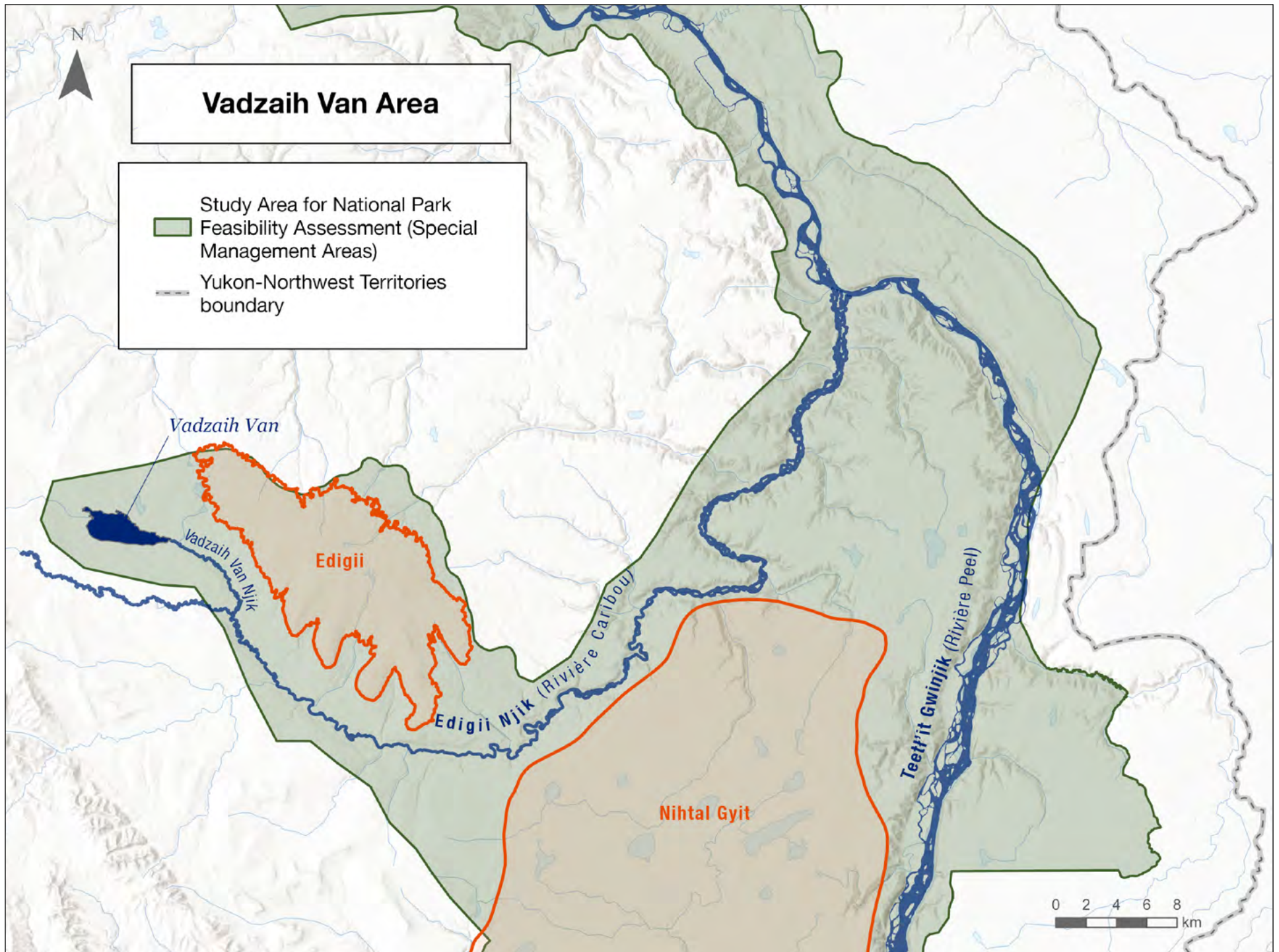


Figure 8. Map of the **Vadzaih Van** area.

Once back on the water, Christopher Colin might take us to **Ok Chì'**, the eddy known for good fishing. There are whitefish and coney here, as well as very large jackfish.⁵⁶ Christopher might put in a fishnet here, in hopes of catching enough for a meal. He would be interested in what the ecologist might have to say, as well, about these fish, perhaps learning that whitefish and coney, among other fish found in the area, spawn and overwinter in the **Teetl'it Gwinjik** watershed before migrating all the way into Inuit lands and to the Beaufort Sea.⁵⁷

In addition to the many creeks, rivers, and lakes, the proposed park also includes extensive wetlands. **Nihtal Gyt**, which translates as “Among the brush-overflow that freezes and thaws repeatedly (glacier)” is a large area with wetlands, swamps, and upland ‘fingers’ of land. For a time, parts of **Nihtal Gyt** have also been known as the Turner Lake Wetlands. The area is also a seasonal home to numerous migratory waterfowl and other birds, including peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, osprey, and bald eagles.⁵⁸

Nowadays, I am pretty old but I still work with wood and I get wood with dogs. I cut wood with axe and saw. These people in Fort McPherson really look after each other. Lots of people in Fort McPherson live in new government houses but me I still work with firewood and good dogs for myself. I still go fishing at Mouth of the Peel in the summer and fall time. This fall, I looked at the net when there was a cold south wind. I came back home and cut some wood, I really don't get tired. In my old age, I get cramps in my knees and it gets sore. The old-time saying is, 'it's like shooting a small bone arrow into your joint and that is what's aching'. That's the way I am.

I remember Old George Roberts (he died long ago), I sit with him one time and he said when a person is old he is always sleepy. It's not the way old people used to be. You are and get so sleepy you always want to sleep. You're always sleepy and weak. Now my son, Neil, always look after me really good and the rest of the people in McPherson, too.

I still try to work for myself.

I thank everyone who has read my story or heard my tape.

Christopher Colin: A Long Time Ago Part 5 (1973)

All the Indigenous people who are stewards of this area have advocated for the protection of **Teetl'it Gwinjik** for many years, in recognition of how special it is inherently, and how important it is to the Teetl'it Gwich'in and Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. Christopher Colin's stories about his travels in the area reflect just how significant, rich, and diverse the area is.

To carry on the tradition of taking care of these lands, the young people of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun have the following message as they look to the future, and as they continue to safeguard the **Teetl'it Gwinjik** area.

- *Respect and care for the land, water, and animals.*
- *Take with you what you bring, leave the rest as you find it.*
- *Give thanks to the land in your way.*
- *Always name the nations of whose lands you travel on.*
- *Share your journey and gratitude with the nation.*
- *Support land guardian initiatives.⁵⁹*

The remainder of this document steps away from Christopher's perspective to tell other chapters of this story. It includes further information about the proposed national park in the area and the process underway to make decisions and eventually establish a new national park.

56. Gwich'in Place Names Atlas www.atlas.gwichin.ca, “Ok Chì’”.

57. Brodie, J. F., & Berger, J. (2009). The Peel River Watershed: Ecological Crossroads and Beringian Hotspot of Arctic and Boreal Biodiversity.

