

Van Tat Gwich'in Historic Lifeways Project



2017 Research Interim Report Autumn 2017



Van Tat Gwich'in Historic Lifeways Project



Moose and calf in northern Van Tat- Crow Flats, 2017

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Cover photo: Chuu Choo Vee - Herschel Island,
Pauline Cove, looking south toward the mainland

Photographs are S.Smith@VGFN unless otherwise
indicated.

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Stan G. Njootli filming learner Madison Lord and mentor David Lord at Than Natha'aii, 2017

1. Introduction to the Project

Polar Continental Shelf Project 391-17
Yukon Scientists & Explorers License 17-45 S&E
Vuntut National Park Landing Permit

The Van Tat Gwich'in Historic Lifeways Project is directed by the Vuntut Gwitchin Government (VGG) Heritage Branch in collaboration with the VG Heritage Committee. The Project takes a focussed, in-depth approach to historical/culturally significant locations and individuals. An integral part of research and knowledge-transmission is mentoring youth to undertake active and creative roles. The Van Tat Gwich'in Historic Lifeways Project expands the VGG Heritage knowledge base, enhances research expertise, builds VGG data collections, develops educational and interpretive materials, expands the range of sources of information (younger elders and other knowledge holders) and time span, and collaborates with other researchers

The foundation of the VTG Historic Lifeways Project is in the series of research projects into oral history, place names and Gwich'in geography, cultural technology and trails/routes and navigation systems that the VGG Heritage Branch has conducted since 1999. The VTG Historical Lifeways Project delves deeper into

Van Tat Gwich'in Historic Lifeways Project Objectives

- conduct research in culturally and historically significant locations
- enhance use and transmission of information to younger generations by mentoring Gwich'in youth to take an active role in research
- conduct background research drawing on databases and products of previous research and other sources
- expand previous data sources by including younger elders and, where possible, Gwich'in elders from other communities
- produce materials with a view to enhancing the teaching and interpretation potential of the research
- bring historical and geographical research closer to current times by including events and changes over the past 20-30 years, updating the databases and keeping them relevant.
- collaborate with academic and other researchers to enhance knowledge of the traditional territory and provide learning and training opportunities for Gwich'in participants and the community

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Ch'ii Ch'à'an - Bear Cave Mountain showing caves and distant fires

important historical topics and geographical areas, investigating themes of strategic resource use, historical events, relationship with land, and aggregation and dispersal. Research involves a significant Gwich'in language component and enhancement of education through experiential learning. An important facet of the project is to mentor youth to participate fully in the research and work closely with Elders and knowledge holders to enhance transmission to Gwich'in and all Canadians. On that note, in 2017 seven learners worked with mentors who guided their background research and interviews, and two projects were designed and conducted by learners taking leadership roles: Sophia Flather and Brandon Kyikavichik, who are approaching the area of Gwich'in language and heritage from different angles.

The VTG Historic Lifeways Project is directed toward two main questions: What are the detailed, in-depth histories attached to significant places/people/events on Van Tat Gwich'in lands? How can both the process of research and the products

be enhanced by mentoring youth to take greater roles in the project? And, how can research augment and be enriched by the use of Gwich'in language? Research focusses on various kinds of significant events and places: e.g., places where people gathered; regular landmarks or stopping places; hunting and fishing locales that go back centuries or longer in archaeological time (e.g., caribou fences); places outstanding for their natural resource use; and where significant events took place. Further, the mentored learners previously mentioned have emphasized the role of Gwich'in language in research and interpretation and are spearheading language revival. Their work is an example of the success of VGG Heritage's commitment to mentoring and cultural transmission in heritage programming.

VGG Heritage continues its commitment to collaborating with academics and other researchers when possible to expand the knowledge base about traditional Gwich'in history and lands and expose Van Tat Gwich'in to this knowledge and associated research practices.

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Research team at Bluefish Caves. Heritage Researcher Mary Jane Moses, elder/mentor Joel Peter, learner Candace Tetlich



Crow River Stewardship Enhancement and research trip, early June 2017.

2. 2017 Research

The 2017 VTG Historic Lifeways Project conducted a number of research activities throughout the year directed toward the two overall objectives: focussed historic life ways research and mentoring youth and learners.

a) Historic Lifeways Research 2017

The main Historic Lifeways research activities in 2017 were LaPierre House to Ch'ihilii trail revitalization, Crow River Heritage Stewardship trip, aerial survey research, and two learner-initiated projects.

