

## If a tree falls, for whom does it make a sound? Multilocality and multivocality in Yukon Forests

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**Abstract:** This article explores how forests in the Yukon Territory of Canada are experienced and understood by residents in divergent ways. Through a focus on alternative interpretations and versions of forest history, I explore some of the implications of diverse forest perception for understanding multiple use issues in natural areas, as well as what can be learned about possible forest futures. As both multivocal and multilocal, many such forests have numerous individuals and groups who vie to define and articulate meanings about them. As a consequence, many meanings overlap in a single locality, the result being that a forest is not always the same place for all individuals. It also means that forest labels such as ‘used’ and ‘pristine’ are not necessarily exclusive. In the context of forest planning in the Yukon Territory, I argue that it is necessary to embrace the contested nature of place in order to understand local land values and inter-group relations.

### Introduction

This article draws on anthropological research I carried out in the Yukon Territory of northern Canada between 2008 and 2010. The project was part of a PhD in cultural anthropology completed at the University of Alberta, Canada.

My primary goal during this research was to explore influences in the formation of forest perceptions among forest users. Methods included conducting unstructured interviews with 58 individuals who were connected to Yukon forests in a variety of ways. This included those who hunted, fished, trapped, and worked in forests, as well as those who used forests for recreation or were driven to preserve and protect them from human use. Study participants were

connected to Yukon forests in a variety of locations, ranging from urban to remote. My primary focus was on non-Native Yukon residents as their forest views are not as well catalogued as those of the First Nations also resident in the area.

Purposive sampling, which targets people with a specific knowledge base, rather than random sampling was employed to select participants. That is, I specifically sought individuals with a connection to Yukon forests rather than looking for a random population sample. Methods were varied and included unstructured and semi-structured interviews, participant observation while living in the Territory for a period of eight months, and archival research. I interviewed 23 females and 35 males.

Female participants were near even with males in recreation, conservation, and trapping, while male participation was considerably higher among those working in forestry, wilderness professionals, and guide-outfitting.

One realisation resulting from interviews was that different versions of Yukon forests were being advocated by study participants. This included different understandings of history, forest policy, boundaries, and basic forest characteristics. I found that although speaking of the same locality, a uniform idea of forest was not to be assumed among forest users. In this article I focus on one aspect of this divergence: Yukon forest history. I explore some of the implications of diverse forest perception for understanding multiple use issues in natural areas, as well as what can be learned about possible forest futures through looking at alternative versions of forest history. This is in part done through exploring local archival material. I propose that through embracing the contested nature of place, using Rodman's (2003) ideas of multivocality and multilocality, a fuller understanding of multiple use issues can be grasped and tension between actors can be understood in a way that goes deeper than differences in use. Furthermore, I show that certain forest labels, such as wilderness or 'used' need not necessarily be exclusive.

## **Yukon context**

The Yukon is the most western of three territories that span Canada's north. It is host to a variety of ecosystems, with the southern arctic in the north and the boreal

cordillera in the south. Forests are generally found on valley bottoms throughout the mountainous territory. Southeast Yukon has the largest diversity of tree species as well as the largest trees, while the west and north tree stands tend to be more open and discontinuous (Smith *et al.* 1994). The most common tree species are white and black spruce, pine and aspen.

The territory has a population of roughly 35, 800 people, 27, 000 (76%) of whom reside in the capital city of Whitehorse (Yukon Bureau of Statistics 2011). There are 14 aboriginal groups within the territory comprising roughly 25% of Yukon residents. While the larger centres of Whitehorse and Dawson City are home to a majority of non-aboriginal people, First Nations are a majority within smaller communities. In forestry and resource planning in general, the Yukon Government aims to be inclusive to various land values including wildlife habitat, recreation, wilderness tourism, First Nations traditional, cultural and economic values, and broader economic values.