58. Brodie, J. F., & Berger, J. (2009). The Peel River Watershed: Ecological Crossroads and Beringian Hotspot of Arctic and Boreal Biodiversity, Government of Yukon. (2024). Yukon Species at Risk. Government of Yukon. <https://yukon.ca/en/species-risk#species-at-risk-in-the-yukon>

59. 2024. First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. “Letters to Our Future”. Film produced by the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun.



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Department of Culture & Heritage

History of the Project

Development and Implementation of the Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan

The Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan (the “Peel Plan”) was developed and recommended by the Peel Watershed Planning Commission, an independent body comprised of nominees from the Government of Yukon, First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, and the Gwich’in Tribal Council - the five parties to the Peel Plan.

The land use planning process took place over 14 years from 2004 to 2018, including a period of litigation that went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada, which ultimately reaffirmed the importance of respecting the joint planning process established under modern treaty.

From September to November 2018, the parties to the Peel Plan undertook public consultation with affected communities, stakeholders and the public. This consultation confirmed very strong support for the recommended Peel Plan and a desire to protect the majority of the watershed, with frequent recommendations to protect 100% of the watershed permanently.

The Peel Plan was formally approved in 2019. The leaders of all five governments signed the approval letter and committed to jointly implement all of the recommendations in the Plan.

The five parties to the Peel Plan are now working to implement the Peel Plan, including work to designate the six Special Management Areas as legally protected areas⁶⁰.



Peel Plan Approval Ceremony – August 22, 2019.
© Yukon Land Use Planning Council

60. As per Chapter 10 of Yukon First Nation Final Agreements, “Special Management Areas are meant to maintain important features of the Yukon’s natural or cultural environment for the benefit of Yukon residents and all Canadians while respecting the rights of Yukon Indian People and Yukon First Nations.”

Foundational Work in Seeking a National Park Designation

Following community engagement meetings, the Gwich'in Tribal Council notified the other parties to the Peel Plan of its interest in seeking a national park designation for Landscape Management Units 11 (Turner Lake Wetlands and Caribou River) and 14 (Peel River).

Preliminary discussions on this proposal took place during 2022 and 2023, and the First Nation parties to the Peel plan affirmed their support. In February 2023, the Gwich'in Tribal Council Board of Directors directed its Department of Lands and Resources to formally engage with Parks Canada officials to pursue a legal designation for a national park.

The Gwich'in Tribal Council and the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, the two First Nations whose traditional territories overlap the proposed protected area, affirmed their intent to work with Parks Canada and the Government of Yukon to explore the potential for a new national park.

The Government of Yukon formally expressed its support for exploring a potential national park designation in July 2023.

April 2024 Collaboration Accord

On April 19, 2024, the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Parks Canada and the Government of Yukon signed a Collaboration Accord. The primary purpose of this Collaboration Accord was to reflect a shared commitment to cooperate in completing a feasibility assessment for a potential new national park in the Teetł'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed.

The parties are united by common goals of protecting the ecosystem, species and cultural values of this special place, advancing Indigenous-led conservation and connections to the land, showcasing this important region for current and future generations, and supporting the creation of land-based economies.



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Department of Culture and Heritage

Feasibility Assessment Process

About the Feasibility Assessment

Work toward the proposed national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed, including this feasibility assessment, is a collaborative process undertaken by the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Parks Canada and the Government of Yukon.

All stages of this work are based on the recognition of Indigenous rights, respect, co-management and partnership. All decisions are made by consensus.

A feasibility assessment is a process to help determine whether the four parties:

- feel that a national park would be desirable and practical;
- agree on a proposed boundary for the national park; and
- recommend moving to the next stage of the process.

A feasibility assessment does not determine whether a national park will be established. Rather, it helps identify the social, environmental, and economic values associated with the proposal.

Each party will ultimately decide whether the proposal is feasible and if they will provide their consent and support for the project to move ahead.

Roles and Responsibilities

The April 2024 Collaboration Accord provided for the creation of a Steering Committee and a Technical Working Group to advance the work of the feasibility assessment and any future steps toward a national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed.

The Steering Committee was responsible for directing and overseeing the feasibility assessment and providing a final recommendation to the four parties on the feasibility of the proposed national park.

The Technical Working Group was responsible for conducting the technical work of the feasibility assessment, including reviewing existing information, summarizing land uses and values in the area, and conducting consultation and engagement activities.

Methodologies

The work of the feasibility assessment included two main components:

1. Information review and analyses

The Technical Working Group reviewed existing reports, academic articles, spatial data and other information to identify values, existing land uses, and key considerations within the study area.

Through the regional land use planning process, a significant record of knowledge and information was gathered and documented by the Peel Watershed Planning Commission. These published reports, plan submissions and maps that supported the Peel Plan were reviewed during the feasibility assessment to:

- understand the rationale for designating Landscape Management Units 11 (Turner Lake Wetlands and Caribou River) and 14 (Peel River) as Special Management Areas in the Peel Plan;
- ensure consistency between Peel Plan management direction for these Landscape Management Units and their potential protected area designation as a national park; and
- ensure the values and land uses attached to these areas were given due consideration during the assessment.

Where necessary, data and knowledge were updated during this review to reflect changes in administration, land use, biophysical and cultural/archaeological knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous-owned data were also assessed to inform the feasibility assessment.

2. Engagement and consultation

During the feasibility assessment process, the Parties engaged with rights holders, community members, stakeholders, and the Canadian public to share information about the proposal, obtain their views on a potential new national park and invite them to share their knowledge and expertise.

The Parties undertook three types of engagement and consultation activities:

1. Engagement and consultation with Gwich'in participants—led by the Gwich'in Tribal Council
2. Engagement and consultation with Na-Cho Nyäk Dun citizens—led by the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun
3. Engagement and consultation with broader audiences, including Yukon First Nations—conducted collaboratively by all the Parties



Gwich'in Community Engagement Summary

From January 20th to February 3rd, 2025, the Gwich'in Tribal Council's Department of Lands and Resources, with facilitation and reporting support from PlanIt North and Boreal North Consulting, hosted community engagement sessions in the Gwich'in Settlement Area communities.

- **Teetl'it Zheh (Fort McPherson):** January 20, Tetl'it Zheh Christian Fellowship
 - 36 Participants
- **Tsiigehtchic:** January 21, Chief Paul Niditchie School
 - 3 Participants
 - *Several conflicting events were taking place in the community at the time of the engagement.
- **Aklavik:** January 23, Community Complex
 - 3 Participants
- **Inuvik:** January 27, Nihtat Gwich'in Council Boardroom
 - 1 Participant
- **Teetl'it Zheh (Fort McPherson):** February 3, Designated Gwich'in Organization (DGO) Office
 - 7 Participants

Each session aimed to:

- understand community concerns about a national park;
- identify the benefits the community perceived from a national park;
- gather input on the vision for the proposed park; and
- clarify information needs about the establishment process.

