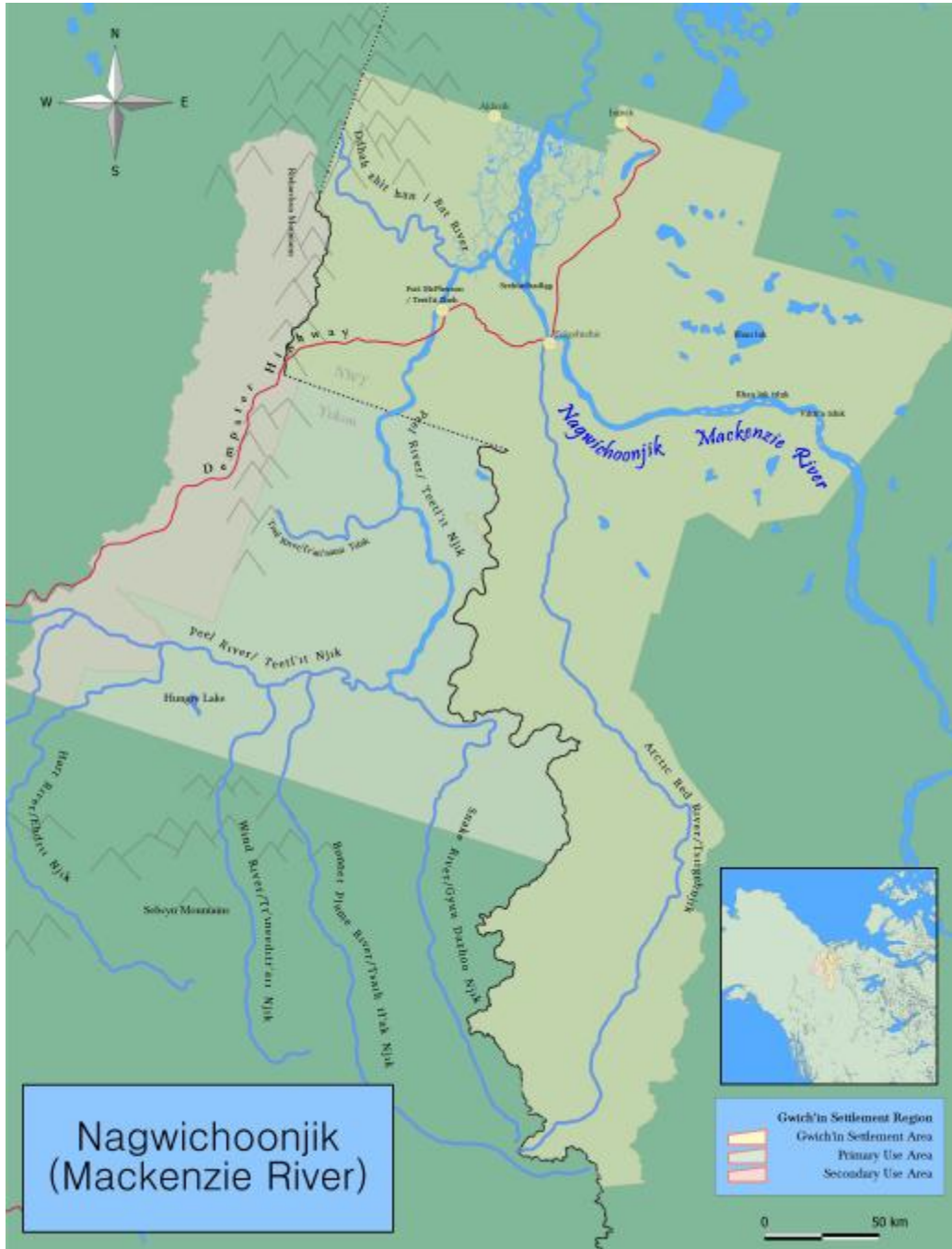


# Nagwichoonyjik, the 'river through a big country'



## Gwich'in Chapter

### Nomination of the Mackenzie River as a Canadian Heritage River

Prepared by Randy Freeman, DownNorth Consulting, Yellowknife October 6, 2005

*The Mackenzie River corridor from Vihtr'ii tshik [Thunder River] to about Srehtadhadlaih [Point Separation] ... was important for a number of reasons. It was one of the links connecting the different regions, and most families travelled on the river at some point during the year. Many families also spent the summer season at one of the fish camps located on both sides of the river. The sites for the great summer gatherings of ts'ii deii days were also located along this stretch of the river. So important is the river that, in [Gwich'in Elder] Gabe Andre's words, it is a 'highway' of the Gwichya Gwich'in.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Heine, Alestine Andre, Ingrid Kritsch, Alma Cardinal and the Elders of Tsiigehtchic. Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak: The History and Stories of the Gwichya Gwich'in. (Tsiigehtchic and Yellowknife, NT: Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, 2001) 59.

## Introduction

Nagwichoonjik is the traditional Gwich'in name for the Mackenzie River. The name means 'river through a big country' and for the Gwich'in of the Northwest Territories it's both literally and figuratively their main 'highway', the backbone of their traditional lands.

## Background

The Gwich'in inhabit an expanse of sub-arctic boreal forest stretching from the interior of Alaska eastward through northern Yukon to the lower Mackenzie valley of the Northwest Territories. The most easterly of the Gwich'in regional groups are the Teet'it Gwich'in and Gwichya Gwich'in. More recently Gwich'in living in Aklavik have begun to refer to themselves as Ehdit'at Gwich'in while those residing in Inuvik call themselves Nihtat Gwich'in.

The Gwichya Gwich'in are named for a distinctive geographical feature of their homeland.

*A long time ago, a man climbed up into the mountains along Tsiigehnjik [Arctic Red River]. Turning back to look down towards the river, he noticed that the place where Tsiigehnjik and Nagwichoonjik come together, is a really flat area. The man later visited the people living there, and told them that he would call them 'the people of the flat land', Gwichya Gwich'in.<sup>1</sup>*

The traditional homelands of the Teet'it Gwich'in (literally the Peel River people) include much of the upper Peel River watershed. With the establishment of the fur trade post of Fort McPherson on the lower Peel River in the mid-1800s the Teet'it Gwich'in began to move down the Peel to be closer to this trading post

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<sup>1</sup> Nap Norbert, Googwandak Community Review Meeting. Tsiigehtchic, NT, January 28-31, 2000: Tapes 01-17.

and today Fort McPherson is considered their main community. Their territory borders on Nagwichoonjik.