- Zheh Gwatsàl-LaPierre House to Ch'ihilii Trail Revitalization

A party of 3 on snowmobiles travelled from LaPierre House to Ch'ihilii - Whitefish Lake in the upper Porcupine River Ch'ihilii Wetlands, from April 4-10. They traced and marked the historic route, advancing previous trail revitalization in the LaPierre House area (to Curtain Mountain and to Daadzai Van - Summit Lake).

- Crow River Heritage Stewardship

From 3-7 June 2017, a party of ten boater/hikers [three elder/mentors and 7 learners, listed at

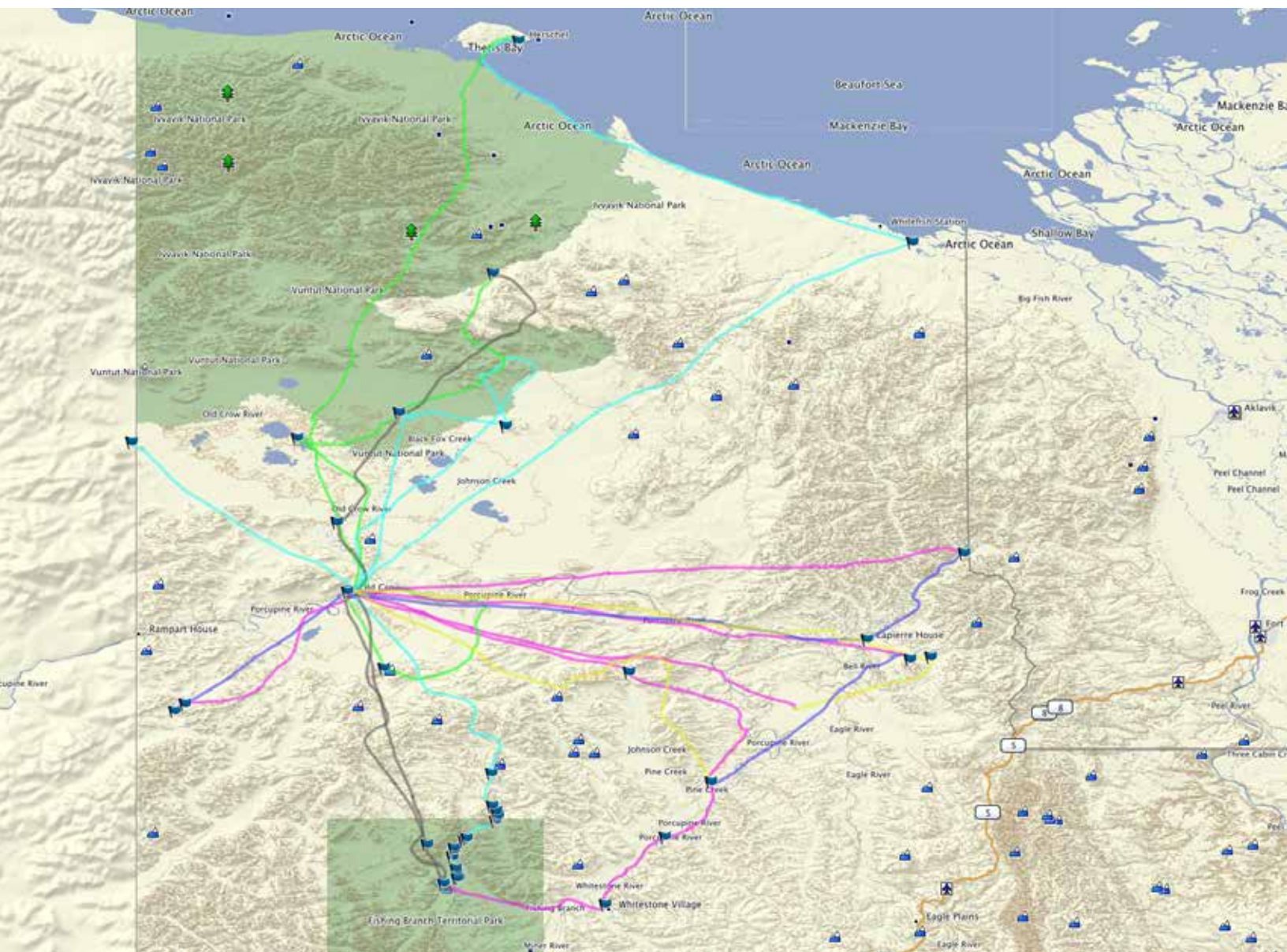
the end of this report] travelled the Crow River, visited camps and historic places of significance, conducted traditional Gwich'in spring hunting activities, and recorded historic lifeways data. The team filmed and photographed locations, individuals and activities, monitored changes in the land and river, and conducted maintenance on VGG Heritage signage.