## **Place, multivocality and multilocality**

To aid in understanding divergent forest perceptions in the Yukon, I employ Rodman's ideas of multivocality and multilocality (Rodman 2003). Rodman posits that in order for anthropologists to grasp the importance of place fully, they must recognise its complex nature. Her primary critique is that in approaching a location of research as a backdrop to other events, the complex and contested nature of place is overlooked. Instead, Rodman urges

researchers to embrace the diverse nature of place through recognising the multiple voices that account for places, as well as the multiple localities that can reside in a single area. Multilocality is in part a recognition that external influences can impact place, that places can be understood and seen in terms of already familiar ones, and that “A single physical landscape can be multilocal in the sense that it shapes and expresses polysemic meanings of place for different users” (Rodman 2003: 212). In being open to diverse interpretations of place, the landscape can become an ethnographic tool used for a better understanding of human-environment relations.

By focusing on a wide range of users types and allowing participants freedom to discuss topics as they choose in interviews, I was able to explore some of the numerous voices that vie to define Yukon forests as well as some of the many ways forests as place were experienced and understood. One way this was achieved was through questioning labels such as forest, wilderness, bush and brush, allowing participants to choose the appropriate terminology, and discussing the meaning of different terms. A focus on multivocality and multilocality meant that from the beginning stages of research, the ‘field site’ remained open to competing definitions. This approach is not unprecedented; Leslie Main Johnson (2010), in her book concerning Indigenous understandings of ecology in northern British Columbia also draws from Rodman in her recognition that geographers’ and inhabitants’ discourses will not necessarily be consistent, and that it is not necessarily true that all of either group will share similar views.

A flexible definition of place must be employed in an approach that aims to be inclusive to different experiences and understandings. For this work I employ Walter’s (1988: 2) definition of place as “The whole synthesis of located experience—including what we imagine as well as the sights stories, feelings and concepts...” Walter’s inclusion of imagination as a sense is important here, as it allows for a wider range of influence to be drawn from in understanding place, including the influence and feeling of history. Others have also argued that while grounded in location, we must also look at place beyond a specific locality in order to be inclusive to alternative understandings (Palka 2000; Stokowski 2002). Similarly, Mason (2004) has argued that in terms of ethnographic landscapes in Alaska, the fact that efforts to protect cultural places of significance are focused on specific sites rather than broader landscapes, serves as a challenge, particularly for mobile First Nations whose stories emphasise traveling landscapes more than specific locations.

## Overlapping histories

In a 2009 Yukon-wide survey it was found that space and wilderness were listed as second only to work for reasons to live in the territory (Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board 2009). Although much academic literature has critiqued the ideas of wilderness and the pristine (Nash 1967, 2001; Chapeskie 2001; Cook 2006), the historical and contemporary presence of First Nations and other residents can be set aside in conservation and tourism discourse

in favour of a simpler view of Yukon Territory. For instance, the following is part of the positioning statement put forward by Tourism Yukon in their 2007–2008 Strategic Plan:

*“[Y]ukon is a destination of unparalleled scenic beauty that captivates visitors under the spell of the midnight sun and dancing Northern Lights. It’s a land that provides larger than life experiences distinguished by vast, wide open spaces and the freedom of unending, pristine wilderness. For residents and visitors alike, Yukon delivers larger than life history, culture, characters and adventures.”*  
– *Tourism Yukon 2007, 7.*

In another example, the Yukon Government recently sponsored an advertisement in a British newspaper. In it visitors are encouraged to visit the Yukon, ‘*Canada’s Pristine Gem*’:

*“[I]magine yourself in a land where the sounds of nature reach your ears; where there is unspoiled wilderness farther than the eye can see; and where for miles your only neighbours sport fur or feathers. This is the Yukon. Emblazoned with a rich scenic tapestry of soaring, snow-capped peaks, boreal forests, sweeping tundra, glacier-fed rivers and abundant wildlife, Canada’s Yukon is one of North America’s major wilderness attractions, with close to 80 per cent remaining pristine landscape....”*  
– *Cowton 2011.*

Among others, Cruikshank (2005), Coates and Morrison (2005), and Zaslow (1988) have discussed the power of the state and interested outsiders in shaping the image of the north that at times encourage the

idea of a space free of people and history. However, despite research into the impacts and limits of the wilderness narrative, many forest users I interviewed spoke of the pristine nature of Yukon forests and of the need to protect these areas from the ravages of resource development that has occurred elsewhere. Furthermore, in confirmation of the 2009 survey mentioned above, many spoke of the Yukon’s wild and untouched character as a reason for choosing to live in the territory.