The Gwich'in of the Northwest Territories can further be divided into groups defined by the regions they returned to year after year.

*Families living in the Mackenzie Delta were Ehdyee Tat Gwich'in, 'Delta people.' Families moving up Tsiigehnjik to live in the mountains were Tsiigehnjik Gwich'in, 'Arctic Red River people.' Khaii Luk Gwich'in were those families who spent the winter season at the winter fish camps around Khaii luk and Vidi' chu'. The Nagwichoonjik Gwich'in lived along the banks of the Mackenzie River.<sup>1</sup>*

For the sake of clarity and brevity the term Gwich'in is used throughout this Nomination Chapter to refer, collectively, to all Teet'it Gwich'in, Gwichya Gwich'in, Ehdiitat Gwich'in and Nihtat Gwich'in in the Northwest Territories.

Nagwichoonjik forms the central axis of Gwich'in lands in the Northwest Territories. These lands extend, in the south, from the headwaters of Tsiigehnjik 'the iron river' (Arctic Red River); northwest to Teet'it njik (Peel River) and the southern half of the Mackenzie Delta, south of an east-west line between Inuvik and Aklavik; east past Vadzaih van 'caribou lake' (Caribou Lake) to the Anderson River; south to the confluence of Viht'ii tshik 'flint river' (Thunder River) and Nagwichoonjik; and southwest to Siveezhoo (meaning unknown).

These are the traditional lands where Gwich'in families travelled. They're bordered on the south and southeast by the traditional lands of the Sahtu Dene and on the north and northwest by the traditional lands of the Siglit and more

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<sup>1</sup> Heine et al., Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak 61.

recently of the Inuvialuit. According to Gwich'in oral history these boundaries were somewhat flexible as

*Gwich'in hunters would travel downriver [Nagwichoonjik] past Vàdzaih degaii zheh (Reindeer Station) for the summer caribou hunt [while] ... other families would travel down the Kugaluk [Kuuvalu'] and Anderson Rivers all the way to the [Arctic] coast [and] ... the Eskimo, in turn, sometimes travelled up the Mackenzie [Nagwichoonjik] as far as the mouth of Vihtr'ii tshik (Thunder River) to collect cooking stones and flint.<sup>1</sup>*



### Mackenzie River Gwich'in Cultural Working Group

The task of reviewing, discussing and presenting, in this Nomination Chapter, the Gwich'in cultural perspective and values of Nagwichoonjik was undertaken by the Mackenzie River Gwich'in Cultural Working Group. The Working Group members are Neil Colin, Fort McPherson; Abraham Peterson, Fort McPherson; Douglas Kendo, Tsiigehtchic; Noel Andre, Tsiigehtchic; Eliza Greenland, Aklavik; Fanny Greenland, Aklavik; Fred B. Jerome, Inuvik and Willie Simon, Inuvik.

<sup>1</sup> Heine et al., Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak 52-53.

Each member of the Working Group was nominated by their respective communities to represent them in this process to nominate the Mackenzie River as a Canadian Heritage River.

The Working Group held two meetings, Thursday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005 (referred to in this document as 2005a) and June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005 (2005b). Also present were Ingrid Kritsch, (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute), Alestine Andre (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute), Raquel Cli-Michaud (RWED, Gov't of the Northwest Territories) and Randy Freeman (writer/historian, DownNorth Consulting). The information and insight the Working Group provided during these meetings forms the bulk of the contents of this chapter. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of A Cultural Framework for Canadian Heritage Rivers (Canadian Heritage River System, January 2000) was used as a general guide for organizing this information.

### **Resource Harvesting**

"That Mackenzie sure brought us lots of things, I know. Lots of food and fish and birds and geese ... lots of rabbits, beaver, muskrat, moose, caribou, bear, etc".<sup>1</sup>

