

information

The North

March 2000

The changing political landscape north of 60°

Canada's North is immense. The three territories that make up the North — the Yukon Territory, the Northwest Territories (NWT) and Nunavut — account for 40 percent of Canada's land mass. Yet the inhabitants of the North make up only about three percent of the country's population.

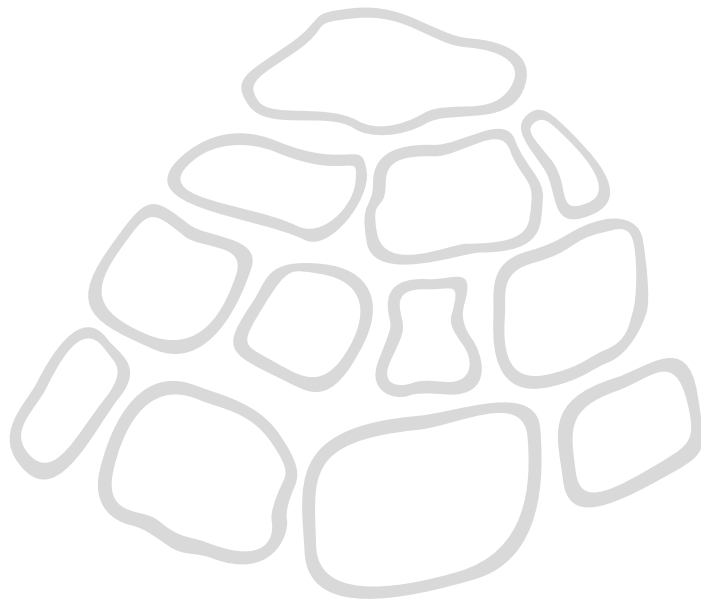
Yukon is the smallest of the three northern territories. It is a largely mountainous region, with thousands of square kilometres of sparse forest. Much of Nunavut, on the other hand, is tundra — a windswept, rocky Arctic region where an extremely cold climate has stunted vegetation and trees do not grow. The Northwest Territories is home to the mighty Mackenzie River, which extends north from the boreal forest lands 1,800 kilometres to the Beaufort Sea.

The three territories differ as much culturally as they do geographically. Aboriginal peoples make up about 23 percent of the Yukon Territory's population; most of these people are members of First Nations. In Nunavut, on the other hand, 85 percent of the population are Inuit. Aboriginal peoples make up 49 percent of the population of the Northwest Territories. These peoples are Dene and Métis, who

live mainly in the Mackenzie Valley; and the Inuvialuit, who live in the northwest region of the NWT.

This is an exciting time for all the peoples of the North. Over the years, the territorial governments have taken on more and more provincial-style responsibilities, and Aboriginal groups are starting to set up their own forms of self-government. As of 1999, the map of Canada was transformed when the former NWT was split in two to create the territory of Nunavut, which means "our land" in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit. (See section on Nunavut public government below.)

As Canada's lead federal government department responsible for management of land and resources in the North, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) is working together with northerners on many fronts to bring about the kinds of changes territorial residents want. The department's responsibilities extend to helping protect the environment — particularly the fragile ecosystem of the Arctic — and managing the sustainable development of natural resources. Through sustainable development practices, northerners can ensure the wise use of resources so that future generations also benefit.



In fact, DIAND supports sustainable development and environmental protection throughout the world's entire Arctic region. The department encourages this international co-operation through the Arctic Council, an organization of the eight Arctic countries. (See "DIAND supports international Arctic co-operation" below.)

DIAND's role in northern political development includes transferring management of provincial-style responsibilities to the territories and promoting Aboriginal self-government. DIAND is also involved in negotiating and settling land claims with Aboriginal peoples in the North.

Territorial governments take on more responsibilities

The Yukon Territory, the NWT and Nunavut have territorial governments. These governments differ from those of the Canadian provinces. Like the provinces, territorial governments have elected legislative assemblies and Cabinets. However, they have fewer powers than their provincial counterparts.

Until the 1980s, federally appointed commissioners ran the day-to-day administration of the territories. The Yukon Territory, the NWT and Nunavut all have appointed commissioners. But today, the commissioners have largely ceremonial duties, similar to those of provincial lieutenant-governors. They leave the actual governing of the territories to the elected assemblies.

Over the years, DIAND has transferred to the territories most of the provincial-style responsibilities it once looked after. Today, the

territorial governments have control of their hydro commissions, health, education, mine safety, roads and airports. The NWT manages its own forestry service. The Yukon Territory also has control over its onshore oil and gas resources, inland fisheries and hospital and health services. All three territories have responsibilities for wildlife management.

DIAND is still responsible for the management of land and resources in all three territories. This includes water and mining in the three territories; forestry in the Yukon; oil and gas in the NWT and Nunavut; and the protection and rehabilitation of the Arctic environment. DIAND's goal is to continue to make progress on transferring the management and control of these services to the territories.

Aboriginal self-government steps up

The Government of Canada believes that Aboriginal peoples have the right to govern themselves and decide on matters that affect their communities. Aboriginal groups will shape their own governments to suit their particular historical, cultural, political and economic circumstances.