In startling contrast to such views were those that emphasised the degree to which Yukon forests had been subject to human use. Often put forward by hunters, trappers, loggers and surveyors, these narratives emphasised the fact that due to the historic concentration of logging activities along roads and rivers, much of the forests that tourists and locals saw on a daily basis were in fact second or third growth. For instance, I was told the following story by a Yukon resident:

*“[I]n the 70s I guided parks Canada system planners down the Yukon River. We were talking about a park all the way from Seattle, all the way to Gold Rush River Park, the Klondike. And anyway we were sitting drinking rum at the Salmon (a local restaurant) one night and they were just marvelling saying “look at this wilderness” and I said, “what the hell are you talking about?” (and they said) “well it just doesn’t get any better than this”. I said don’t you recognise that this is the highway up here? Hundreds and thousands of people have traveled up this river, they denuded it, from ridge top to ridge top.*

*They didn't believe me. I said, "Let's go!" We walked back a mile in the bush and here are stumps this high (showing a height about a foot off the ground), I said those are all 80, 90, 100 year old stumps and they cut it to feed the boilers on the paddle wheeler. And they would use 130 or 140 cord to do a round trip. Dawson and back up. SO I said, isn't this ironic that we have Parks Canada systems planners that are on the ultimate edge of the extreme in terms of conservation and they couldn't recognise the difference between an area that served people for years and years and a pristine area."*

This interview extract is one among many that emphasise Yukon forests as 'used'. Yet, in many cases, the participants I interviewed were speaking of the same area when discussing both used and pristine forests. Each side worked from a specific understanding of Yukon history, and incorporated this understanding into their views concerning resource development, conservation, and in forming opinions of other forest users. It seemed that what a forest was today depended to some degree on what it had been in the past. It also became apparent that without recognising this distinction, a component of individual forest values was being overlooked.

As few sources exist that discuss Yukon's forest history in any detail, this distinction in narratives sparked my interest in doing archival research into local forest use. I discovered a rich natural and social history that has shaped the form of forests as well as the people who work and live within them. I will briefly outline a few key elements of this aspect of the project.

## **Timber use during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Yukon territory**

Aboriginal peoples have been living and thriving in the area that is now the Yukon Territory for several thousand years and have been influencing the land in a variety of ways (Morse 2003, Coates & Morrison 2005; Cruikshank 2005). This includes setting fires to forests in order to control mosquitoes, to attract animals that would forage on the young shoots of post-fire growth, to open up forests for travel, and to counter the effects of large wild fires (Morse 2003). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, non-First Nations residents were few. However, when as many as 40,000 prospective miners from southern Canada and the United States arrived the year following the 1896 discovery of a substantial amount of gold (Coates & Morrison 2005), the way forests were used by people changed dramatically.

During these early years, wood was used to support the mining industry, build infrastructure, fuel steamboats and provide heat. These needs meant that wood was heavily harvested from those areas most visited by the new arrivals such as lake-heads, along rivers and near communities (Scarth 1898; Strickland 1899, Morse 2003). The combined impacts of timber harvest, mining, and the setting of fires to create dry wood (Morse 2003; Coates & Morrison 2005) made it a difficult habitat for native fish and animals. Due to this, Morse (2003) writes that fishing, hunting, and gathering became more difficult if not impossible in many areas, in part due to frequent flooding and heavy run-off in streams.

At the height of the gold rush, approximately 250 sternwheelers traveled

rivers in the Yukon, and woodcutter camps and settlements were located approximately 25 to 30 miles apart along the Yukon River (Northern Design Consultants 1993). Steamboats could consume as much as 100 cords per round trip between the two major centers (Innis 1936). They also frequented many smaller rivers and continued to be a major way of travel and transportation until 1956 (see figure 1).