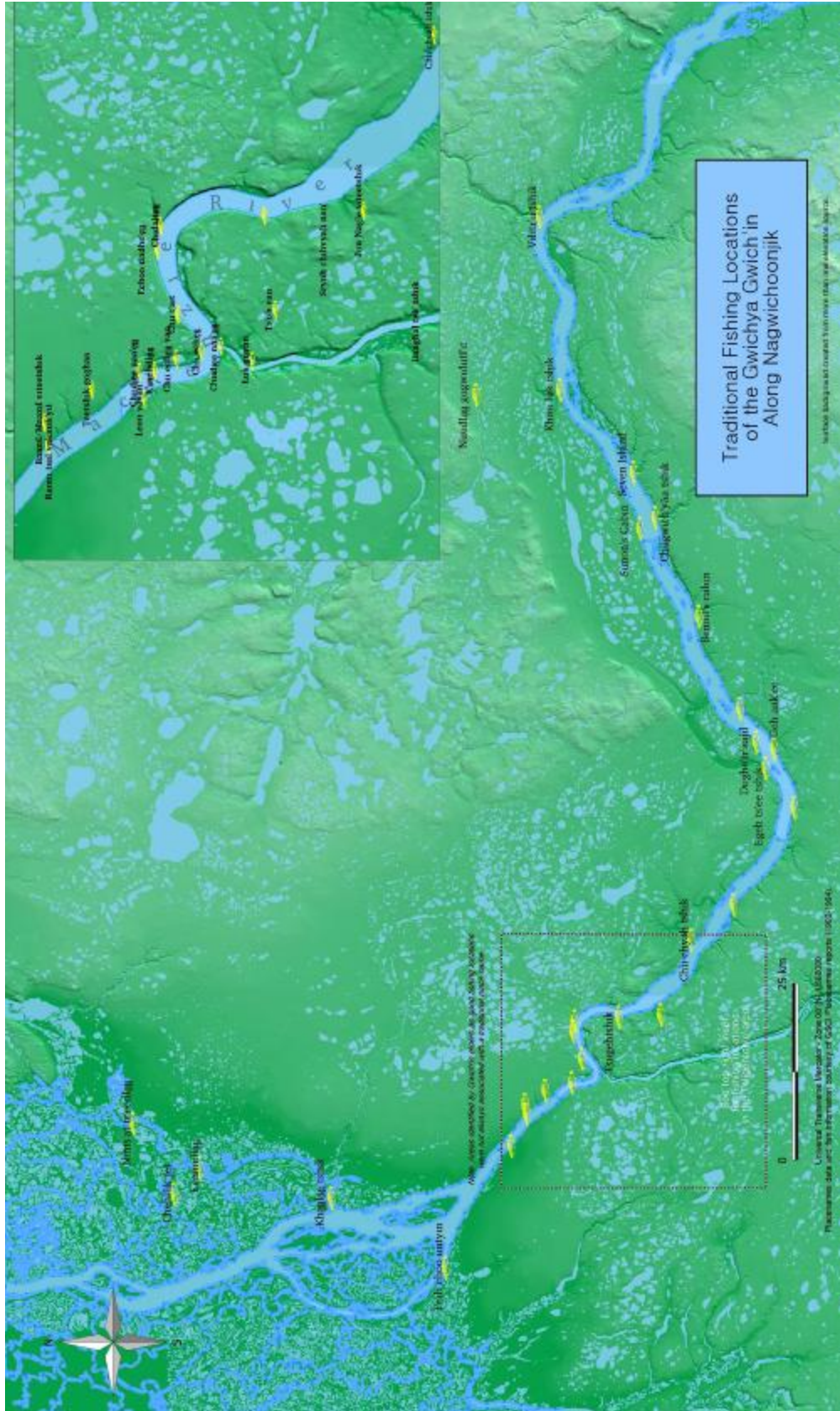
### Fishing

All Gwich'in, during pre-contact and well into fur-trade times, "shared a traditional life-style based on large-scale fishing during the summer, and heavy reliance on caribou and moose during the remainder of the seasonal cycle".<sup>2</sup>

For the Gwich'in, and especially the Nagwichoonyik Gwich'in ('Mackenzie River people'), summer fish camps play an important role in their lives. Fish camps are set up at 'eddies' (*k'in'eedlääi*, Gwichya Gwich'in dialect or *ok* in the Teet'it Gwich'in dialect), places along the river where the current is either still or flows

<sup>1</sup> Neil Colin (Mackenzie River Gwich'in Cultural Working Group) 2005a,b.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Heine, "That river, it's like a highway for us." The Mackenzie River through Gwichya Gwich'in history and culture. Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada Agenda Paper. (Tsiigehtchic and Yellowknife, NT: Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, 1997) 4.



Nagwichoonyjik, the 'river through a big country'

against the main current. These are generally located at obstructions in the river or at the mouths of creeks that flow into Nagwichoonyjik. Fish are caught in nets set in these eddies and the summer is spent smoking and drying fish.

*I've been going back to the same fish camp for twenty or thirty years and before me it's been there forever ... I go back there because there's a nice eddy on the river and there are other places where there are eddies but I know that place where I go. People seem to go back to the same one.<sup>1</sup>*

Use of these traditional summer fishing places along Nagwichoonyjik dates back to a time long before the missionaries and traders came to this land. There was a dramatic increase in the use of these fishing places during the time of the fur trade because of the increased use of dog teams and the need to feed these dogs during the winter. The Working Group agreed that no one owned or owns these fishing places but that the use by individuals or families is recognized and respected.



Nagwichoonyjik east of Tsiigehtchic

The Journals of both Sir Alexander Mackenzie (1789) and Sir John Franklin (1825) mention visiting traditional Gwich'in fish camps on the banks of

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<sup>1</sup> Alestine Andre (Mackenzie River Gwich'in Cultural Working Group) 2005a.



Nagwichoonjik. Archaeological investigations in the lower Mackenzie valley have pushed the known dates for the use of these fish camps well back.

*Excavations undertaken in 1992 and again in 1993, at the Tsiigehtchic (MiTr-1) site of Arctic Red River, demonstrate repeated, intensive summer to fall occupations for at least the last thirteen centuries... [and] ... other sites [along Nagwichoonjik] appear to have been repeatedly used, particularly as fishing stations. Given its great abundance in the Mackenzie River during summer and fall, fish has likely for a very long time been an important resource for local inhabitants. The recovery of fish remains in association with lithic artifacts at a few sites seems to substantiate this proposition.<sup>1</sup>*

Throughout the summer a variety of fish are caught and processed.

*At our camp at Tree River we would get, in early June, suckers first and after that would be coney. There are always jackfish in the creek and along the shore – close to the shore on the river – and then there are whitefish. Then while the whitefish is running we usually catch crookedback ... and sometimes you would get the odd pickerel, sriijaa (grayling or 'bluefish'), the odd trout, the odd lake whitefish, ling cod or loche are caught in the spring ... once in a blue moon the odd salmon.<sup>2</sup>*

Nagwichoonjik not only provides the fish but also the means and materials to dry and preserve it. Cut poles from the Mackenzie are used for hanging fish in the smokehouses and as tent poles for the summer's accommodation. All different types of driftwood ('doo') is used in the smoking process. The amount of

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<sup>1</sup> Luc Nolin and Jean-Luc Pilon. "Archaeological Potential Along the Lower Mackenzie River, N.W.T.: Recent Data and Some Considerations" in Jean-Luc Pilon, ed., Bridges Across Time: The NOGAP Archaeological Project (Canadian Archaeological Association Occasional Paper No. 2, 1994) 166-167.

<sup>2</sup> Andre, Alestine 2005a.

driftwood along the banks of Nagwichoonjik can vary dramatically from year to year. Last spring there was

*hardly any driftwood, I don't know why. Might be lots up river but nothing down here and that makes it hard. More work for somebody that's fishing and drying fish ... last summer I had to go about 15 miles up the Mackenzie before I hit some wood for the smokehouse.*<sup>1</sup>

The high waters of this past spring brought a lot of driftwood down Nagwichoonjik, “now it's too much! We got lots this year.”<sup>2</sup>

Dryfish, smoked fish and even fresh fish ('split fish') from Nagwichoonjik is always in demand year round but often only available for a short while in the summer and fall. Fishing and processing fish is very hard work and today some Gwich'in sell their fish to supplement their annual income. “I sell my dryfish to the tourists ... twenty five maybe thirty dollars for each fish.”<sup>3</sup>

### Shoreline Resource Harvesting

A variety of plants and berries are harvested along the Mackenzie River. Most prominent are ts'eenakal (raspberry), ts'iigyüü' (wild rhubarb), and treh (*Hedysarum alpinum* 'bear root'). “Another thing we used to get is red and black currents ... the red currents would be just along the Mackenzie ... they seem to be just above the high water mark ... people used to make jam with them.”<sup>4</sup>

The following list shows the variety of plants from along Nagwichoonjik used by the Gwich'in. Plant names are shown in both Gwichya Gwich'in (G) and Teetl'it Gwich'in (T) below. Those without (G) or (T) are the same in both dialects.