- Aerial survey research

We conducted 8 days of helicopter-assisted research in July 2017 (see Map 1) which began with background research for the 7 student/learners and the six filmers. Participants worked with written sources (including previous interviews), conducted new background interviews with mentors, learned to operate the project DSLR camera and record photo data, reviewed helicopter safety, and interviewed mentors in the field. As well, six filmers were trained or refreshed on the digital video camera by mentor Heritage Coordinator Mary Jane Moses.

This year, aerial survey research included interviews in the Summit Lake/Bell River area, Herschel Island, upper Porcupine/Chii Ch'a'an/Bear Cave Mt. area; Bluefish Caves; David Lord Creek and Than Natha'aii, an important landmark

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Map 1. Draft map of research locations and areas/routes, 2017

and hunting area; Ni'iinlii Njik - Fishing Branch and Whitestone River; LaPierre House and Curtain Mountain; Blackfox caribou fences and John Kyikavichik grave site; the British Mountains and Babbage falls; and Diniizhoo - Game Mountain - Potato Hill in western Van Tat.

b) Mentoring 2017

The VGG Heritage mentoring program is nuanced and multi-faceted. Mentoring has been a part of Heritage projects going back to 2000. Mentoring took many forms in 2017, beginning with introducing 5 new and 2 returning learners to Heritage research, who then played an active role in 2017 aerial survey research. Another 5 learners

(and one mentor) recorded digital video of those activities. Seven other youth/learners and 3 elder/mentors participated in tracing and stewardship on the Crow River route. Two experienced youth/learners worked with mentors to design their own heritage research, focussing on ambitious Gwich'in language research projects:

- Sophia Flather

Sophia has been working with VGG Heritage programs for the past 3 years, doing experiential research into hide tanning, training as a filmer, and travelling on the land by snow machine and boat with Heritage Sewardship and mentoring route research. As well as taking part in 2017

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Historic Lifeways research, Sophia is currently spearheading an intensive new 'Direct Acquisition' Gwich'in language immersion program targeted at adult learners and based on a proven method by the Salish School of Spokane, used by three Interior Salish Languages, Lingit, and now Gwich'in. The program utilizes fluent Gwich'in speakers for audio recordings, stories and editing and will roll out in fall 2017.

- Brandon Kyikavicik

Brandon Kyikavicik is currently VGG Heritage Interpreter. He has participated in VGG Heritage projects since 2002. In 2016 & 2017, Brandon has been working with mentor/elder and fluent Gwich'in speaker Joel Peter. Together Joel and Brandon have done in-depth re-translations and transcription in the modern orthography of some of the oldest interviews in the VG Oral History collections (e.g., their ancestor Myra Kaye b. 1884). Brandon is compiling information linking the old land-use information in the interviews with kinship and social relationships to research

Above: Blackfox caribou fence #2.

Below: Brandon Kyikavicik and mentor Joel Peter examining an antler fragment at a shah at Blackfox 2 caribou fence.



ancient family connections to specific areas. They also transcribed and translated the four "monster stories" from elder Sarah Abel, currently slated for production into Gwich'in language booklets and theatre or radio plays. In the process, he is becoming fluent and literate in Gwich'in and passing information to other learners, as well as visitors to the John Tizya Centre.

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Crow River Stewardship group that travelled up the Crow River and hiked to John Joseph Kyikavichik's heritage muskratting camp. Standing: Stringer Charlie (mentor), John Joseph Kyikavichik (mentor), Lyle Charlie, Mary Jane Moses (mentor), Devyn Kassi, Robert Kyikavichik. Sitting: Amanda Frost, Stan G. Njootli, Sophia Flather. Behind the camera: Malinda Bruce.



Marking and documenting the Zheh Gwatsàl - LaPierre House to Ch'ihilii - Whitefish Lake trail. Photo JBruce@VGG



Crow River Heritage Stewardship trip. L-R Devyn Kassi, Malinda Bruce, Lyle Charlie, Amanda Frost, Stringer Charlie.