Though the Klondike gold rush lasted little more than a decade, intensive wood use during this period was felt for many years. In June of 1911, a survey letter directed to the Gold Commissioner reported that "... there is hardly enough timber along many of the nearby rivers and creeks to support the individual mining operation." (McLeod 1911). In a report on timber use in the Yukon by the superintendent of forestry it is stated that for about 30 years after the gold rush nearly all lumber used in Territory was local manufacture; used for heating homes and running the river steamers (Merrill 1961). However:

*"[T]hese early timber demands practically exhausted the supply of accessible timber in the Dawson area and after 1930 lumber requirements for Dawson and Whitehorse were supplied largely by shipments from British Columbia."*  
– Merrill 1961: 2.

Timber use was not only limited to the gold rush period. Along with a small but consistent demand from locals, another major phase of forest use occurred between 1942 and 1946 during the construction of the Yukon's first major highway (Coates & Morrison 1992, 1995; Kupperberg 2009)

(see figure 3). Wood harvested during this time went towards bridge construction, fuel wood for the army camps, housing, and road construction. During this time cords of wood taken annually jumped from 13,658 in 1942-43 to 20,403 in 1943-44 not including much more that was cut without permit (Robinson 1945). There are reports such as those by Gertrude Baskine (1946) that suggest wood was often left to rot on the side of the road. She writes:

*"[T]he sides of the highway were untidy and disaster laden: fine spruce and poplar, as tall as any still upright, lay toppled in all direction, sprung and flattened by the merciless dozers... When I asked my companion what would be done with all this wood he shrugged and said: 'I can only tell you what one bulldozer driver said: 'We just walk em' down, shove em aside and let 'em lay'."*  
– Baskine 1946: 17.

Also a problem was the increase in forest fires which occurred due to the use of heavy equipment, portable sawmills, poor storage of fuel and tossing cigarette butts into dry forested areas. These fires were probably the most immediate and wide-ranging cause of damage by construction projects of this time (Coates & Morrison 1995).

While overall timber production declined in post-war years, an increase in mining, tourism, and government activity after the war led to steady production well through the 1960s and 1970s (Heartwell 1987). In the following decades, timber production rose and fell in connection to demand. Production fell during a national recession in the 1980s (Heartwell 1987), and rose



