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## **UNIQUE WILDERNESS TOURISM VENTURE UNVEILED FOR NORTH YUKON**

WHITEHORSE – It’s been over ten years in the making and just over three years in detailed planning, but officials are taking the wraps off a unique wilderness tourism bear viewing experience developed to attract travelers from around the world.

Vuntut Development Corporation and bear specialist Phil Timpany, along with the support of Environment Yukon’s Parks Branch, have spent the past three years working on the new venture that will see small groups of visitors going in to the Ni’iinlii Njik Ecological Reserve between mid-September and mid-November each year.

“This venture puts forward a model for how communities and local governments can protect the environment, promote tourism and ecological awareness, and deliver economic opportunities for their local community,” Premier and Minister of Environment Dennis Fentie said.

Those economic benefits will accrue to Yukon service providers from Whitehorse to Dawson City and Old Crow, and to the employees and beneficiaries of the joint venture with the Vuntut Development Corporation.

Premier Fentie said the initiative in the ecological reserve complements the government’s Celebration of Parks program to increase awareness, appreciation and support for Yukon Parks among Yukoners and visitors.

Visitors to the ecological reserve will go to a site on the Fishing Branch River near Bear Cave Mountain, where grizzly bears congregate to feed on chum salmon. The area also supports a diversity of other wildlife species including moose, caribou, wolves, wolverine, fox and marten.

“This is an example of how we can protect the diversity of Yukon’s eco-regions and life-forms for future generations,” Fentie said. “Whether it is for the cultural and historical values, scientific and educational, or our physical and spiritual health – special places like Bear Cave Mountain deserve to be celebrated.”

Vuntut Gwitchin Chief Joe Linklater said the program will result in long term benefits for Old Crow.

“We can see this, and other similar activities, promoting Old Crow as a gateway to the Ni’iinlii Njik Ecological Reserve and the surrounding territorial and national parks, and a means to promote and highlight the North Yukon region.

“This protected area is very important to the Vuntut Gwitchin people. We are pleased to see our joint management of the Fishing Branch system, and Bear Cave Mountain in particular, progressing well, including the careful development of this unique wildlife viewing opportunity,” Chief Linklater said.

The bear viewing program was originally negotiated in the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement. Tours are expected to begin by mid-September.

Contact:

Peter Carr  
Cabinet Communications Advisor  
(867) 667-8688  
[peter.carr@gov.yk.ca](mailto:peter.carr@gov.yk.ca)

Dennis Senger  
Communications  
(867) 667 - 5237  
[dennis.senger@gov.yk.ca](mailto:dennis.senger@gov.yk.ca)

Phil Timpany, President  
Bear Cave Mountain  
Eco Adventures  
(867) 667 – 2283  
[phil@bearcavemountain.com](mailto:phil@bearcavemountain.com)

**Backgrounder**  
**Ni'iinlii Njik Ecological Reserve**  
**Grizzly Bear Viewing**

The genesis for the Bear Cave Mountain eco-tourism venture originated in the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement, which directed that the Ni'iinlii Njik Ecological Reserve and adjacent Vuntut Gwitchin Settlement Lands be managed as one ecological unit in order to protect the full diversity of wildlife populations, particularly salmon and grizzly bears.

The joint Management Plan for the Ecological Reserve and Settlement Lands requires that a risk management plan be completed before the commercial wildlife viewing program begins.

The Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Yukon governments agreed to a risk management plan and to a wildlife viewing proposal submitted by the Bear Cave Mountain Eco Adventures, a joint venture of the Vuntut Development Corporation and Phil Timpany, who is a wildlife viewing specialist with over 10 years experience in this remote area of northern Yukon.

Contributors to the development of the wildlife viewing program include The Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, the North Yukon Renewable Resources Council, Environment Yukon, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

The team that contributed to the planning of this project over the past three years included:

- Erik Val, Director of Yukon Parks - responsible for development of the program.
- Katie Hayhurst, Yukon Parks Planner – project manager.
- Melissa Valja, Planner of Vuntut Gwitchin Government (VGG) Department of Natural Resources and William Josie, former Director – Coordinator and Advisor of VGG partnership in the project.
- Gord MacRae, Yukon Parks Regional Superintendent – coordinator of the camp facility development in conjunction with Vuntut Gwitchin contractors.
- Ramona Maraj, Yukon Carnivore Biologist and Grant MacHutchon, Contract Biologist - technical advisors for risk management and monitoring.
- John Russell, Director and Yukon Conservation Officers – technical reviewers
- Teri Cherkewich, Yukon Justice Solicitor – legal advisor
- Ni'iinlii Njik (Fishing Branch) Committee of Managing Agencies – reviewers and advisors - co-chaired by Yukon and Vuntut Gwitchin Government and including
- North Yukon Renewable Resources Council (Stanley Njootli),
- Department of Fisheries and Oceans (Pat Milligan)
- Yukon Heritage Branch (Ruth Gotthardt)
- Phil Timpany, Bear Cave Mountain Eco Adventures - wildlife viewing operator and technical advisor.
- Ron Daub, Vuntut Development Corporation, Executive Director – partnership advisor.
- Dr. Kris Rothley, Advisor and Shelley Marshall, Graduate Student, Simon Fraser University School of Resources and Environment - collaborators with Yukon to develop the monitoring program and currently collecting baseline data

The first traveler to the area under this new arrangement is scheduled to visit there in September.

That visitor opportunity will also showcase the ecology and cultural history of this unique North Yukon area. This opportunity includes the Beringian karst landscape and a visit to the some of the caves of Bear Cave Mountain, where many of the Grizzly bears den in winter.

The manner on how that opportunity could be delivered was laid out for the Vuntut Development Corporation by Phil Timpany and Michelle Christensen. Timpany's 29 years of experience in working up close with bears makes him one of the most experienced Grizzly bear cinematographers in the world.

He has partnered with the Vuntut Development Corporation to form Bear Cave Mountain Eco Adventures.

The plan calls for a slow but gradual introduction of people to the viewing area with the maintenance of the pristine wilderness character being of the utmost importance.

The welfare of grizzly bears at Fishing Branch is paramount. Highly qualified guides and their knowledge of bear behavior will provide the basis for creating a safe viewing program.

The Ecological Reserve Management Plan limits commercial visitation numbers to five people per week. Access will be limited to one guide and four people at any given time. The plans are to start slowly, starting with only one guide and two people initially and gradually developing to full scale over the three-years of this pilot period..

This limit is being used for the viewing plan to minimize disturbance to bears, maintain quality viewing, increase human safety, and enhance the wilderness experience.

The process will allow the bears to become used to people being in the area at certain times of the day and in predictable location so that the bears will perceive the people viewing the activity as neutral and non-threatening.

The bear viewing facilities on the site will be limited to:

- A main cabin for staff accommodation and common kitchen
- Two sleeping cabins for visitors, connected to the main cabin by decking
- A high cache
- One outdoor toilet
- One main and one alternate helicopter landing pad
- **One elevated viewing platform**

A Risk Management Plan has also been produced to guide activities in the area.

It gives direction for minimizing the adverse effect of human activities on the ecology of the Ecological Reserve and Settlement Land, including grizzly bears.

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It calls for minimizing the probability of conflict between wildlife and humans and the procedures to be followed for responding to conflicts between wildlife and humans.

The Risk Management Plan is also drafted to promote continued co-operative human use management and information exchange among the Yukon Government, the Vuntut Gwitchin Government, the North Yukon Renewable Resources Council and Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Access to the site will be by helicopter travel out of Dawson City. Travel time is about 70 minutes.