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Andre, Mackenzie River Gwich'in Cultural Working Group 2005a.

<sup>2</sup> Noel Andre, Mackenzie River Gwich'in Cultural Working Group 2005b.

<sup>3</sup> Andre, Noel 2005b.

<sup>4</sup> Andre, Alestine 2005a.

English	Gwichya (G) / Teet'it Gwich'in (T) dialects	
Bear root	treh (G)	trih (T)
Birch	aa'too	
Bearberry	dzhii ndèe' (G)	shih jak (T)
Black currant	deetree jàk	
Crowberry	dineech'ùh (G)	dineech'uh (T)
Blueberry	jàk zheii (G)	jak zheii (T)
Cranberry	natà'at	
Fungus	edinìichii	
Horsetail	kheh dyè' (G)	kheh dì' (T)
Juniper	deetrèe jàk (G)	ts'ìivii ch'ok (T)
Soapberry	dìnjik jàk (G)	dinjik jàk (T)
Moss	nin'	
Muskeg tea	lidii maskig (G)	lidii masgit (T)
Poplar	t'oo	
Raspberry	ts'eenakal	
Red currant	eneeyù' (G)	nee'uu (T)
Red willow	k'oh	
Wild rhubarb	ts'iigyüü' (G)	ts'iigyüü' (T)
Rosehips	nich'ih (G)	nichih (T)
Spruce	ts'iivii	
Stoneberry	dàn daih (G)	dan daih (T)
Tamarack	ts'iiteenjùh (G)	tsiihenjoh (T)
White moss	uhdeezhù' (G)	uudeezhu' (T)
Willow	k'aii' (G)	k'ài' (T)
Yarrow	at'àn dagäï (G)	at'àn dagài (T)
Yellowberry	nakàl (G)	nakal (T)

### Trapping and hunting

Nagwichoonyik provides access, in all seasons, to the areas where people hunt and trap. “There are a lot of trails along the river that are going inland from the river, either south or north ... whether winter trails or summer trails, walking trails, dog team trails.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andre, Alestine 2005a.



Nagwichoonjik, the 'river through a big country'

Trapping fox, marten, mink and lynx and hunting moose takes place in the winter. In the late winter and spring beaver and muskrat are trapped while there's still snow on the land. In anticipation of spring break up a good camp is found and after break up, when there's open water, beaver and muskrat are hunted using a small canoe and a .22 rifle. Spring and early summer was the time for hunting ducks and geese. Summer moose hunting and fish camps keep most Gwich'in busy through till fall when a good place to camp was found to wait for winter and the cycle began again.

While this once important annual cycle is no longer relevant for most Gwich'in, especially with the decline in trapping over the past decades, hunting continues to be an important source of food for many Gwich'in. Moose habitat in the willow flats along Nagwichoonyjik, geese and duck hunting areas, and trails to caribou hunting areas make this river of continuing importance to the Gwich'in. "You could go to lots of places [along the Mackenzie], we all know the country, lots of moose all over right now ... caribou is coming back too."<sup>1</sup>

#### Mines and quarries

"Thunder River – they call that in our language Flint River because there's flint there [near its junction with Nagwichoonyjik]."<sup>2</sup> Archaeological surveys and excavations in 1973, 1982, 1988 and most extensively in 1992 have demonstrated that the junction of Viht'ii tshik (Thunder River) and Nagwichoonyjik (Mackenzie River) is perhaps the most important known archaeological site in the lower Mackenzie valley. A side-notched projectile point recovered during the 1992 excavations suggests the earliest use of this site to be between 2000 to 6000 years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Colin 2005a.

<sup>2</sup> Colin 2005a.

The site clearly has

*unique status among reported archaeological sites in the lower Mackenzie Valley, which generally have relatively small artifact assemblages ... [and] ... the significance of the Thunder River confluence as a source of lithic material is also documented by native place names for the location, and early historic references. Elders of Arctic Red River call the locality Vihtr'itshik – 'Flint Creek' or 'Flint River', while Fort Good Hope people refer to it as Feettee Lu She – 'stone hide scraper or flat stone, skipping on water'. The mouth of the Thunder River is probably the location identified by Alexander Mackenzie in 1789 as a source of lithic raw material for both Dene and Inuit groups.<sup>1</sup>*

Ochre (tsaih) and sulphur (gwinahkhò) is also found at various places in the region. Sulphur, "it's kind of green stuff, put in your mouth...it's good for stomach. They use that for medicine."<sup>2</sup> Ochre is used to dye snowshoes, dog whip handles, and other items. It's important to remember that when people gather sulphur or ochre they must 'pay for it', they must leave matches, tobacco or other small items, otherwise they will soon encounter a storm.