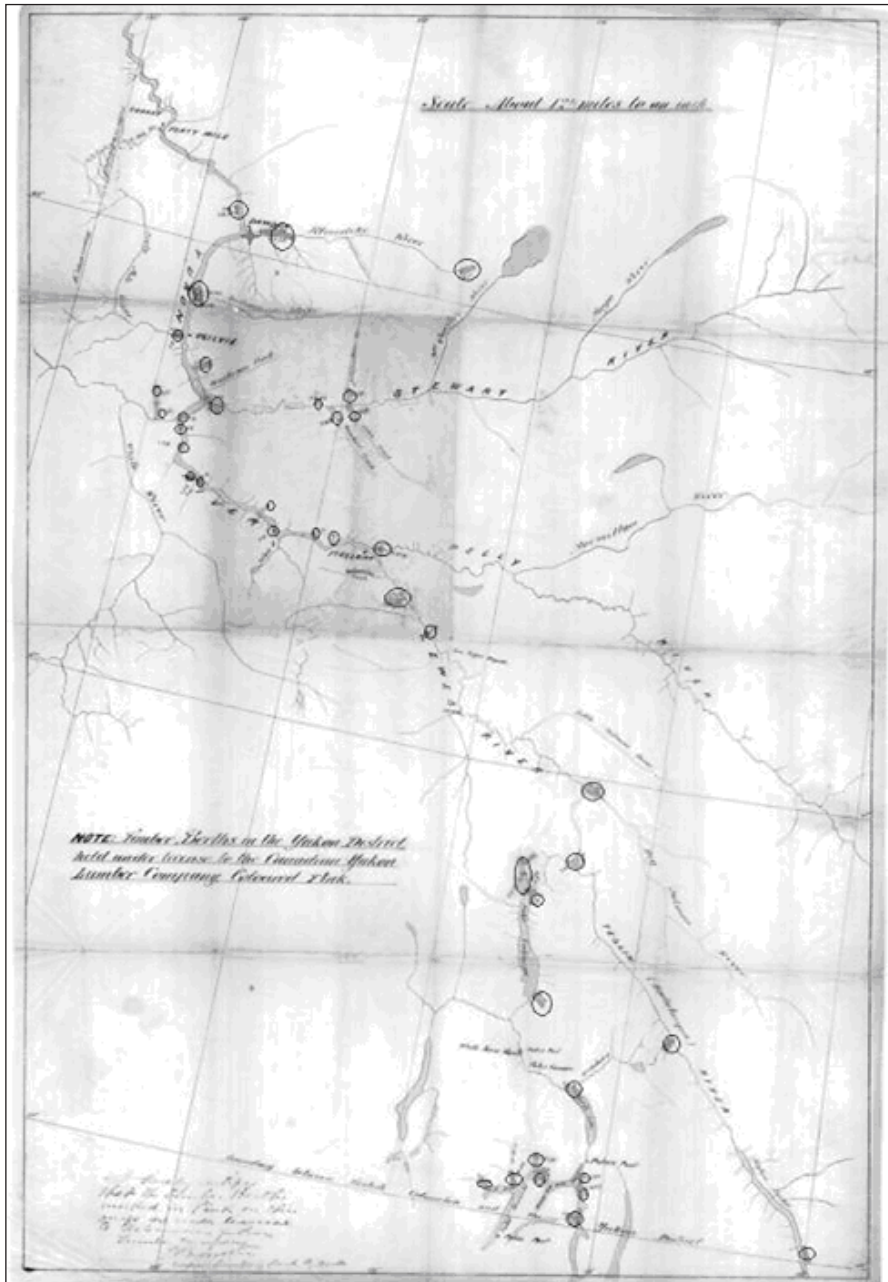


Figure 1 . Map of *Select Yukon Timber Berths* 1898. Note reads: "Timber berths in the Yukon District held under license to the Canadian Yukon Company coloured pink." Scale 1: 729 000. All timber berths indicated on the map have been circled by the author of this article, often more than one berth is within each circle. They indicate only a portion of licensed timber berths at the time. Dawson City is indicated by the star. Source: Yukon Archives, Whitehorse H-1774.