Presentations, delivered by GTC staff, provided an overview of the park's background and next steps, and were followed by discussions on:

- community hopes and concerns about a national park;
- opportunities for protecting the area for future generations; and
- alignment of the park with Gwich'in culture, land, and economy.

Discussion Summary

These sessions offered a platform for meaningful dialogue and ensured that local perspectives will continue to guide the decision-making process for the potential Teetl'it Gwinjik National Park.

The Gwich'in Settlement Area communities that participated in these engagement sessions expressed overall support for the establishment of the proposed Teetl'it Gwinjik National Park. However, they also emphasized the need for more information to be made available to Gwich'in and for ongoing

engagement throughout the process if the park were to move forward. Some participants also voiced that the Teet'it Gwich'in, rather than the Gwich'in Tribal Council, should be leading this process.

Discussion focused primarily on the following themes and topics:

1. Land based learning and educational opportunities for youth

Participants emphasized the critical importance of intergenerational knowledge transfer to maintain cultural identity and connections to the Peel River Watershed. With many Elders no longer present, the community has a responsibility to teach youth about place names, historical camps, and traditional practices such as hunting, fishing, and trapping.

Land-based learning opportunities, including on-the-land trips with youth and Elders, were highlighted as essential for preserving and sharing these stories. Ensuring continued access to the watershed allows younger generations to learn firsthand about their history and the land of their ancestors.

A national park could help support these efforts by creating employment opportunities within the watershed and leveraging funding to build infrastructure, such as cabins, to facilitate more land-based learning experiences.



Faith (?) with two of Neil and Elizabeth Colin's daughters at a camp at the mouth of **Teet'it Gwinjik** (Peel River)
©Keith Billington/Department of Culture and Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council

2. Critical need for Peel River Watershed protection

The protection of the Peel River Watershed is critical to preserving its pristine nature and safeguarding its ecological, cultural, and historical significance. Participants emphasized that protecting the watershed honors the legacy of their ancestors and the crux of their culture, while ensuring that future generations can maintain their connection to the land.

Recognizing the watershed as a whole, beyond its current boundaries, is essential to ensuring its long-term protection and the continuity of cultural and traditional practices. Some speakers communicated that while supportive of protecting the area, it is necessary for communities to take ownership of protected areas that are established for their benefit and to leave a legacy for future generations. Some speakers expressed support for protecting the area but emphasized that a national park should not be the only option considered. Instead, they suggested more conversations exploring all potential protection mechanisms, such as Indigenous and Protected Conservation Areas, and other examples of Indigenous-led conservation initiatives such as Edézhzhíe in the Dehcho region of the Northwest Territories and Gwaii Haanas in Haida Gwaii.

Several speakers spoke to the need to protect more area than is covered in the proposed national park. In particular, there was interest in seeing lands within the Northwest Territories protected as well, effectively extending the protected areas boundary north of the Yukon border.

3. Uphold and empower Gwich'in knowledge

Indigenous knowledge was highlighted as a valuable resource, not only for land management but also for addressing global challenges like climate change. Participants underscored the need to accurately represent the deep history of Gwich'in use of the land in all planning processes, extending beyond present-day territorial boundaries to reflect ancestral travels and connections. They called for collaborative efforts that build on this knowledge, ensuring that Gwich'in voices remain central to decision-making processes and support their leadership in stewardship efforts. It was noted that within the Gwich'in archives there are many stories from Elders talking about where people traveled within the Peel watershed.

Targeted engagement with Elders and youth throughout this process should be considered. Community engagements are not a “catch-all” and in some communities speakers expressed that there were Elders who were not in the community at the time of the meeting who would have very valuable input. If

engaging in targeted meetings with Elders, it was also suggested that this could be an opportunity to engage youth and facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer.

To prevent future disputes and the loss of traditional place names, they also stressed the need to accurately document and include all traditional place names and culturally significant sites in protected area management plans from the outset of the planning.

4. Potential economic and cultural opportunities

A potential national park could provide both economic and cultural benefits by supporting programs that integrate cultural education with economic development, such as guiding and eco-tourism. Participants highlighted the success of Gwich'in-led initiatives like Dinjii Zhuh Adventures as a positive model for future opportunities in tourism and mentorship. Guiding paddlers and hosting trips were seen as valuable ways to teach youth traditional practices while generating economic benefits for the community.

A park headquarters facility in Fort McPherson was also perceived as an opportunity for both community employment and to ensure Gwich'in will be leading the path for how their lands and culture will be represented for visitors.

Speakers emphasized the importance in ensuring Gwich'in are engaged and participatory in developing potential socio-economic initiatives as a result of the proposed national park. It was highlighted that Gwich'in need to understand what a park means to do and what their return on it could be.

5. Strength through collaboration

Lastly, participants stressed the importance of collaboration and co-management in protecting the Peel River watershed. Gwich'in leadership and knowledge must form the foundation of any management framework, with government and other stakeholders supporting these efforts.

The need for ongoing engagement through community meetings, targeted meetings with Elders, engagement with the schools and workshops was expressed by speakers. Effective co-management of this potential protected area requires meaningful inclusion of Gwich'in perspectives and sufficient financial and logistical support for community-led initiatives.



Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Community Engagement Summary

Dedication to Jimmy Johnny

During the engagement process in early 2025, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun experienced a great loss with the passing of Elder Jimmy Johnny. Jimmy was a respected knowledge keeper, protector of the land, and strong voice for the Peel Watershed. His deep connection to the land and water guided his commitment to ensure that future generations would inherit a Peel that remains clean and full of life. Jimmy's legacy lives on in the rivers that continue to flow and the voices of those who continue the work that he passionately dedicated his life to. Mussi Cho Jimmy Johnny.



Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Elder Jimmy Johnny
© First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun

Between October 2024 and March 2025, First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun (FNNND) representatives on the Peel River feasibility study conducted an engagement process with FNNND Citizens to provide background and context information and allow for input and feedback on the process.

It included:

- presentation to the FNNND General Assembly at the October 4, 2024 General Meeting;
- citizen newsletters mailed out and posted on social media in January 2025, providing background information on the feasibility study and save the dates for February 2025 engagement sessions;
- jointly developed survey launched as part of public engagement;
 - FNNND received ~10 survey responses
- engagement sessions—dinner and discussion:
 - February 3, 2025 in Mayo at the FNNND Government House (~ 18 participants);
 - February 5, 2025 in Whitehorse at the Sternwheeler Hotel (~15 participants);
 - February 6, 2025 Virtual Meeting (Zoom) (~2 participants); and
- update to the FNNND General Assembly at the February 15, 2025 General Meeting.

Discussion Summary

The following is a summary of themes heard from FNNND Citizens throughout the engagement sessions.

1. Access & Development

Participants asked questions about access and development management if the area was designated as a national park.

Participants discussed how this area is a culturally important area for FNNND and is an important place where the Northern Tutchone people and Gwich'in gather.