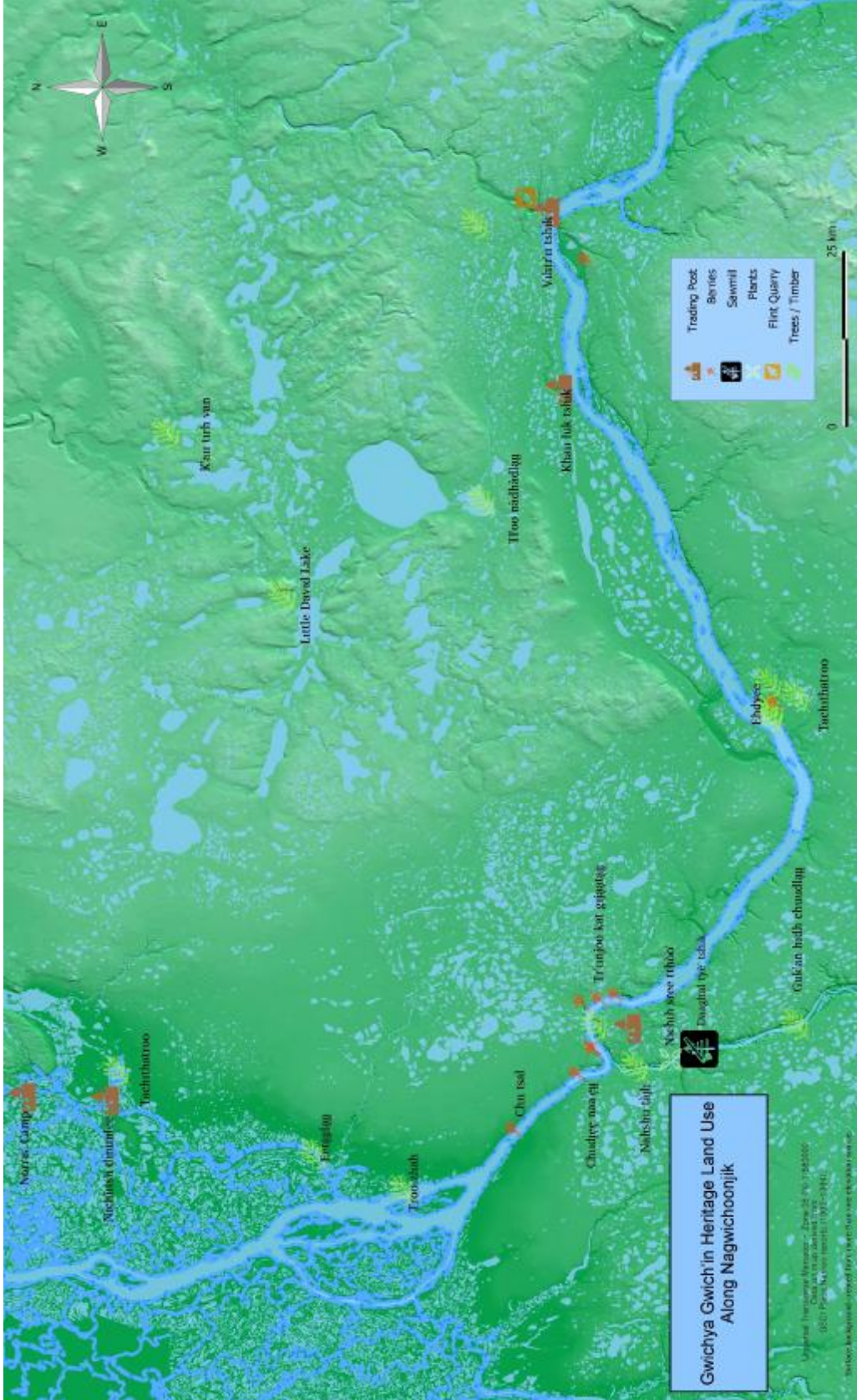
### Wood

The harvesting of wood became an important source of income for the Gwich'in beginning with the first of the steam-driven paddle wheelers on Nagwichoonjik. These ships needed enormous amounts of wood and from the late 1880s through to the 1940s – when diesel engines replaced steam engines – many Gwich'in would make their living cutting and stacking cordwood along the banks

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<sup>1</sup> David Pokotylo "Archaeological Investigations at *Vihtr'itshik* (MiTi-1), Lower Mackenzie Valley, 1992" in Jean-Luc Pilon ed., Bridges Across Time: The NOGAP Archaeological Project (Canadian Archaeological Association Occasional Paper No. 2, 1994) 171.

<sup>2</sup> Colin 2005a.



Nagwichoonjik, the 'river through a big country'

of Nagwichoonyik. And it was a good living. In the 1940s people were paid two dollars for each cord of wood they cut, hauled and stacked along the Mackenzie. Noel Andre recalled seeing, in 1942, three hundred cords of wood stacked about a mile downstream from Tree River. This was wood for the *SS Distributor* and it took only two stops, once going downstream and once on its upstream trip, to use all this wood.

With the construction of the new town of Inuvik in the mid-1950s logs harvested from along the banks of Nagwichoonyik and its tributaries were rafted down to the town site and used as pilings to support buildings constructed on permafrost.

*We cut logs and cordwood too ... we hauled logs with dogs and put it by the banks [of Nagwichoonyik], and go back and get some more ... it's good earnings, they come with Bombardier to make a cheque. Give you two hundred and something dollars. That's lots of money ... not only cordwood, lot of people cut lots of logs down the Peel, down the East Branch [of Nagwichoonyik].<sup>1</sup>*

Malcolm Firth, a well-known trapper, was also well known for his logging skills.

*He cut lots and lots of logs in his days. You know he was so good at it them days, he just knew how to handle his logs. He knows how to peel them, he knows how to roll them in the water, he knows how to raft them, he knows everything ... he was fast on his feet, a real Relic! [referring to Robert Clothier from CBC's *The Beachcombers* 1971-1992].<sup>2</sup>*

During the building of Inuvik and in the following decades there were sawmills along the Mackenzie near Tsiigehtchic; at the mouth of the Peel River; and across from Aklavik on Pokiak Channel. Sawmills were also located on the Peel River above Fort McPherson and on the Arctic Red River at Jackfish Creek.

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<sup>1</sup> Andre, Noel 2005a.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Peterson (Mackenzie River Gwich'in Cultural Working Group) 2005a.



These provided lumber for construction of the town and for other construction projects in the Delta and along the Arctic coast. Not only was lumber transported by scow on Nagwichoonjik but the sawdust from these mills was also taken to Inuvik and used for insulation in buildings.

Noel Andre told of his seven years work at a sawmill on the Arctic Red River. In 1968 the mill cut a million board feet of lumber that was then hauled by scow down the Arctic Red River and the Mackenzie for use in Inuvik, Arctic Red (Tsiigehtchic) and for an oil company working on the coast.

### **Transportation**

Whether by canoe, raft, tracking, moose skin boat, York boat, scow, paddle wheeler, schooner, speedboat, diesel tug, dog team or just snowshoes Nagwichoonjik is a 'highway' for the Gwich'in.