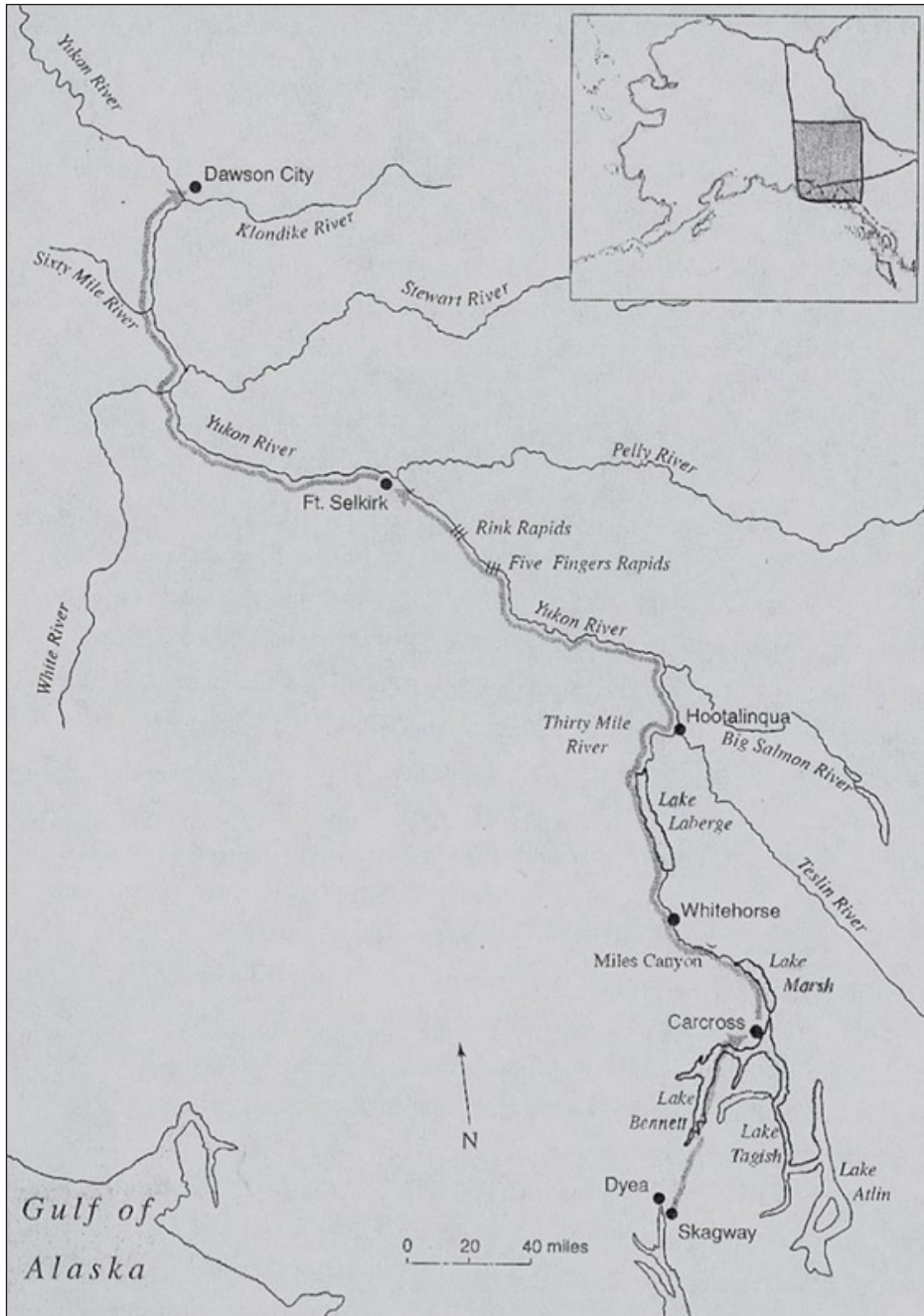


Figure 2. For clarity purposes I have included this map of Yukon waterways, borrowed from Morse (2003). The arrow indicates one common route taken by prospectors entering the Territory during the gold rush.