Participants discussed concerns about Indigenous people not having access to the area if access becomes unaffordable or too busy, and that often national parks attract increased tourism into an area. They spoke of the need to manage access and development in the area to avoid displacement and land use conflicts.

2. Stewardship & Employment

Participants talked about support and interest in sustainable employment opportunities.

Participants discussed interest in having FNNND and Gwich'in staff as the main people on the land to allow for Indigenous led stewardship and management.

Participants suggested the new cultural center in Mayo could be a central place for education and communication about the area.

3. Co-management & Relationship

Many participants spoke of the continued and ongoing breakdown in trust between FNNND and Crown governments.

Participants discussed how management of this area needs to be collaborative and support trust and relationship building through co-management.

Participants discussed the need for continued shared management and collaboration between all parties and to include community voices at every step.

4. Aboriginal & Treaty Rights

Participants communicated concern about the impact on Aboriginal and Treaty Rights, and the importance of making sure the intent of our Treaty and the Peel Plan were protected and upheld.

Participants discussed interest and opportunity to explore Indigenous led protection and management through Indigenous law.

5. Protection for Future Generations

Participants spoke of the importance of water and land protection for future generations.

Participants spoke of the need to continue the legacy of our ancestors and Elders in protecting this area.

Participants discussed concerns about continued development within and outside of the proposed study area boundary, and that studies and monitoring should support continued protection of the area.



© Tayu Hayward

Engagement with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation are Yukon First Nations based in Dawson and Old Crow, respectively. As noted by Christopher Colin, the Indigenous people from these areas have close historic ties to the study area. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Final Agreement and Vuntut Gwitchin Final Agreement guarantee continued subsistence harvesting rights in the study area.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation are both parties to the Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan and participate in its implementation through the Peel Plan Implementation Committee (PPIC).

Gwich'in Tribal Council, First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Parks Canada and the Government of Yukon reached out to Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation through PPIC to provide information on the feasibility assessment and an invitation to engage on this topic.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in held a community engagement session on the proposed national park in Dawson City on March 20, 2025. At this session, Phyllis Vittrekwa, a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder born in Fort McPherson, described her relationship with the study area this way:

... I also heard my father talk about his many trips through the Richardson Mountains down to the Peel Valley River, Hungry Lake and all those areas. I'm sure you know that for centuries we lived there. Our parents and our ancestors did, but people my age didn't have a chance to live there because we were put in a residential school and so much has been taken away from us.

How much more is gonna be taken away from us?

I'm so glad most of this is going to be turned into national park, and rightfully so. It should be so that we have something and that we leave something for our children. It's only fair because that's what our ancestors, through stories, are trying to leave us—knowledge and information of what we can have and what we can preserve for generations after generations. So thank you for all the hard work you put into this. It's very emotional, I want you to know that. But thank you for your work.

Among other things, Phyllis' words highlight the potential for a protected area to advance Indigenous stewardship and support Indigenous people in reconnecting with the values and traditions of their ancestors.



Public Consultation and Engagement Summary

From February 3 to March 17, 2025, the Parties engaged and consulted with a variety of audiences to share information about the proposed national park and seek feedback and perspectives on the proposal.

Audiences

The Parties reached a wide variety of audiences through consultation and engagement efforts. These included Indigenous governments and organizations, stakeholders, as well as members of the general public.

Indigenous Governments and Organizations

Peel Planning Implementation Committee
Council of Yukon First Nations
First Nations in the Yukon
Sahtu Secretariate Incorporated
Inuvialuit Joint Secretariat
Bodies established under Modern Treaty
E.g. Management committees/ boards, renewable resource councils, land use planning committees/ boards, Yukon Environmental and Socio-economic Assessment Board, etc.

Stakeholders

Academia
Government departments—federal and territorial
Local governments
Natural resource industries
Non-governmental organizations
Tourism organizations

Consultation and Engagement Approaches

Methods for consulting and engaging with broader audiences included:

- project webpage, hosted on the Parks Canada website;
- survey hosted online by Parks Canada (open February 3 to March 17, 2025);
 - Print copies of the survey were also distributed within Gwich'in and Na-Cho Nyäk Dun communities
- 34 letters to Indigenous governments and organizations from the Steering Committee;
- 39 letters to stakeholder organizations from the Steering Committee; and
- generic project email address to receive additional comments and questions.

The Parties raised awareness of the consultation and engagement period through:

- social media;
 - 2 posts (February 4 and March 3) on Parks Canada Facebook pages, shared by the other Parties; and
- outreach to local media:
 - The Parties notified 17 local media outlets of the consultation.
 - Information about the consultation was featured three (3) times in media throughout the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

Outcomes

Participation—By the Numbers

- ~1800 visits to the project webpage
- 762 completed surveys
- 10 emails or letters with feedback and comments
- 3 bilateral meetings with Indigenous governments and organizations, upon request
 - This included a community engagement session with Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in citizens
- 4 bilateral meetings with 4 stakeholder organizations, upon request

Survey Results ⁶¹

The results of the publicly available survey demonstrate widespread interest in this proposal among respondents, and highlight some of the benefits, concerns and considerations that respondents associated with the proposal.

Location: The majority of survey respondents live in western Canada (52%), followed by the Yukon (17%) and other parts of Canada (12%).

Where respondents reside

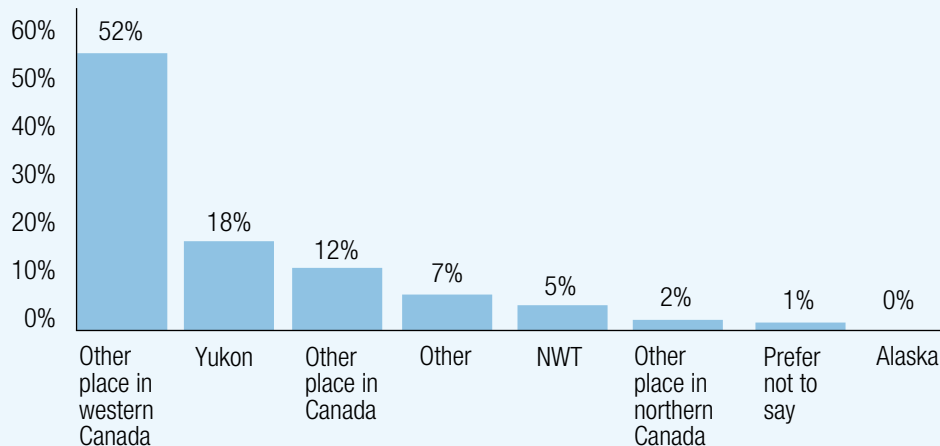


Figure 9. Survey respondents' places of residence.

Self-identification: A wide variety of audiences participated in the survey.