3. 2017 Heritage Trails Research & Reconnaissance and Crow River Stewardship Trip

In April 2017, Joseph Bruce, Norman Linklater and Stan G. Njootli travelled the historic Gwich'in route from Zheh Gwatsàl-LaPierre House to Ch'ihilii-Whitefish Lake, across the productive wetland in the vicinity of the main trail over the Richardson Mountains to Fort McPherson NWT. As well as the richness of wildlife resources in the area, it is a strategic hub between travel to the south (to villages of Kâachik-Johnson Creek and Chuu TI'it-Whitestone), north to Daadzaii Van-Summit Lake, and east to Curtain Mountain and McDougall Pass.

From 3-7 June 2017, 7 learners and 3 mentors travelled Chyàh Njik-Crow River on a Heritage Stewardship expedition Funded by the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Enhancement Trust and VGG. The purposes of the trip were: mentoring the next generation of Van Tat/Crow Flat users; researching/interviewing/filming heritage locations, areas and individuals; conducting Gwich'in land-based activities such as hunting, gathering and food processing; monitoring changes in the land, mostly due to global warming; repairing and maintaining VGG Heritage signage that records and communicates VGG use and history on the land.

The research team reported numerous landslides along Chyàh Njik from permafrost melt etc, and continued 'brushification' as the vegetation changes. As well, they encountered low water on Neegoo Zràii Njik/Black Fox Creek, although the trip was planned to coincide with high water levels.

The participants accomplished their objectives and recorded valuable oral history and monitoring data. Learners were mentored in hands-on and verbal experiences. Expeditions of this sort are necessary for cultural, historical and environmental goals and this trip also advanced leadership development in this particular group of learners.

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Approximately 150 specimens from site CRH11A: muskox, beaver, bison, horse, wolf, mammoth, muskrat, hare, camel, caribou, plus the antler projectile point

4. 2017 Research Collaborations

The main research collaboration this year is with Yukon Government palaeontologist Elizabeth Hall along with crew: technician Susan Hewitson and STEP student Clara Reid. In July 2017, the VTGHLP collaborated with the paleontologists to coordinate helicopter time to our mutual advantage. Paleontologists incorporated VGG learner Willow Frost into their activities. They visited known areas of paleontological resources on the Crow River area, and acquired a large number of paleontological specimens, along with an archaeological antler spear point, which boreal archaeologist Ray Le Blanc (2017 pers comm) described:

“The point is a lovely example of a Late Prehistoric, Klo-kut [TI’oo K’at] Phase, unilaterally barbed projectile. It is typical of Klo-Kut and Rat Indian Creek sites. It’s probably made from antler and I’m not surprised to see it turn up on a palaeo collection locale.”

Plans are in the works for more paleontological collaborations in 2018, including a visit in spring 2018 for identifying and cataloguing specimens at the Old Crow Arctic Research Facility. Other collaborations being planned are: archaeology research design with Lauriane Bourgeon (University of Montreal and Kansas U), Crow Flats community monitoring development (Yukon College), and muskrat community research with Jeremy Brammer (Phd McGill University).



Chyàh Njik - Crow River - an important area for paleontological specimens. In the distance: Ch’ichèechih - Schaeffer Mountain.



Paleontology crew. (L to R) Willow Frost (VG student participant) Susan Hewitson (Field Technician), Elizabeth Hall (Yukon Gov. Assistant Paleontologist), Clara Reid (STEP student)



Teryn Kassi with antler spear point found by the paleontologists

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Cranberry Hill fire 2017

5. 2017 Interim Results

The major factor affecting our helicopter-assisted research program in summer 2017 was forest fires. Huge swaths of the northern Yukon in Van Tat Gwich'in traditional territory were alight. Fires burned in every direction from Old Crow and came within 20 km of the town but thankfully didn't necessitate evacuating the town or inhabitants. A major effort was mobilized to save the Rampart House historic site (subject of a long-term reconstruction program), on the Porcupine River and the Canada-US border: <http://wildfiretoday.com/2017/08/13/protecting-a-historic-site-above-the-arctic-circle/>. Fortunately the fire moved away naturally from the indefensible Bluefish Caves archaeological site, critically important for interpreting the history of human occupation of North America: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/humans-may-have-arrived-north-america-10000-years-earlier-we-thought-180961957/>

The fires necessitated adjusting our research plans but we were fortunate to accomplish essentially all our goals. We didn't put in camps due to smoke and safety, and didn't conduct any research in the area near Rampart House, where there was an exclusion zone for firefighting operations as well as fire and thick smoke. There was an initial shortage of fuel in Old Crow due to the firefighting equipment working out of that airport, but this was resolved almost immediately. Otherwise, we avoided a couple of areas and had to go around fires and smoke, but were able to substitute alternate destinations and complete our research.