*The river was not only important for the summer fishery of the Nagwichoonjik Gwich'in, it was also a major travel route for many Gwichya Gwich'in families at different times of the year. Families who left the Flats to move into one of the regions at the end of summer, travelled on the river to reach one of the major trail heads. In winter the river itself was an important dog team trail used by families coming to town for Christmas or Easter celebrations. Families heading towards the Flats in early summer would travel on the river by raft or birch bark canoe. There cannot have been many families – during ts'ii deii days or during the fur trade – who did not travel on Nagwichoonjik at some time or another.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Heine et al., Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak 169.



"The Flats"

'The Flats', or *Åeth t'urh kak*, is one of the most important places for the Gwich'in along Nagwichoonjik. This area, below the community of Tsiigehtchic, is where in pre-contact time, trade took place with the Siglit from the Delta and Arctic Coast and with the Sahtu Dene from up the river. It was also the place of the big early summer gatherings when people would travel great distances to greet friends and relatives at the Flats.

*'Up-the-River' people, Sahtu Dene, and the Inuvialuit also travelled to the Flats. When the big Dene birch bark canoes came into sight, everybody began to shout and announce the guests' arrival. The visitors were so anxious to join the dancing that they hardly took time to pull their canoes ashore. An old man from among the hosts was known to like to dance, had begun to dance when the boats came into sight. An elder from among the visitors likewise began to dance when the boats had been pulled ashore. The two slowly moved towards each other. They met halfway between Church Hill and the Flats. When they met, everybody joined in. The dancing had begun, and it would last for days.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Heine, "That river, it's like a highway for us." 26.

The Flats has also been a place of conflict. Van tsal, a small lake on the Flats, “is known locally as Ghost Lake because when the Gwich’in killed the ‘Eskimos’ on the flats during one of the many battles between the two groups a long time ago, the Gwich’in threw the bodies of the ‘Eskimos’ into the lake”.<sup>1</sup>



“Ghost Lake”

Other important summer gathering places included the mouth of Travailant River, Pierre’s Creek, the mouth of the Peel River and at Big Rock in the Mackenzie Delta.

Even before Nagwichoonjik brought the first fur traders and missionaries it brought a hint of a world beyond what the Gwich’in knew. Neil Colin says there is a story of somebody finding a wood chip that looked peculiar. It was not cut with a stone axe

*... they didn’t know what it was, [but] it’s not beaver [cut]. They find out somebody cut that tree with a [iron] axe ... find out how they cut*

<sup>1</sup> Ingrid Kritsch and Alestine Andre. Gwichya Gwich’in Place Names up the Arctic Red River and South of the Mackenzie River, Gwich’in Settlement Area, N.W.T. (Tsiigehtchic: Gwich’in Social and Cultural Institute 1993).

*it, with what ... they find out it drift down the Mackenzie. Somebody found it.<sup>1</sup>*

*This happened at Cony Bay [on Nagwichoonjik]. This man was staying there with his family, and he saw those wood chips. So he got ready, made his mud house thicker ... and left his family further back [from the river]. And then one day he saw somebody paddling down, there were these whitemen [Sir Alexander Mackenzie and his group] coming down. Before the whitemen came ashore, this man told his family to go back in the mud house. Then the whitemen came ashore, and he went to greet them. And then that one whiteman put his hand out – he was going to shake hands. They shook hands, and the man looked at his hand after that. He thought the whiteman had given him something. He looked at this hand: nothing! They didn't know anything about shaking hands in those days.<sup>2</sup>*

While conducting interviews for the Indian Brotherhood many years ago Neil Colin also heard a story of the coming of one of the first steam boats.

*The boat is coming, no paddles! The boat can't move then, that's what people say ... sure enough a couple of days later there's a big smoke coming up, that's that one they're talking about. So when it came it landed straight down from the Bay [Hudson's Bay Company trading post]. Everybody went down, men, women, girls, boys, even dogs that wasn't even tied down, everybody went down. Minutes before they landed there's a whistle, big whistle, everybody ran into the bush!<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Colin 2005a.

<sup>2</sup> Billy Cardinal, Googwandak Community Review Meeting, Tsiigehtchic, NT. January 28-31, 2000, Tapes 01-17.

<sup>3</sup> Colin 2005a.

Testaments to the importance of Nagwichoonjik as a major water transportation route are its numerous sunken boats and ships.

*Along the Mackenzie and Mackenzie Delta there are lots of [boat wrecks] – my father’s boat is right at the mouth of the Peel where steamboat land at the mouth there, about 20 feet down – sinking more, sinking more – 35 horse Universal engine in it, big schooner ... lots of boats under the mud of the Mackenzie [River and] Delta.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Riparian Settlement**

Built in 1806 at the mouth of Bluefish River, the Northwest Company’s Fort Good Hope was the first fur trading post near Gwichya Gwich’in lands. The Gwich’in “proved to be so reliable trading partners that the post was moved downriver twice to make it easier for them to reach it.”<sup>2</sup> Shortly after amalgamation of the Northwest Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1821 Fort Good Hope was moved to a site across from the mouth of Vihtr’ii tshik (Thunder River) but given the distance from Fort Simpson re-supply was often difficult. In 1827 Fort Good Hope was moved out of Gwichya Gwich’in territory up Nagwichoonjik to its present location.

For much of the later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Fort McPherson, on the Peel River 38 kilometres upstream from Nagwichoonjik, was the principal fur trade post for the Gwich’in. In 1868 Oblate Missionaries built a mission near Åeth t’urh kak, the Gwich’in fish camp at the junction of Tsiigehnijik (Arctic Red River) and Nagwichoonjik. In 1901 the first trading post was established at this site followed by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1902 and Northern Traders in 1912. The community that formed around this mission and the trading posts officially changed its name in 1994 from Arctic Red River to Tsiigehtchic (‘mouth of the iron river’). This community is the only Gwich’in settlement on Nagwichoonjik.

<sup>1</sup> Colin 2005a.

<sup>2</sup> Heine et al., Gwichya Gwich’in Googwandak 174.



Tsiigehtchic (1999)

During the time of the prominence of the fur trade there were many trapper's cabins along Nagwichoonjik. There are still some that people go to, but not as many as there used to be, "the rest of the places are fish camps ... people put up their [tents at] fish camps in the summer starting anywhere from June into July, August, September."<sup>1</sup> Some of the cabins along Nagwichoonjik are now used as emergency shelters for people travelling on the river.