Respondents self-identified as:

- Member of the general public: 81%
- Other: 7%
- Resident of nearby community (e.g. Teetl'it Zheh/Fort McPherson, Tsiigehtchic, Aklavik, Inuvik, Keno City, Old Crow, Mayo, Eagle Plains, Dawson City): 6%
- Non-governmental organization: 6%
- Tourism/hospitality industry : 5%
- Gwich'in participant: 4%
- Other Indigenous: 4%
- Citizen of First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun: 3%
- Cultural association: 3%
- Business: 2%
- Citizen of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in: 1%
- Citizen of Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation: 1%
- Government: 1%
- Industry or industry association: 1%
- Prefer not to say: 1%

Connection to the watershed: Many respondents reported feeling connected to the watershed in multiple ways. The most common responses selected were:

- I recognize the value of the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed and wanted to ensure it is protected and managed for the benefit of the planet and future generations: 74%
- I have limited knowledge of the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed but am interested in the proposed national park: 38%
- I have learned about the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed in other ways (e.g. stories, family knowledge, reading, research, documentaries or videos, photos, campaigns): 36%

61. Public consultation is a means to obtain feedback on a subject (in this case, the proposed national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed) by exploring perspectives and general themes. The results are not statistically representative of any population or sub-group, nor can statistical inferences be made.

A minority of respondents have connected with the watershed through in-person visits.

- I have visited or travelled through the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed a few times (1-4 times): 18%
- I occasionally visit or travel through the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed: 4%
- I frequently visit or travel through the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed: 4%

Activities: Respondents identified a wide variety of activities that they have undertaken or wish to undertake in relation to the proposed national park area. Respondents were invited to select more than one response.

A majority of respondents have engaged or intend to engage in activities that are related to the proposed national park area, but occur elsewhere:

- Appreciation of the inherent value of the landscape: 75%
- Viewing photos or videos: 57%
- Advocacy or awareness activities: 46%
- Learning activities: 37%
- Engaging with cultural knowledge: 35%
- Other: 5%
- None: 9%

A smaller proportion of respondents have undertaken or wish to undertake activities within the proposed national park area:

- Recreational activities: 45%
- Tourism activities: 38%
- Cultural and traditional activities: 17%
- Livelihood activities: 9%
- Other: 9%
- Commercial activities: 3%
- None (31%)

Some of the most common activities specified through long answers included canoeing/paddling, hiking, hunting/fishing/harvesting, cultural/family/school trips, wildlife and nature viewing, art and photography, research and work.



Canoeist on Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River). ©Tayu Hayward

Potential benefits of a national park: Respondents were invited to select the options that best represented their views about the potential benefits associated with the proposed national park.

- Conserving ecosystems, habitats, and species: 92%
- Protecting the land for future generations: 90%
- Contributing to the protection of lands and waters in Canada: 85%
- Supporting Indigenous-led conservation, well-being of Indigenous communities and continuation of Indigenous cultural practices: 84%
- Mitigating climate change and/or protecting a carbon sink: 75%
- Implementing the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement and First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun Final Agreement: 66%
- National and international recognition of this area: 62%
- Opportunities for knowledge sharing through learning and/or research: 60%
- Sustainable economic opportunities for local communities: 59%
- Implementing the Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan: 54%
- Tourism and recreation opportunities: 50%
- Other: 4%
 - Common themes among the 'Other' responses were protection of animals, mental health and well-being, protection from extractive activities, and protection of Canadian sovereignty. A few respondents also stated concerns and opposition to the creation of a national park in this section.
- None: 3%

Benefits in creating a proposed new national park in this area

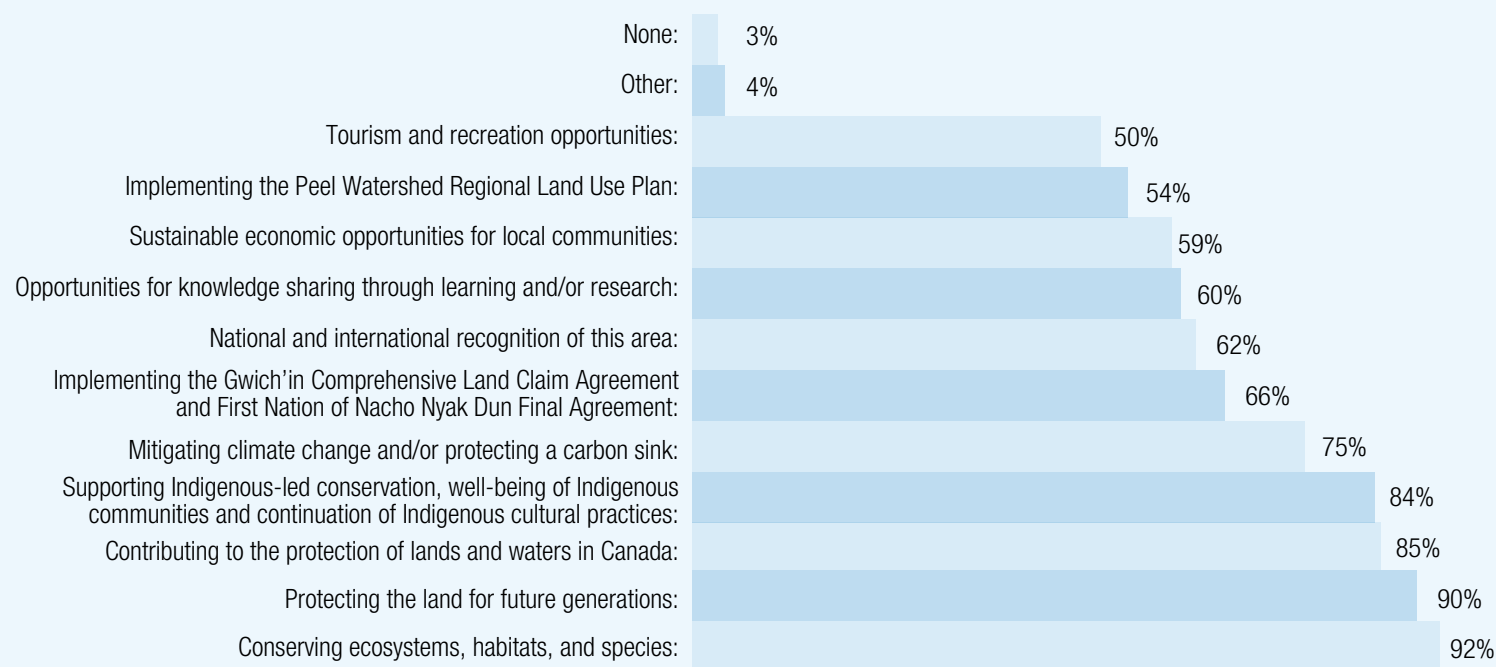


Figure 10. Potential benefits of the proposed national park selected by survey respondents.

Concerns: Respondents were invited to select the options that best represented their views regarding concerns with the proposed national park.

