

Old Crow wants park to protect Porcupine herd

From the Whitehorse Star

The people of Old Crow want the Porcupine Caribou here protected with a new, national wilderness park in the northern Yukon.

According to Grafton Njootli, Old Crow's representative at the Council for Yukon Indians, he met with Old Crow residents recently to ask for directions about dealing with "the slow mechanisms that the government are using to kill off the 110,000 Porcupine Caribou."

The caribou, said Njootli, are the basis of the Old Crow peoples' livelihood.

"This proposal for a wilderness park is specifically designed to benefit the Native people by protecting their renewable resources and by preserving the land in its natural state," said Njootli.

He said the Old Crow people must play an important part in management of any such park and, in particular, be able to manage over the caribou herd.

If a park was established the "Old Crow people must be guaranteed...their rights to live, hunt, trap and fish within its boundaries," said Njootli.

Njootli called for the immediate withdrawal of the land and water areas needed for such a park from any development, including limiting access to the area as a tourist attraction.

He said the Porcupine herd has flourished until recently because of its isolation, but disturbances like aircraft, the presence of the Dempster Highway and "sudden noises from people, machinery, and other activities from development, when repeated can drive the herd from their range."

Njootli pointed out that a number of other herds in the Yukon and Alaska and elsewhere in Canada "have abandoned their ranges and they have decreased in numbers after they came in contact with industrial man."

Believing that the same thing can happen to the Porcupine herd because of increased access and more activity, Njootli said

there is "no alternative but to establish a wilderness park in the two major areas of the herd's breeding and wintering areas."

The area Njootli proposes for a park is the region north of the Ogilvie River, including Eagle Plains to the Peel River, then north from the Old Crow area to include Herschel Island and three miles of Arctic waters.

This will protect both the herd's migration routes and their north slope breeding grounds, he said.

Such a park can be set up under the national parks system, said Njootli, but "it will be a new park, a wilderness park."

Such an action would serve as a "clear indication of intent" of government to follow its own stated policy, said Njootli, adding it would also be a starting point for the planning of a full-fledged park and allow negotiations with Alaska to make the area an international park to begin.

Old Crow's proposal echoes calls by conservationists in Whitehorse in October 1970 for the establishment of an International Wildlife Range to be established in the Yukon as part of the present Alaska Wildlife Range.

Jean Chretien, then minister for Indian affairs and northern development, endorsed the plan, but nothing ever came of it.

A wide range of Canadian conservation groups, as well as American conservationists, have lauded the idea of an Arctic International Wildlife Park.

The federal government in a policy statement on northern development in the 1970's, said government priorities included maintaining and enhancing the natural environment through intensified ecological research, more national parks and wildlife conservation policies.

During the inquiry into Arctic Gas' proposed natural gas pipeline down the MacKenzie Valley, Mr. Justice Tom Berger, the inquiry chairman, recommended the establishment of a Wildlife

sanctuary in the Old Crow region.

According to Njootli, the federal government, under the Territorial Lands Act, has the power to designate the area as a land reserve.