



Whose Hinterland? Gwich'in Cultural Geography and the Narrative of Northern Canadian 'Wilderness'

who are we?

We are the Gwich'ya Gwich'in and Teett'it Gwich'in. We are among the most northerly Indigenous nations in North America. We live in an area where the boreal forest meets the tundra, where we hunt migrating caribou, pick berries, and fish along the waterways, amid a backdrop of soaring mountains, spruce-dominated boreal forests, and large flatlands dotted with innumerable lakes, rivers, and deltas.

Today, many of us live in the communities of Teett'it Zheh (Fort McPherson), Tsiigehtchic, Aklavik and Inuvik in the Northwest Territories, and we are participants of a land claim agreement we negotiated to protect and preserve our lands and our way of life. Our traditional lands extended from the headwaters of the Teett'it Gwiniik (Peel River) and Tsiigehnjik (Arctic Red River) in the south, to the Ehditai (Mackenzie Delta) in the north, from the Sryuh Choo Njik (Anderson River) in the east, to the Teett'it Ddhaa Tat (Richardson Mountains) in the west. Many Gwich'in families have summer and winter camps throughout the Gwich'in Settlement Region, where we continue to practice our traditional ways of life such as hunting, trapping, plant harvesting, and fishing. At these camps, we share meals with our friends and family, along with stories, legends, and histories as we have always done. It's through these stories and gatherings that we continue to pass along our information, knowledge of the land and our people.

the myth

There is a persistent and damaging myth that Gwich'in and other northern lands are wild, empty hinterlands unknown to a soul, except for perhaps to a handful of rugged scientists and mineral prospectors. This myth is both false and damaging: Gwich'in lands are well-known, well-documented, and layered and imbued with our use, sacred knowledge, and thousands of years of history. Our knowledge of our landscapes has been passed from generation to generation through a complex oral history; an oral history which ranges from delightful and comical to heavy and morally instructive, but one always sewn to the land with Gwich'in place names and other cultural geographies. The 'northern wilderness' myth is also damaging, as it allows colonial practices and ideas to continue to damage and infringe upon our Gwich'in rights.



Photos: Berry harvesting camp August 26, 2024. Credit: Arlyn Charlie, Gwich'in Tribal Council.

Gwich'in cultural geography

In 1976, Gwich'ya Gwich'in knowledge holder Robert Andre spoke publicly at an enquiry about the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline, which would have bisected his traditional lands north of the Nagwichoonjik (Mackenzie River) if it were built.

"Well, perhaps at this time maybe we should bring your attention to the map behind you. The area that has been used by our people for the last hundreds of years. At present, there is many of our people that are still out on the land. There's some up the Arctic Red River, up the Mackenzie, down around Point Separation and then the delta. There are quite a few people out on the land at present. [And] this map is incomplete. All the lines are not drawn in. There's still a lot of people that have to put their [information], how they have used the land in the past. Soon you won't see any green in there... I tell you, once [we] have covered all the maps [with our trails], it will be **just a black sheet of paper.**"

Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, before the Honourable Mr. Justice Berger, Commissioner. Arctic Red River, N.W.T. March 13, 1976 (Volume 47) Vancouver, BC: Allwest Reporting Ltd.

the maps

Maps are not simply tools of navigation. They tell stories, constrict and enable imaginations, and exert control. Maps of our lands often fail to uphold our stories and histories. For example, the map to your left is projected to a Northwest Territories Lambert projection, which is a territorial standard. It has a central meridian at -112°, which is closer to the administrative center and territorial capital of Yellowknife, and more than 1,100 kilometers from the Gwich'in communities around -133° and -135°. The use of this projection, while common for maps made of our lands, wildly skews the area clockwise compared to how we prefer to see our lands mapped. GIS programs will add a north arrow that points directly up on the page, despite the clear rotation of the features on the map—clear to any Gwich'in audience. The central meridian of the projection being far to the east of the map also confers a sense that the area is well outside of an imagined heartland; peripheral to the main event. The Gwich'in Settlement Region is symbolized on this map, which is the extent of the lands within our land claim agreement boundaries, along with the Dempster Highway and the modern communities. These are administrative and modern points and line features, tied in complex ways to our land use and travels, but also hallmarks of the settlement of our lands by others. This map may capture the vast beauty of our lands, but it supports the myth of an unoccupied, unknown hinterland, a myth that is simply untrue.

The map to your right shows just a selection of our cultural map layers, projected to our own Gwich'in Lambert projection. It includes a selection of the more than 800 Gwich'in place names which we have carefully recorded over several decades and submitted for official recognition. It also includes trails recorded in the 1970s and 1980s by the Dene Nation, in interviews with a sample of about 1/3 of our Elders, and it includes cabin and camp locations. This map doesn't include the numerous layers we have of our biophysical knowledge and traditional use (such as caribou habitat and hunting areas), because, as Robert Andre said, that map would simply be a **black sheet of paper.**

We encourage you to bring your attention to the map on the right to get a sense of how we see our lands: tied, inextricably, to our lives, our history, and our knowledge.