- Concerns about land use pressures: 26%
- Concerns about restrictions on activities in a national park: 21%
- Concerns about recreation opportunities: 19%
- Concerns about harvesting opportunities: 19%
- Concerns about economic impacts: 15%
- Concerns about new rules/ regulations: 13%
- Other concerns: 6%
- None: 35%

Concerns about the creation of a national park in the area

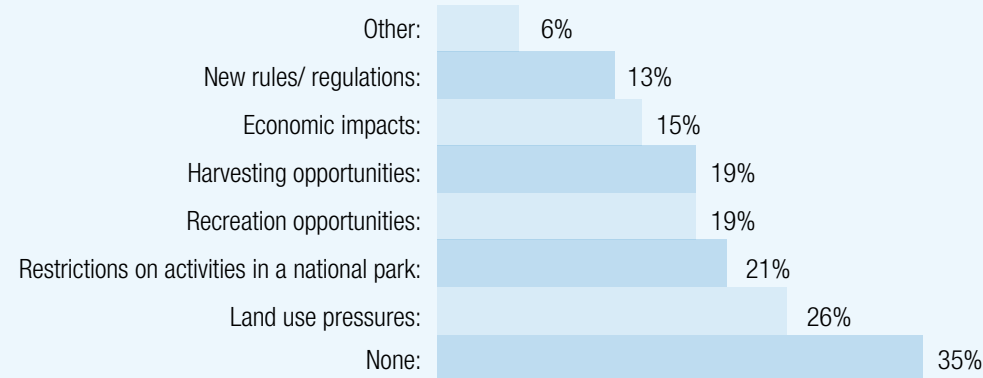


Figure 11. Concerns regarding the creation of the proposed national park selected by survey respondents.

Respondents were given the option to provide more specific details about their concerns in long-answer format. These responses provide additional insights into key interests and priorities.

Of note, many of the concerns shared consisted of considerations and guidance for park establishment and management, rather than opposition to the proposal. Many of the long-answer responses indicated support for the proposed national park, advocated for protection, shared governance, and thoughtful regulation of activities and visitation.

Some of the specific concerns commonly highlighted in the long-answer sections included:

- concerns about ecological impacts from increased visitation or visitor experience offers, including recommendations for limits on visitor levels and support for prioritizing ecological integrity;
- recommendations to ensure that Indigenous rights are upheld in the proposed national park and that local Indigenous Nations are decision-makers in park management;
- recommendations on specific regulations for the proposed national park (e.g. bans on mining and extractive activities, limits on motorized access and hunting, etc.);
- concerns about lost opportunity for mining and other economic activities in the proposed national park area;
- concerns about barriers for visitor access and activities (e.g. limitations on recreation, permitting processes); and
- concerns about lost hunting opportunities for non-Indigenous hunters.

Key Themes

Overall, consultation and engagement efforts revealed significant interest in and support for the proposed national park. Key themes raised through long-answer questions on the survey, emails and letters, and bilateral meetings included:

Value of this area

Many participants spoke about the proposed national park area as a unique and highly valued area. Common themes included reflections on the intact and undisturbed nature of the area, its ecological importance (in terms of biodiversity, water quality, species at risk and culturally important species, carbon storage, landscape connectivity, etc.) and the opportunities it offers for livelihood, cultural and recreational activities.



Northern lights over the confluence of the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) and Gyuu Dazhoo Njik (Snake River).
©Tayu Hayward

Support for Indigenous stewardship

Participants frequently expressed support for meaningful Indigenous stewardship in the proposed national park area, including a strong decision-making role through shared governance.

Some participants expressed support for the proposed national park on the condition that it would align with Indigenous rightsholders' vision for this area, that it would benefit local Indigenous communities, and that Indigenous rightsholders would be able to continue to be able to access this area to exercise their rights, including the right to harvest. Some participants also enquired about the potential to co-designate the area as a national park and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA).

Concerns about over-visitation

The most common concerns raised by participants were concerns about ecological impacts from increased visitation, including potential ecological footprints of visitor infrastructure and the possibility that some future visitors may lack a respectful understanding of the ecosystem and wildlife. Common recommendations included limitations on the number of visitors and the areas available for visitor access, as well as regulation of activities that could have negative environmental impacts.

Concerns about access and opportunity cost

This type of comment was raised less commonly than the themes above but did recur across multiple responses.

These included concerns about the potential for a national park to reduce the ease of access to this area or create administrative burden for visitors or businesses (e.g. through regulations or permitting processes). Other participants raised concerns about a lack of access and lost opportunities for non-Indigenous hunting, as well as mining and other economic activities.

Previous Consultation and Engagement—Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan

Significant consultation and engagement on the future of the study area were previously undertaken as part of the development of the Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan.

The Planning Commission undertook multiple rounds of public consultation prior to the release of the final Plan in 2019. The final round of consultation was held in 2018. It included 8 community engagement sessions in affected communities and 12 bilateral stakeholder meetings. Over 2,500 people sent in feedback through questionnaires or letters. Outcomes of the consultation were captured in a detailed [What We Heard report](#).

From this consultation, the Peel Watershed Planning Commission concluded that there was strong general support for the final recommended Plan, a widespread desire for additional protection of the watershed, and support for upholding the inherent rights of First Nations in this area.

Insights from these previous consultations and engagement activities provided a strong backdrop for this proposed national park feasibility assessment.



© Keith Billington/Department of Culture and
Heritage Gwich'in Tribal Council.

Intentions Going Forward

In a joint letter to the Premier of the Northwest Territories in 2010, the leaders of the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Tr'ondëk Hwëch' in and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation—the four Peel First Nation parties to the Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan—described the importance of the Peel Watershed as follows:

For us, the Peel has unparalleled cultural and ecological values. It has sustained us for untold generations and will continue to do so if properly protected. It is a land that is rich in renewable resources and the spirits of our ancestors. It would be impossible to overstate the importance of the Peel Watershed to our peoples. It is a sacred place that is fundamental to our spirituality and our identity. Our fate as First Nation people is tied to the fate of the Peel River Watershed.

Going forward, the Parties intend to work as partners toward the joint establishment and management of the proposed national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed. A national park designation would allow the cultural resources and wilderness characteristics of this area to be maintained over time for the benefit of Gwich'in and Na-Cho Nyäk Dun communities, as well as all Canadians and people of the world, while respecting treaty rights and preserving traditional uses.

The Parties intend for the proposed national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed to be maintained, to the greatest extent possible, in a pristine condition in which the natural environment and ecosystem processes remain unaltered.

Future conversations will help the Parties explore the possibility of co-designating this area as an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) and a national park and will help the Parties develop more detailed intentions and a future vision for this special place.



Steering Committee Recommendations

The Steering Committee makes the following recommendations to the Grand Chief of Gwich'in Tribal Council, the Chief of the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, the Yukon Minister of Environment, and the Minister of Canadian Identify and Culture, in relation to the proposed national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed:

Establishment of a national park

The establishment of a national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed is considered feasible and desirable. Work towards the establishment of the proposed national park will continue through negotiation of an agreement-in-principle to establish a national park under the Canada National Parks Act.

The proposed national park will be established and managed in a manner that is consistent with inherent and treaty rights to use the lands, waters and resources in accordance with the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement and the First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun Final Agreement.