### Ferries, fords and roads

The construction of the Dempster Highway in the 1970s brought about dramatic change in the way in which the Gwich'in use Nagwichoonjik. The road, and its associated summer ferry and winter ice bridge crossings of Nagwichoonjik, have made the river less important as a transportation route. Before the highway, goods came only twice a year by barge, life was simpler and more people depended on Nagwichoonjik not only for going places but also for their food and their fuel. "Life changed though [with the Dempster] TV came in, housing came in, you have to pay rent, you get cold you just put the thermostat on, no more wood stove, [now] electric stove ..."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andre, Alestine 2005a.

<sup>2</sup> Colin 2005a.



Ferry crossing at junction of Tsiigehnjik (Arctic Red River), lower left, and Nagwichoonyjik (Mackenzie River)

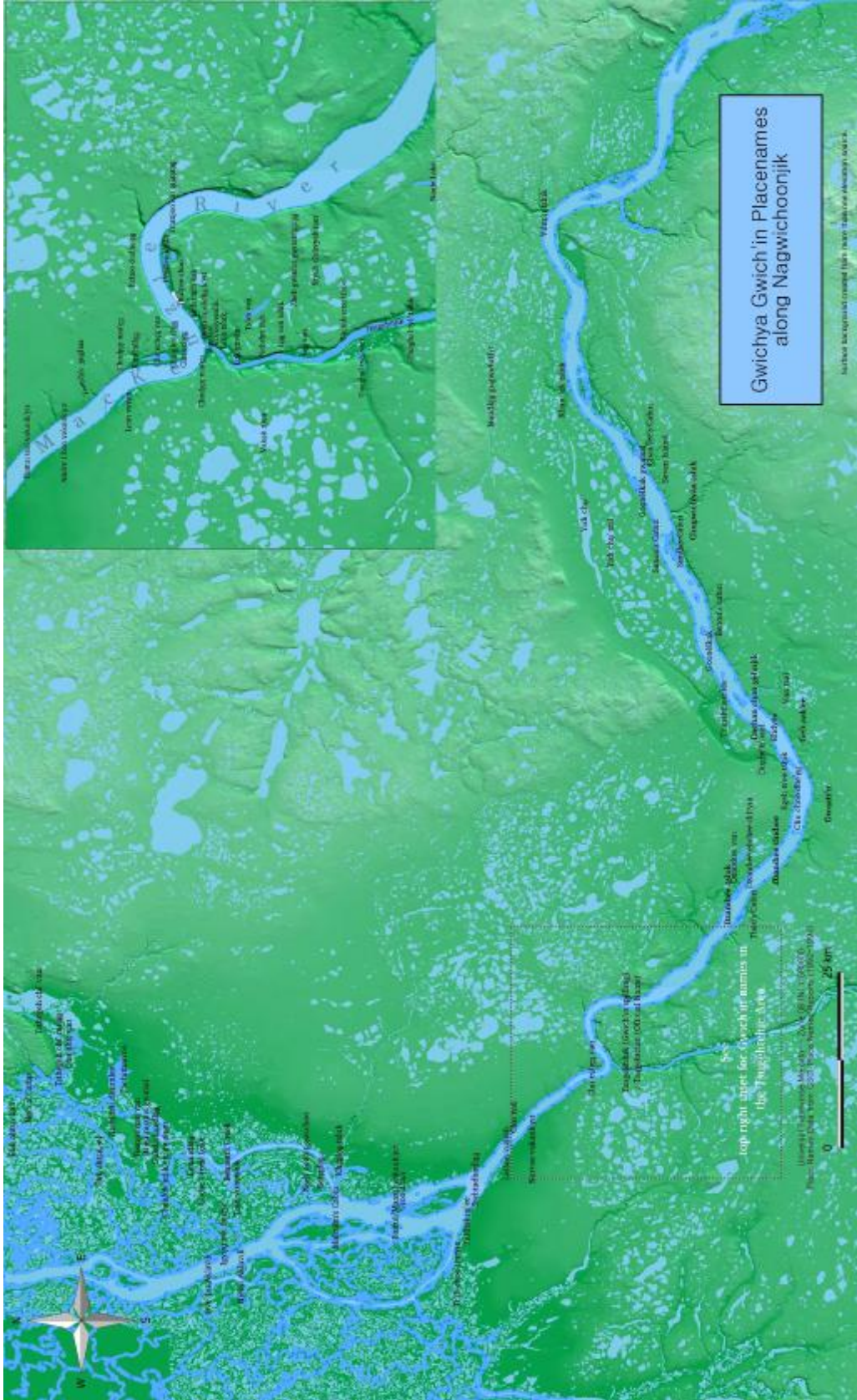
The Dempster Highway changed everything, “you [now] see in the communities brand new vehicles, brand new skidoos, brand new four wheelers, new boats, and just everything ... it’s just a lot of stuff.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Traditional Place Names**

Since the early 1990s, when the Gwich’in Social and Cultural Institute undertook projects to record the traditional knowledge of Gwich’in Elders, it became clear that traditional names for places in the Gwich’in Settlement Area are a very important part of Gwich’in culture and history. Over the years traditional names, and associated meanings and stories, have been gathered for many of the hills, creeks, rivers, camps, burial places and sacred sites along Nagwichoonyjik. The traditional Gwich’in place names shown on the following map represent only a small portion of the total number of traditional names known to and used by the Gwich’in.

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<sup>1</sup> Andre, Alestine 2005a.



Nagwichoonjik, the 'river through a big country'



### Environmental concerns

During the meetings of the Working Group the topic of conversation continually returned to questions about what's happening to Nagwichoonjik. From concerns about the quality of the water for drinking to apprehension concerning decreasing water levels it's apparent that Nagwichoonjik still plays a significant role in the lives of the Gwich'in.