In summary, we conducted a 5 day heritage boat trip on Crow River in June 2017, and 8 days of helicopter-assisted research in July. We visited important historic locations in the northern and eastern reaches of Van Tat Gwich'in territory, the upper Porcupine and adjacent areas, identified significant landmarks, and recorded or confirmed place names.

As in 2016, an important component of 2017

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Above: Elder mentor Irwin Linklater and learner Jocelyn Benjamin at Daadzaii Van -Summit Lake. Below: Learner Madison Lord and elder/mentor David Lord at Than Natha'aii - Lone Mountain.

Above: Learner Candace Tetlich and elder/mentor Joel Peter at Bluefish Caves. Below: Learner Caleb Charlie and elder/mentor James Itsi at Moses Hill.

research activities was mentoring 7 youth/learners to take an active role in the research while learning about their culture, ancestors and history on the land. Learners conducted background research with VGG Heritage collections and materials. Then they travelled on the land, took photographs and conducted interviews with their mentors. They then worked with Heritage staff to produce personal presentations that were incorporated into the project season-end community presentation.

As part of research activities, this year 6 participants were trained or refreshed in digital video filming. Further, as described elsewhere, two mentored individuals are spearheading projects focussed on Gwich'in language.

Winter 2017-2018 activities will focus on processing the data: transcribing the oral history interviews; indexing video tapes; cataloguing photographs; updating databases (place names, interviews, video, GPS mapping, photographs); preparing reports; creating products such as language

materials, maps, educational materials, draft Atlas; applying for funding; and, liaising between Heritage staff, Heritage Committee, VGG, the community, consultant, government agencies and other researchers. We will also review the results of 2017 research and produce detailed plans for 2018 research.

To summarize, our 2017 accomplishments were:

- 7 students/learners in mentoring program
- 6 filmers trained/reoriented
- 2 student/learner-initiated projects
- 1 Heritage Trail revitalized and marked
- 1 Heritage Stewardship route travelled
- 38 oral history interviews with student/learner participation
- 1433 student photos
- 576 Crow River photos
- 2040 project photos
- 750 min digital video
- 1 trails GPS mapped/confirmed
- 3 place name verified

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British Mountains, 2017

6. Proposed 2018 Research

In autumn 2017, we are in the process of evaluating this year's research and processing data, and developing research plans for 2018. As with previous years of VTG Historic Lifeways research, the project will be developed under the guidance of the VG Heritage Committee and VGG Heritage Branch.

The over-arching direction for the VTG Historic Lifeways Project is to sharpen the geographical and historical focus to capture more in-depth and detailed information. Methodologically, the project is committed to the student/youth mentoring program to expose youth to information about Van Tat Gwich'in history and places on the land, as a further step in transmission of Gwich'in culture and history.

In 2018, the Project will continue to collaborate with other researchers wherever possible, conduct environmental monitoring, record locations of trails and other cultural features, and contribute to VGG Heritage collections of data on VGG heritage and lands.

Currently, a number of locations are being considered as the focus of 2018 research: British Mountains, Herschel Island (possible collaborative research), the area above Caribou Bar creek west of Van Tat (where we couldn't go in 2017), the upper Bluefish River/Drifting Snow Creek area, and upper Johnson Creek east of Van Tat.

As we analyze 2017 research results, we plan methodological adjustments for future research. A year ago, we noted that flexibility regarding research destinations is important, in order to better match youth/learners and mentors with places significant to both. This flexibility served us well in 2017 given the challenges posed by the

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Above: Chuu Choo Vee - Herschel Island. Lower: Research team at upper Aadriinjik - Johnson Creek, 2006.

Above: Ch'idzèe Njik - upper Caribou Bar Creek. Below: Sriijaa Vàn - Bluefish Lake.

forest fires. We are planning 2018 activities for both research relevance and logistical flexibility.