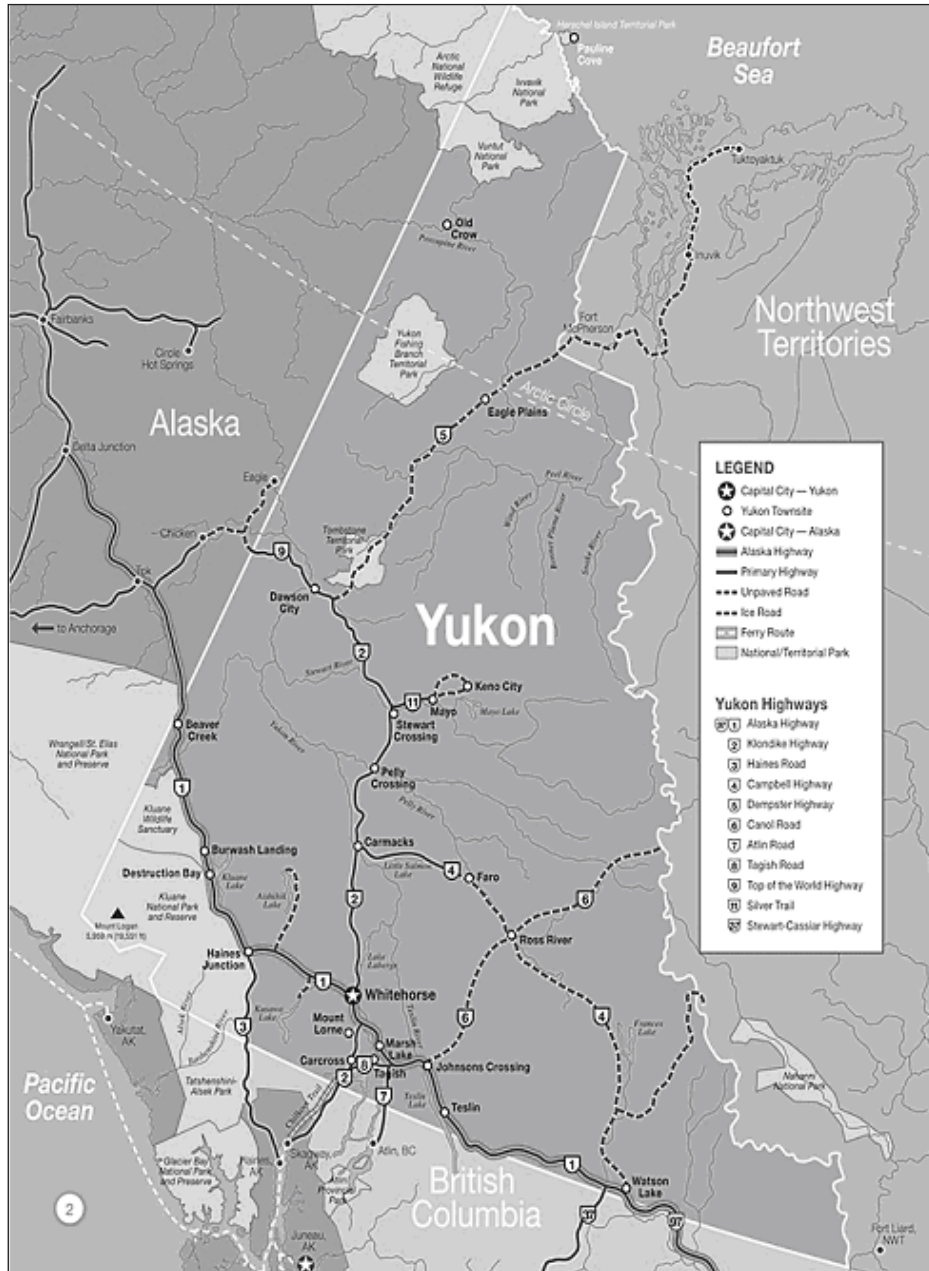


Figure 3. Yukon Territory Canada. Major roadways are indicated by solid lines. The Alaska Highway is indicated by the thick line along the southern portion of the territory. Source: Yukon Government, [www.gov.yk.ca](http://www.gov.yk.ca).

steeply in the 1990s during a brief forestry boom (Cohn 2001), this was followed by an almost total standstill of the industry as a need for a Yukon Forest Act, agreements with First Nations groups, and other forms of legislation were called for. Today, Yukon's forest industry could be labeled as small, with only two operational mills and a shifting number of back-yard operators who supply fuel wood, value added products, and dimensional timber. A major difference in timber extraction in the last half of the century was that it took place out of sight from most residents. This was made possible by new harvesting technology, the availability of alternative fuel sources, a halt in river steamer traffic, and an increasing number of in-town jobs, all of which lessened a local dependence on wood and importantly, daily interaction with forests, forest workers and wood products.

## **Wilderness anew**

Despite this modest but persistent history of timber use and extraction in the Yukon, natural areas in the territory continue to be labeled by many as pristine. However, it is important to point out that the narratives of pristine wilderness that overshadow the reality of a much more complex space cannot be dismissed as simply inaccurate. While it is tempting to relegate this perspective to an erroneous historical conception of local forests, it should be placed in a broader context, one that accounts for the perceived continual threat of potential territorial resource development, dwindling world-wide intact ecosystems, the impact of wilderness discourse in media, and as a

defining grounding point from which many people understand and experience Yukon's natural spaces.

