

Stikine development affects Alaskans, Canadians

Editor's note:

Studies to determine the feasibility of the construction of a large scale hydro-electric dam (or series of dams) on the Stikine River by the British Columbia Hydro-Electric Authority have been taking place during the past two years, by both the B.C. Hydro and, more recently, the Tahltan Tribal Association of Telegraph Creek, B.C.

If and when constructed, the mammoth project will impact the lives of many people on both sides of the Canadian/Alaskan border.

The Stikine is an international river. Beginning high in the Cassiar Mountain Range and winding through some 400 miles of wilderness, the Stikine eventually spills into the Alaskan Inland Passage near Wrangell. The sediment build-up has been taking place at the mouth of the Stikine for an estimated 50 million years and has evolved into a wetlands area encompassing about 500,000 acres.

The Stikine's wetlands have become one of the last great wildlife refuges in the world. These wetlands are a critical habitat to wildlife ranging from migrating birds (approximately one half million migratory birds of various species depend on the area for food and rest each year) to the five types of salmon that spawn in the Lower Stikine.

The people that live along the Stikine naturally are very concerned about the proposed development. The Tahltan Indians face an uphill battle of seemingly impossible odds in opposing the proposed hydro-project. They are not the only group or organization opposed to such a large scale develop-



Sentiments about Stikine development shown on Istuk Community Hall in British Columbia.

ment on the Stikine, but seem to be the group that stand to lose the most should the dams be built.

The following article is reprinted from the *Telkwa Foundation Newsletter*, Telkwa, B.C. and all photographs accompanying the article are courtesy of the *Friends of the Stikine*.

By Tony Pearce

As the B.C. Utilities Commission prepares for up to eight months of public hearings on B.C. Hydro's proposed Site C dam in the northeast, another Hydro project is beginning to receive attention by a

different group of investigators.

The Tahltan Tribal Association in northwest B.C. is implementing the first part of a \$7 million, three-year program of field work in order to evaluate the effects of Hydro's proposed Stikine-Iskut projects.

Known as the Stikine Basin Resource Analysis, the study was designed by a planning team comprised equally of Tahltans and resource specialists during a four-day intensive workshop held in Vancouver in 1981. While the study is intended to assess the implications of resource de-

velopment generally within traditional Tahltan lands, the principal focus is the 2,800-megawatt, five-dam hydro-electric generation scheme on the Stikine's Grand Canyon and its major tributary, the Iskut.

Hydro itself, of course, is currently conducting environmental impact studies of the proposed development and some \$2 million has been spent for this purpose by the agency to date. The Tahltan people, for a number of reasons, believe that Hydro's work will be largely deficient. Moreover, they logically ask, how can a project proponent fairly and objectively evaluate the effects,

particularly the negative ones, of something they want to build;

The Tahltan study has several remarkable features to it, especially in contrast to Hydro's studies. First is its size and scope. Embracing some 20,000 square miles, the study area includes the entire Stikine watershed down to the United States/Canada border. Both the natural biophysical resources and the socio-cultural resources of the Stikine Basin will be inventoried as the first step in the analysis project (see Figure 1).

Hydro, on the other hand, has restricted its impact studies to the vicinity of the impoundment areas and the downstream reaches. Many of the effects of the development, such as impacts on big game in the basin resulting from increased hunting pressure by workers during dam and transmission line construction, would therefore go unassessed.

Second, the Resource Analysis will represent the first time in this part of Canada that we know of where the emphasis is as much on process as it is on product. The Study Team will comprise outside resource specialists working with Tahltan resource people in each sector. The Tahltan members of each sectoral study team will be providing local knowledge and expertise to the project while the specialists will be demonstrating to the local team members ways and means of systematically collecting, organizing and processing raw

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Habitat capabilities must be studied

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field data. By the time the project is completed, Tahltan team members should be competent field researchers and resource managers in one or more particular disciplines. A criterion of project success will be the redundancy of the specialists by the time of project completion.

Third, unlike the Hydro studies, the Tahltan study will focus on the loss of future options for Tahltan economic and social development as a result of the proposed hydro-electric scheme. This is an important distinction! The Stikine is different from most other regions in the province in that it is a relatively pristine area. Little resource development has occurred to date. No mineral production, no timber harvesting, no manufacturing or processing facilities, little land alienation, etc., render the region comparatively wild and undeveloped. A single road corridor and an abandoned railway grade comprise the principal incursions into the Stikine territory. That its present state of regional economic development appears inconsequential in comparison with other river basins in the southern parts of the province does not mean the Stikine is with-

out abundant resource value or development potential.

A proper assessment of the effects of a large hydro-electric project cannot, then, be restricted to the present situation. Impacts to the present inventory of resource values (i.e. the present level of utilization) are only the short-term part of the picture. The capability of the region to generate resource value, and alternative development options for the future, must also be examined.

For example, present levels of wildlife species population in a certain habitat (eg. goats in the Grand Canyon, sockeye in the Tahltan River, etc.) do not necessarily indicate the full potential of the habitat to support those species. Thus a capability assessment of the habitat must be an integral component of impact evaluation. Resource capability in all sectors must be examined, for it is a measure of the alternative futures available to other resource users, not the least of which, of course, could be the Tahltans themselves. In the resource economist's jargon, it is the "opportunity costs" of the project that must be examined in evaluating costs and benefits of development. This is a main focus of the Tahltan

study.

The Tahltan Tribal Association has now received \$150,000 from the Department of Indian Affairs (D.I.A.) as project start-up funds. This money will be applied toward the fisheries, terrestrial wildlife, and biophysical mapping component during the course of the coming winter. Additional funds from D.I.A. are also expected for the forthcoming fiscal year in April of 1982. In the meantime, Tahltan representatives must undertake a large fund-raising campaign to supply the remaining 90 percent of project operating costs not covered by the federal government's contribution.

In June of 1982, the Governor of Alaska and the Premier of the Province of British Columbia, Canada signed an agreement promising the exchange of information (between governments) concerning the feasibility studies and relative impacts the proposed hydro development in the Stikine area would have on the environment and populace integrated into the Stikine's prominent, present-day role.

The two-to-three-member panels responsible for the information exchange, one panel from Alaska (appointed by the Governor) and the other panel



Opponents of the dam gather to discuss the situation.

from British Columbia, (appointed by the Premier) will hold a public meeting in Juneau, Alaska in November.

The Tahltan Tribal Association has prioritized their feasibility study and are concentrating on the socio-economic impacts the proposed hydro development will have on the area and population.

Anyone wishing more information about the status of the feasibility studies can inquire

by writing: Henry Tashoots, Iskut Band Council, Iskut, B.C. Canada; Ivan Quok, Tahltan Band Council, Telegraph Creek, B.C. Canada; or George Asp, Pres. Association of United Tahltans, Smithers, B.C., Canada.

Information and a newsletter can be obtained by written request to: Friends of the Stikine, 4669 Drummond Dr., Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6R 1E8.