Research objectives for 2017-2018 will focus on:

- in-depth investigation of selected historical and geographical topics
- preparatory background research drawing on VGG Heritage data and elders/mentors
- intense involvement, training and mentoring of a group of 4-7 Van Tat Gwich'in students/learners
- involve younger elders as resource people and knowledge sources
- research in geographical locations in the general areas of the British Mountains/Herschel Island, west of Van Tat, northeastern Van Tat and the upper Bluefish River. Specific locations in these areas will

be selected for relevance to youth/learner participants and availability of knowledgeable mentors

- production of interpretive and educational materials such as Gwich'in language booklets drawn from the oral history collections
- seek to disseminate interpretive materials and Gwich'in history, culture and language
- emphasis on fostering Gwich'in language
- collaborations with academic researchers
- training and orientation seminars and community presentations
- recording precise locational information on significant Gwich'in historic locations, routes and landmarks
- routine environmental and heritage resource monitoring

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Little Bell River near Daadzaii Van - Summit Lake

7. 2017 Project Supporters



Canadian
Heritage

Patrimoine
canadien

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, PARKS CANADA, VUNTUT NATIONAL PARK

in kind: salaries, equipment, expertise

OBJECTIVES: Vuntut National Park was established in 1995 as part of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement, to conserve, protect and present to Canadians a portion of the North Yukon Natural Region, to recognize Vuntut Gwitchin history and culture and to protect the traditional and current use of the park by the Vuntut Gwitchin. Parks Canada supports the Historic Lifeways Project and previous research through the participation of Parks staff in research, training and interpretation, and provision of equipment, supplies, logistics assistance and expertise.

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GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, POLAR CONTINENTAL SHELF PROJECT

30 hours helicopter support [valued at \$64,486]

OBJECTIVES: The Polar Continental Shelf Project provides critical logistical support for arctic research. The PCSP funded the Van Tat Gwich'in Historic Lifeways Project under its Traditional Knowledge Program and its commitment to support research relevant to northern Aboriginal communities which fosters development of their research capability.



Natural Resources Canada

VUNTUT GWITCHIN GOVERNMENT

in kind: salaries, office space and facilities, project management

OBJECTIVES: The VGG is directing the Historic Lifeways Project, providing the services of the VGG Heritage Manager, Heritage Researcher and seasonal Heritage Department personnel, arranging logistics and expediting for researchers and other project personnel, liaising between community resources and the project, providing office facilities, meeting and storage spaces, facilitating Heritage Committee meetings which direct the project, and general logistical and administrative support. VGG support includes Gwich'in language programs formerly covered by the federal Aboriginal Language Services.



Bluebells and fireweed at Ni'inlii Njik - Fishing Branch weir

YUKON GOVERNMENT FISH AND WILDLIFE ENHANCEMENT TRUST \$15,000

OBJECTIVES: Established under Chapter 27 of the Umbrella Final Agreement, the Trust works to enhance Yukon's fish, wildlife and natural habitats. Since its founding in 1995, the Trust has contributed towards a wide variety of projects having a significant benefit to the continuing enhancement, restoration and protection of fish and wildlife and their habitats throughout Yukon. The Trust supported the Crow River Heritage Stewardship trip which included monitoring of land and climate change and Gwich'in wildlife harvesting activities, and transferral of knowledge and skills to the next generation of Gwich'in heritage, land and wildlife stewards.



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8. 2017 Project Participants

Elders & Resource people

Robert Bruce Jr.
James Itsi
Irwin Linklater
David Lord
Joel Peter

Heritage Committee

Robert Bruce Jr.
Jane Montgomery
Marion Schafer

Research team

Robert Bruce Jr.
Brandon Kyikavichik
Mary Jane Moses
Shirleen Smith
Megan Williams

Heritage Language Project

Sophia Flather

Cultural Translation Project

Brandon Kyikavichik (learner)
Joel Peter (mentor/elder)

Youth/Students/Learners

Jocelyn Benjamin
Caleb Charlie
Willow Frost
Teryn Kassi
Tyrone Kyikavichik
Madison Lord
Candace Tetlich

Filmers

Malinda Bruce
Maureen Charlie
Sophia Flather
Brandon Kyikavichik
Mary Jane Moses
Stanley G. Njootli

Paleontologists

Elizabeth Hall (Yukon Asst.
Paleontologist)
Susan Hewiston (Field
Technician)
Clara Reid (STEP student)

Food/Catering

Samantha Frost
Margaret Frost

Crow River Stewardship route

Malinda Bruce
Lyle Charlie
Stringer Charlie (mentor)
Sophia Flather
Amanda Frost
Devyn Kassi
John Joseph Kyikavichik (mentor)
Robert Kyikavichik
Mary Jane Moses (mentor)
Stanley G. Njootli

Heritage Trails - LaPierre to Ch'ihilii

Joseph Bruce
Norman Linklater
Stan G. Njootli

Ch'ihilii Trail Fuel Haul

Trey Charlie
David Lord
Devyn Kassi
Floyd Norman
Nathaniel Schafer

Logistics

Dirk Mohrmann (Pilot)