While it is certainly true that the Yukon has had a long history of forest use, it is also true that in comparison with southern Canada it has been on a relatively small scale. This point is particularly important for Yukon residents who originated from other parts of Canada or who use southern or international examples of environmental degradation as a reference point for Yukon's pristine state. The Yukon *is* little developed in comparison to many other places, and areas that have seen the impact of deforestation have often since regrown. In a report on the history of logging in the Yukon (Northern Design Consultants 1993) 40 sites of known past logging activity were surveyed and regrowth was reported to be strong:

*"[I]n general it was found that most of the old settlement and wood camp sites were adequately regenerating with aspen, balsam poplar, white spruce or white birch. In fact, signs of past logging activities were not as obvious as expected with minimal disturbance noted for those sites used primarily in the early 1900s."*  
– Northern Design Consultants 1993: 50.

These areas of regrowth when recognised by those seeking the wilderness experience, tend to be understood as remnants of historic moments long ago and in many cases emphasise how little development there has been. Such cases support at once both hypothesis as put forward by modern forest users – Yukon forest as used space and Yukon forests as pristine. Beyond

appearances of pristine wilderness provided by natural cycles of regrowth and renewal, wilderness can be understood as a social construct in which many users are able to ground their discourse, and experiences, in a very legitimate fashion.

In taking a historic view, perhaps a fuller and healthier idea of forests can develop. For instance, there can be potential for those areas in need of forest regeneration and restoration to once again be experienced as wild nature and to support animal life and wild waterways. With time, wilderness can grow out of depleted and fatigued areas, and can be experienced by the people that depend upon it as untamed and natural. Within the last 120 years, many forests along Yukon's primary waterways were largely clear-cut, local eco-systems were detrimentally affected, and in some areas locals were no longer able to fish or hunt. Yet today these same forests are not just understood by many as recuperated, but as pristine. This is not to suggest that the long term damage of deforestation around the world should be dismissed, instead it is a reminder that both nature and humans have the capacity to absorb change in surprising ways.

Something else we can learn from Yukon forests is that those traces that are left need not always be a bad thing. Forests are an anchor for stories of the past and possibilities for the future. They are a physical anchor in the sense that they exist on the land, and a conceptual anchor in their capacity to evoke memories or imaginings. Changes over time make physical marks upon them, their shape when planted by people, their form when impacted by animals, their size and height when once

burned or cut hold clues to their history. Similarly, Oliver Rackham (1990) has traced the formation and conceptualization of treed areas through time in Britain. Beginning as early as 11 000 BC, Rackham looked at the use of trees by different generations exposing the creation of what he refers to as pseudo-histories. Rackham urges researchers to use the landscape itself as an aid in understanding history, and to refrain from underestimating the changes in viewpoint that can be brought on by passing years.

## Conclusion

In terms of multiple use issues, what is necessary to recognise is the potential for an underlying conflict in forest discourses: people are not necessarily referring to the same place when discussing a forested space. Thus, what is appropriate use or appreciation varies accordingly. Without addressing this fundamental difference, an important piece of forest related discourse is missing and those hoping for inclusivity in forest planning will meet unexpected barriers. In addition, the importance of paying attention to who has the power to control or advocate certain place-narratives cannot be understated, especially as those narratives can deny the historical position of other actors. Such is the case when First Nations or other forest users find themselves in a 'pristine' landscape.

One of my goals during this project has been to explore the perceptions of study participants in a manner that went beyond use and in doing so many contradictions became apparent. For instance, working

in the forest, yet also living and playing within it, or alternatively, working to protect it against human-induced change while recognising the important role that resource-based industry plays in the livelihoods of locals. Participants in this study found ways to approach forests on a number of levels and assuming their interests are limited to one aspect of forests is problematic in part because assumptions about user values can silence the possibility of alternative relationships between users. In the same way that some conceive of pristine and used as exclusive categories, such assumptions pre-suppose that 'types' of use are incompatible, and therefore types of users are as well. When individuals are labeled by use, the potential relationships between groups who could work together towards common goals are undermined from the beginning; from the lack of recognition that people can and do live and work with contradictions on a daily basis. One way to side-step the pitfalls of user-based assumptions is to not only recognise that place is more than simply background to use, but to embrace and explore its contested nature as a means of illuminating local land values.

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