The proposed boundary for the national park encompasses the outer boundaries of both Landscape Management Unit 11 (Nihtal Gyt (Turner Lake Wetlands) and Edigii Njik (Caribou River)) and Landscape Management

Unit 14 (Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River)), combined. The proposed boundary excludes Tetlit Gwich'in Yukon Lands as well as First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Settlement Lands.

The establishment of the proposed national park will be guided by the 2019 Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan (the Plan) and management of the proposed national park will be consistent with the Plan's goals and management strategies for Landscape Management Unit 11 (Nihtal Gyt (Turner Lake Wetlands) and Edigii Njik (Caribou River)) and Landscape Management Unit 14 (Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River)).

The name of the proposed national park will be finalized as part of an agreement-in-principle and will be subject to approval by Gwich'in Tribal Council and the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun.

Gwich'in and Northern Tutchone place names and language will be prioritized alongside English and French place names in the establishment and management of the proposed national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed.

Negotiation of establishment agreement-in-principle

The Government of Canada, the Government of Yukon, Gwich'in Tribal Council and the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun sign the attached Collaboration Accord for the Establishment of a National Park to provide the mandate to commence negotiations for an establishment agreement-in-principle, and that negotiations commence as soon as practicable.

The Parties commit to a consensus approach to decision making in the negotiation and implementation of the national park establishment agreement-in-principle.

Reaching an agreement-in-principle to establish a national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed is contingent upon reaching an agreement for the transfer of administration and control of lands from Yukon Territory to Canada.

The agreement-in-principle will outline a management structure which will enable Parks Canada, Gwich'in Tribal Council and the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun to jointly manage and govern the proposed national park.

Without limiting the scope of the final agreement-in-principle, Gwich'in Tribal Council, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, the Government of Yukon and Parks Canada intend to include the following provisions/priorities related to the proposed national park establishment agreement-in-principle:

- Maintain Gwich'in and Na-Cho Nyäk Dun traditional cultural activities including harvesting; hunting; fishing and trapping.
- Recognize, conserve and promote heritage and cultural resources and values and the traditional land use practices of local communities.
- Contribute to food security and water security, the spiritual and physical well-being of the local communities including local economic benefits.
- Promote the use of traditional knowledge in delivering on the mandate for protection and management of the area.
- Promote the engagement of elders and youth.
- Promote the use of Indigenous language and cultural knowledge.
- Develop equitable and enduring employment opportunities for Gwich'in and Na-Cho Nyäk Dun communities.
- Provide training opportunities to assist community members to take advantage of employment opportunities related to the proposed national park.
- Leverage economic and business opportunities related to the proposed national park.
- Consider the application of an administrative reserve or other measures to Landscape Management Unit 11 (Nihtal Gyt (Turner Lake Wetlands) and Edigii Njik (Caribou River)) and Landscape Management Unit 14 (Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River)) in order to ensure continued protection of the land.
- Describe federal investment in the establishment, management and operation of the proposed national park.

Collaboration Accord

Collaboration Accord Respecting the Establishment of a National Park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed

BETWEEN

THE GWICH'IN

AS REPRESENTED BY

THE GRAND CHIEF OF THE GWICH'IN TRIBAL COUNCIL

AND

THE FIRST NATION OF NA-CHO NYÄK DUN

AS REPRESENTED BY

THE CHIEF OF THE FIRST NATION OF NA-CHO NYÄK DUN

AND

GOVERNMENT OF YUKON

AS REPRESENTED BY

THE MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT

AND

HIS MAJESTY THE KING IN RIGHT OF CANADA

AS REPRESENTED BY

THE MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT

FOR THE PURPOSES OF THE PARKS CANADA AGENCY

EACH A "PARTY" AND COLLECTIVELY THE "PARTIES"

Preamble

This Collaboration Accord between the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, the Government of Yukon and the Government of Canada (the "Parties") plays a critical role in enhancing relationships, deepening connections, and facilitating collaboration to advance the implementation of the Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan through the establishment of a national park within a portion of the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed.

The Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed is central to the traditions, cultures, and ways of life for both the Gwich'in and the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. This area is situated within the Gwich'in Tribal Council's Primary Use Area and within the Traditional Territory of the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. It includes the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Corridor, Nihtal Gyt (Turner Lake Wetlands) and Edigii Njik (Caribou River) and is an area rich in natural beauty that supports a diverse array of fish and wildlife species. The untouched boreal forest is essential for sustaining both Boreal caribou and the Porcupine caribou herd. Expansive wetland complexes and deep river canyons create a hospitable habitat for numerous waterfowl, raptors, and migratory birds each spring. Additionally, the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) and its tributaries serve as vital spawning grounds for whitefish and various other significant fish species. It is an area of deep spiritual value to the Gwich'in and First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, embodying the stories and experiences of ancestors.

The Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan was signed in 2019 by the Gwich'in Tribal Council, First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Tr'ondek Hwëch'in, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, and the Government of Yukon. The Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan outlined several Special Management Areas earmarked for comprehensive protection, with the intention that, through the plan's execution, they would attain legal designation as protected areas. During the implementation of the Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan, the Gwich'in Tribal Council expressed an interest in exploring national park protection in the lower Peel River area within the Nihtal Gyt (Turner Lake Wetlands) and Edigii Njik (Caribou River) Landscape Management Unit and the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Landscape Management Unit. The Peel Watershed Regional Land Use Plan definition for Special Management Areas explicitly includes reference to national parks as an option for permanent protection.

Article 1

Purpose

The primary purpose of this Collaboration Accord is to confirm a shared commitment to cooperate in completing an establishment agreement-in-principle regarding the creation of a national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed.

Article 2

Establishment Agreement-in-Principle

In April 2024, the Parties jointly announced the launch of a quadripartite process to determine whether to establish a national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed, and under what terms and conditions. After reviewing available information and conducting community engagements with rightsholders and stakeholders, the Parties have concluded that a proposed national park is feasible and desirable. The Parties now wish to proceed to the negotiation of an establishment agreement-in-principle to protect the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed area under the Canada National Parks Act. Consultation and engagement with rightsholders, stakeholders and the public will continue to be an ongoing priority throughout the establishment process.

Work towards an establishment agreement-in-principle will be guided by the goals and management strategies of the Peel Plan, and the spirit and intent of the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement and Nacho Nyak Dun Final Agreement. The Parties recognize that meaningful participation and consent by all Parties is imperative to establishing a national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed.

Article 3

Steering Committee

The Parties will work together through the existing Steering Committee structure to coordinate and oversee the establishment agreement-in-principle negotiations. This includes setting the overall framework for the negotiations, identifying negotiating leads, collaboratively resolving issues, and advancing shared priorities. The Steering Committee will include senior representatives from each of the Parties and will meet at least twice per calendar year to discuss progress and set further direction.

Article 4

Decision-Making

Informed by the Steering Committee's recommendations on any agreement-in-principle, the Parties will make their respective decisions on whether to accept or reject the agreement-in-principle. Should all Parties agree to accept an agreement-in-principle, they will endeavor to finalize negotiations towards a legally binding establishment agreement for a new national park and undertake steps to formally establish a national park in the Teetl'it Gwinjik (Peel River) Watershed.