The challenge will be to find a balance between the territorial public governments and Aboriginal governments that is workable and that all northerners can accept.

Of the 14 First Nations in the Yukon Territory, seven have already settled self-government agreements with the federal government.

The western region of the former NWT, still known as the Northwest Territories, is also evolving in many

ways. NWT residents are working to build consensus on the development of the territory. Aboriginal groups in the NWT are developing self-government proposals, or are in negotiations with the federal government.

Nunavut public government

DIAND worked with residents of Nunavut to help them build their government. This government opened for business on April 1, 1999, when the central and eastern portions of the NWT officially became Nunavut. The territory has a public government, representing all Nunavut residents. But because the Inuit make up an 85 percent majority of the Nunavut population, the Nunavut government helps Inuit shape systems that suit their culture, traditions and aspirations.

Land claims help advance Aboriginal goals

Aboriginal peoples see land claims as the means to make the kinds of social and economic changes they want. Most land claim settlements include funds that can support these changes, as well as title to lands, fishing and trapping rights, and guaranteed participation for Aboriginal peoples in decision-making processes on lands and environmental management.

In the NWT, claims settled to date include the Inuvialuit Final Agreement in 1984; the Gwich'in Agreement in 1992; and the Sahtu Dene and Metis Agreement in 1994. The Treaty 11 Dogrib Claim is currently in negotiation.

In Nunavut, the land claim agreement was settled in 1993.

In the Yukon Territory, an umbrella final agreement in 1993 set out the basis for negotiating settlements with each of the 14 Yukon First Nations. Seven individual claims have been settled under this agreement.

The North's economy faces unique challenges

The cornerstones of the North's economy are mining (diamonds, gold, lead, zinc), oil and gas development, and the traditional pursuits of hunting, trapping, fishing and arts and crafts. Tourism, including adventure tourism, is a rapidly growing industry in the Yukon, NWT and Nunavut.

The North faces some unique challenges when it comes to economic development. Northern entrepreneurs are often far away from primary markets and the business services they need to support their operations. Because of the North's remoteness, northern business people can also face very high transportation and communications costs.

In the past, the lack of a skilled northern work force has proven to be an obstacle to economic progress. But this situation is gradually changing. More and more companies that come to the North are negotiating partnerships with northerners. Under these agreements, northerners receive job training and a guaranteed percentage of the new jobs created.

Because of the North's remoteness and its small, scattered population, it does not enjoy an economy as diversified as southern Canada's. The northern economy's heavy

DIAND supports international Arctic co-operation

Over the past few years, a new international community of circumpolar countries has emerged in the Arctic. Circumpolar countries are nations that have lands in the Arctic. They are Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States. These countries face the same challenges when it comes to the Arctic, so why not work together?

The circumpolar countries first met in 1989 to discuss co-operative measures to protect the Arctic environment. In 1991, they established the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) to guide their actions.

In 1996, they formed the Arctic Council. Northern Aboriginal peoples are also participants. The Council's job is to address issues of common concern to the Arctic. These issues include the work of the AEPS, sustainable development, and improved health conditions and cultural well-being for the Aboriginal peoples of the North.

Canada's Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs is Mary Simon, an Inuk. In this capacity, she represents Canada at various international meetings on circumpolar issues.

reliance on non-renewable natural resources poses yet another challenge. This means that the North is far more sensitive than the national economy to the world's changing demand for these resources. But all three territories are taking steps to deal with these challenges.

Under the law, the territories are not entitled to receive equalization payments as provinces do. Because the Government of Canada

is committed to ensuring northerners have the kinds of programs and services that other Canadians enjoy, the federal government set up a special formula to transfer resources to the territories. This formula includes the following factors: population change, tax revenues, and changes in the spending levels of provincial and municipal governments in southern Canada.

DEFINITIONS

Aboriginal peoples: The descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people – Indians, Métis people and Inuit. These are three separate peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.

equalization payments: the redistribution of payments that the federal government makes from high-income to low-income provinces.

First Nation: A term that came into common usage in the 1970s to replace the word “Indian,” which many people found offensive. Although the term First Nation is widely used, no legal definition of it exists. Among its uses, the term “First Nations peoples” refers to the Indian people in Canada,

both Status and non-Status. Many Indian people have also adopted the term “First Nation” to replace the word “band” in the name of their community.

Inuit: An Aboriginal people in northern Canada, who live above the tree line in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Northern Quebec and Labrador. The word means “people” in the Inuit language – Inuktitut. The singular of Inuit is Inuk.

Métis: People of mixed First Nation and European ancestry who identify themselves as Métis people, as distinct from First Nations people, Inuit or non-Aboriginal people. The Métis have a unique culture that draws on their diverse ancestral origins, such as Scottish, French, Ojibway and Cree.

non-renewable natural resources: natural resources that, once removed, cannot be replaced. These include minerals taken from the earth, for example, or extracted oil and gas. Trees, on the other hand, are an example of a renewable natural resource because they can be replanted.

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