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Position on Community-Initiated Protected Areas in the Mackenzie Valley

WWF-Canada believes that any future development of natural gas reserves in Canada's Mackenzie Valley should only occur in full accordance with government, industry, and community commitments to build a sustainable future for the North. At a minimum, this requires that prior to completion of a major energy corridor, a network of protected areas be established that adequately represents the ecoregions affected by such development and safeguards key wildlife habitats and culturally significant areas. This network of protected areas should be identified and championed by the people who live there.

The principle of sequencing long-term conservation interests as a first priority is rooted in most northern land claim agreements. A representative network of protected areas will safeguard crucial natural and cultural values, and provide essential benchmark reference areas against which to assess (and hence mitigate) the cumulative and long-term impacts of industrial development. This is especially important in Canada's Arctic – a sensitive region predicted to be most severely impacted by climate change, where much remains unknown about ecosystem processes, wildlife distribution and ecological requirements, and their sensitivities to cumulative industrial development.

In 1992, recognizing the many long-term benefits of a community-initiated network of protected areas, the federal, territorial and provincial governments in Canada all committed to completing a network of representative terrestrial protected areas by 2000. Yet, thus far only one third of Canada's 486 terrestrial ecoregions are adequately or even moderately represented. In the Northwest Territories' Mackenzie Valley, only five of the 16 ecoregions that are directly intersected by the proposed major gas pipeline or adjacent hydrocarbon development areas are reasonably represented by protected areas. This contrasts markedly with the situation in Alaska, where substantial portions of the state are designated as protected areas and conservation lands (see Map).

Unlike the situation 30 years ago, when Justice Berger's Royal Commission recommended against building a Mackenzie pipeline until Aboriginal land claims were settled and key conservation areas were set aside, many NWT residents now support a Mackenzie Valley pipeline. But, they also insist that economic development occurs in the right way, ensuring that the land and renewable resources are protected for future generations.

There is now a community-based *NWT Protected Areas Strategy (PAS)*, and an associated *Five-year Action Plan* to 2009 that builds on Ministerial commitments to safeguard key natural and cultural areas ahead of pipeline completion – in other words while the conservation opportunity still exists. Industrial exploration for oil, gas and mineral resources is accelerating rapidly in the Mackenzie Valley today, with a full application to build a \$7 billion gas pipeline submitted in October 2004.



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WWF-Canada believes that the *NWT PAS Five-Year Action Plan*, which is already supported by the Aboriginal, industry, government and environmental NGO partners in the *PAS*, must now be implemented fully to establish an adequate network of culturally significant and ecologically representative protected areas by 2009. The federal and territorial governments and ENGO partners have now committed the funding to implement this *Action Plan* to 2009.

Comprehensive regional land use planning should also be completed ahead of major industrial activity, to ensure that special cultural and ecological areas are adequately mapped, protected and functionally connected.

Communities have already identified many of these areas of great cultural and harvesting importance in the NWT portions of the Mackenzie Valley, and most of these areas are known to be of high ecological value (see Map). Over the past 30 years some important terrestrial protected areas have been established in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region; and the Gwich'in, Sahtu, Dehcho and Dogrib First Nations have identified large areas they consider important to protect now, in their natural state, for future generations.

But with major decisions expected in 2005 on further access for exploration and development of oil, gas and mineral reserves in the Mackenzie Valley, it is vital that these areas of high cultural and ecological importance be reserved under the *PAS* process. WWF-Canada believes that the *PAS* interim 5-year withdrawals of development access for key natural areas is a pragmatic approach that should be taken. This approach allows for full resource assessments to be made prior to future decisions about long-term land use. Only in this way will a satisfactory balance of socio-cultural, economic and environmental values be achieved in this spectacular region.

WWF-Canada strongly supports the demonstrated commitment of northern communities to engage in this balanced, long-term approach to deliver a sustainable future for Northerners. Therefore, WWF-Canada will continue to support further habitat conservation achievements through the NWT *PAS* and land use planning initiatives, ahead of major industrial developments in the Mackenzie Valley.

The principle of respecting community wishes to sequence conservation first is formally and unanimously supported by WWF's entire international network which regards the Mackenzie Valley as an important global precedent for whether development will be truly sustainable.

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