Article 5

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Any new national park establishment agreement will reflect the Government of Canada's commitment to implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as affirmed through the enactment of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, S.C. 2021, c.14

Article 6

Financial Arrangements

The establishment agreement-in-principle will include sufficient detail to determine the funding requirements for national park establishment and ongoing operations. Finalizing the national park establishment agreement is contingent upon confirming federal support for the funding requirements, which is subject to Parliamentary approval.

Canada will endeavour to fund the effective participation of the Parties in negotiations towards the establishment agreement-in-principle, as well as community engagement and consultation.

Article 7

Duration and Termination

The establishment agreement-in-principle negotiations will commence upon the date of the last signature on this document, and will conclude with the earlier date of either:

- 1) a decision by the appropriate decision-makers representing each Party on whether or not to accept the agreement-in-principle; or,
- 2) March 31, 2026, or other date agreed to by the Parties.

Any Party, with 30 days advance written notice and reasons for the decision, may terminate its participation under this Collaboration Accord. Upon receipt of such notice, the remaining Parties will discuss the implications and options in light of the termination.

Original copy signed by:

Grand Chief Frederick Blake Jr.—for Gwich'in Tribal Council

Chief Dawna Hope—for First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun

The Honourable Nils Clarke, Minister of Environment—for Yukon

The Honourable Steven Guilbeault, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, and Minister Responsible for Parks Canada—for Canada

Annex A—Glossary of Indigenous Words Used in this Report

Place names have been linked to the Gwich'in Place Names Atlas for readers to listen to pronunciation, locate places on a map and learn additional information.

Indigenous Place Names

Teet'it Gwich'in	English Translation	English Place Name
Chii Akàn	Rock-its (beaver) lodge	Churchward Hill
Chii Deetak	Rocks-between	Rock River
Chitr'iniinjil	They went under the water (drowned)	
Chuu Tr'idaoodiich'uu	Water-angry and wicked (OR dangerous and cranky)	Peel Canyon
Colin Vizheh	Colin-his house	
Ddhah Dik'ee	Mountain-sharp ridge	
Ddhah Zhit Han	Mountains-in-river	Rat River
Dèeddhoo Gòonlii	Scrapers - many	
Ditsii Deek'tit	(Everyone's) Grandfather-his place	
Divii Daaghoo Njik	Sheep-making noise-creek	Sheep Creek
Edigii	(Caribou) calving (place)	Edigii Hill/Caribou Mountain
Edigii Geeghanh	(Caribou) calving (place)-ridge	Caribou River Hills
Edigii Njik	(Caribou) calving (place)-creek	Caribou River
Edrii Njik	Heart-river	Hart River
Ehdiitat	Among the timber stands	Mackenzie Delta
Ekèhtsii Va'àn	Ekèhtsii-his den	
Ezhinak'àn	Burning hill	
Gwatoh Taii Njik	Over across-trail-creek	Stony Creek
Gwazhal Njik	Round swollen mountain-river	Ogilvie River
Gyuu Dazhoo Njik	Worm-hairy-river	Snake River
Gyuu Dazhoo Tshik	Worm-hairy-at the mouth of	Mouth of the Snake River
Nagwichoonjik	Big country river	Mackenzie River

Teet'it Gwich'in	English Translation	English Place Name
Nihtal Gyt	Among the brush-overflow that freezes and thaws repeatedly (glacier)	Turner Lake Wetlands
Ok Chi'	Eddy-at the head	
Ok Choo	Eddy-big	
Shìldii	Sitting down OR Sitting in fear	Shiltee Rock
Shoh Diidhiłkhaii Njik	Black bear-killed one of us-creek	Bear Creek
Taa'aih Khànjlinaii	Paddle-many broken up	
Taiinlaih	Water flowing into back channel	Three Cabin Creek
Teet'it Gwinjik	Head of the waters-along the course of	Peel River
Teet'it Zheh	Head of the waters-town	Fort McPherson
Tr'ineeditr'aii Njik	Wind is blowing through-river	Wind River
Tsaih T'ak Njik	Ochre-sparkling (or dark)-river" or "Black sands-river	Bonnet Plume River
Tsiigehnjik	Iron river	Arctic Red River
Tsiigehtshik	At the mouth of iron river	Tsiigehtchic
Tth'oh Zrai Njik	Boulder-black-river	Blackstone River
Vadzaih Van	Caribou-lake	Vadzaih Van (previously Lusk Lake)
Van Choo	Lake-big	Hungry Lake
Vih't'òo Njik	Blue/green-creek	Road River
Vih't'òo Tshik	Blue/green-at the mouth of	Road River
Vihtr'ih Njik	Flint-creek	Vitrih Creek
Yiditshyuu Theetoh Taii	Something soft-portage-trail	

Glossary of Indigenous Words

Teetł'it Gwich'in	Northern Tutchone	English Translation
chigwiju'ee tr'igwindaii		honesty
daii	tthun degro	spring break-up
dineedzil	ts'ok dahdzyón'	spruce cones
Dinjii Zhuh	Dan-dha k'e	Indigenous peoples
Dinjii Zhuh Ginjik		Gwich'in language
dzih ant'at	ts'ok dzi'	spruce gum
gwahshri'		open areas with sparse mixed spruce and birch
jak zheii	nanindhe	blueberries
khaii	yahka	winter
khaiints'an'	Nun hunk'ál'	fall
lidii maskit	ts'ago or dân ledyät	labrador tea
nakhwigwandak		our stories
Natt'at	nintl'át	cranberry
nihk'atr'inaatii	łeyáts'eli łek'ás'ete	sharing and caring
shin	shan	summer
sreendyt	dinlyat	spring
thoo'ah	ts'ok aw	spruce boughs
tr'eedlaa		laughter
ts'iivii leegat	ts'ok aw' dagat	spruce needles
ts'iivii neech'uu	ts'ok t'ún'	white inner layer of spruce bark (cambium)
tsii dei		a term which implies great antiquity, reaching back hundreds or thousands of years

Teetł'it Gwich'in	Northern Tutchone	English Translation
ts'iivii ch'ok	ts'ek'i jak	juniper
uutsik	łyok gan	dryfish
vadzaih	hudzi	caribou
yiinjinihłetr'ichil'eh	nálats'int'ra	respect
yiinjitr'ichil'eh		honour
zhuh ghat t'igwidich'uu		kindness
	chinkaak	meadow, open place
	Dän Ki	our way
	e nazhan	snowshoe frame
	e tthi sanamá'	round nose snowshoes
	eyéndyá	women
	Häts'edän	teach
	hunsún'	clear place
	K'ahme	Ptarmigan
	kechän	moccasins
	łek'ats'ete	care
	łeyáts'ele	share
	man kún'	camp
	t'o tso	cottonwood tree
	yak	coat
	zha	snow