*That's where I lived [pointing to the map], out on the Mackenzie. When you look at it it's all changed, it seems like it's shrinking, the river is shrinking. You see more land appearing, and the river is not as wide as it used to be.<sup>1</sup>*

And its not just summer water levels, the water would normally rise in December after freeze up and the overflow would then freeze creating a smooth travel surface along the edge of the river, "nowadays I never see that [overflow], I don't know how many years, never see overflow on the Mackenzie in December ..."<sup>2</sup>

### “Why is Nagwichoonjik so important to you?”



**Neil Colin:** “Why is the Mackenzie so important to me? That’s where I was raised. I’ve been on that river a good many times, even if it’s bad weather or calm. I hauled wood across the Mackenzie and down to my cabin, I fished in [the] Mackenzie ... I just like [the] Mackenzie River, all those little channels and all those little lakes are full of [musk]rat houses and full of rabbits and full of beaver and moose ... I just like going around because I can see far ... just to stand out there

and all the geese coming up or coming down ... that’s our life, I like that ... the

<sup>1</sup> Eliza Greenland (Mackenzie River Gwich'in Cultural Working Group) 2005a.

<sup>2</sup> Colin 2005a.

Mackenzie is very good, you can depend on it because there's lots of good places to fish ... that's where we eat from ... Mackenzie comes handy ... lots of good places for hunting moose and fishing and especially the rabbits."

**Elisa Greenland:** "A lot of our food comes from there, other than that I don't really know, I guess Neil said it all for us."



**Abraham Peterson:** "The Mackenzie River is always there, it's good for hunting, a lot of game – geese, moose, rabbits – it's a good river, it's a big land ... you could make a good living out of the Mackenzie River."

**Alestine Andre:** "I think the Mackenzie River is very important because along the river many of our ancestors, our old people, lived the way that Neil Colin just talked about. So from a cultural point of view I think its very important because it has all the legends and all the stories and it has names of places that are in Gwich'in and some of those place names have stories. I always liked the trails. I always talk about the trails because along those trails people used to travel whether it's dog team trails that go up the river or down the river or where ever trails are that's where people lived. So they travelled



along those trails to go to where ever, fish lakes or they went by boat to go to their different camps. The River is a very important piece of our history [and] because of that it really needs to be protected!”



**Noel Andre:** “Mackenzie is a really important river, important for everything that we see every year, in our future to see, in our Elders long ago even the legends ... white people use it, natives use it, Metis use it, they trapped around there, they hunted in there, they fight in there. That river is pretty well known, for this part of the north anyway, I know a lot of legend story about that Mackenzie but it’s pretty hard to think about anything especially when you get old and you’re short minded too. I use that river too, I fish in there, I get my fish in there, I’ve made a few dollars out of it, I’ve made some rafts, I’ve made some booms with wood and I’ve travelled in it with boat, with slow boat, with fast boats, with big boats, I’ve even travelled in it one time with *Pelican [Rapids]*. I was working on there and travelled on that [river boat]. I’ve even fished paddling, when we don’t use paddling we tracked, when we got tired of that we brought along three dogs and they tracked for us, it was faster then, easier, all that. I know an old couple, they used their dogs for travelling in the summer, put them in the harness and chase them along the shore. Good leader, when a stick sticking out of that [river bank] instead of going over that, they go around it. Lots of good place to hunt moose, lots of good place to hunt rats and beaver, there’s lots of fish, all kinds of fish, all different kind of fish and it’s a good place to travel, good place for long days on skidoo, you go on that place, its good, not like when we used to have dogs. So, Mackenzie is important, believe me.”

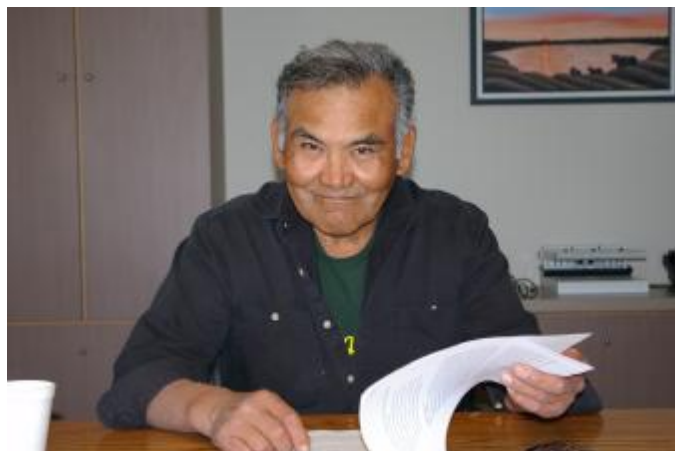
**Fanny Greenland:** “I guess I’m just going to try and speak for the younger generation. The Mackenzie River is important because it provides a lot of resources ... a lot of people go hunting and fishing on it, it provides transportation like the boat and barges coming down and a lot of services in between the communities and maybe tourism and recreation and everything ... I hear a lot of good legends and a lot of good stories and its important for the mighty Mackenzie, it may be mighty but it provides lots of resources for the whole GSA [Gwich’in Settlement Area].”



**Douglas Kendo** “The Mackenzie River is very important to me because it provides me with a place to fish, to hunt animals and waterfowl. It gives me access to summer campsites and seasonal trailheads to inland destinations where we have an opportunity to hone and maintain

our cultural skills. The Mackenzie holds stories and place names of the Gwichya Gwich’in people which tell us our history. The Mackenzie River provides me with a place to relax, to heal and to rejuvenate.”

**Fred B. Jerome** “The Mackenzie River is very important for us...[and]...a good place for tourists to take around, a good area for tourism. We’d show them the old areas where the old timers



Nagwichoonjik, the ‘river through a big country’

used to travel and fish...and hunt.”



**Willie Simon** “Mackenzie River, Nagwichoonjik, is important to me because I grew up on the Mackenzie and during my years saw many things that happened along the Mackenzie. We use it for transportation, we travel with dogs along the Mackenzie. In the summer we travel by boat and there’s one thing that even as a kid I can remember – we’d go back into the bush in the spring and hunt [musk] rats and beavers. It seemed to me that after we were back in the bush, maybe fifteen or twenty miles back, when the spring hunt was over we’d go to the Mackenzie with dog pack and canoe. We’d cross lakes and portages, and when we got to the Mackenzie, as a kid I’d remember, it seemed like you’d just got home, it’s like this other place wasn’t quite home. And springtime is wonderful hunting birds on the Mackenzie. On the islands [there are] moose all over in the wintertime. It’s very important in a lot of ways.”