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Yukon River Inter-Tribal Watershed Council

A coalition of 63 Alaska Native Tribes and Canadian First Nations residing within the Yukon River watershed

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The Yukon River Inter-Tribal Watershed Council stands as a collective initiative of 63 rural, indigenous communities across Alaska and the Yukon Territory with a mission to monitor, advocate, and advise in order to improve the well-being of the watershed and the people who live within it. The Council has set preservation priorities, increased its own capacity to measure water quality, and successfully advocated to remedy and prevent further environmental degradation of the Yukon River watershed.

The Yukon River flows from the Yukon Territory-British Columbia border, through central Alaska, and into the Bering Straits. Spread along 2,300 miles of river and millions of acres of land, the Yukon watershed has suffered increasing environmental degradation over many generations. Intensified usage of the River has resulted in contamination of the watershed from military sites; outdated sewage systems; increased industrial activity, such as mining operations; and growing recreational human activity. The pollution flows from various points of origin and across multiple property owners and jurisdictions, including international boundaries. The Yukon River's watershed is home to over 60 Alaska Native villages and Canadian First Nations. It is a resource of great importance for the economic, cosmological, and nutritional sustenance of these communities. In all respects, they maintain a significant spiritual, material, and cultural relationship with the River. Degradation directly impacts the physical health, economic wellbeing, and spiritual welfare of the citizens of these villages and First Nations.

While at least eleven federal, state, and/or provincial agencies have some regulatory responsibility for managing the River and its watershed, no advocacy group existed that was singularly dedicated to the well-being of this watershed. Recognizing the need to preserve the River for the health of their communities, tribal nations, leaders and citizens along the River initiated the Yukon River Inter-Tribal Watershed Council (YRITWC or Council). The YRITWC is the first organization solely dedicated to the responsible management, use, protection, and enhancement of this resource. It serves as the vehicle that raises the Native communities' collective voice and asserts their right to direct decision-making related to the preservation and management of the River and watershed.

Tribes throughout Indian Country face environmental problems that span multiple jurisdictions, stem from multiple source points, and impact various landowners. While Alaska Native villages and First Nation communities along the Yukon River struggle with similar

challenges, they face an added dimension of international boundaries. The massive River navigates real and imagined boundaries, and tribal citizens negotiate those same boundaries to preserve the River and watershed communities. The YRITWC is a model of a successful intertribal advocacy and environmental preservation organization that effectively works across municipal, state, federal, and international boundaries.

Founded in 1997, the Council is a treaty-based organization of indigenous governments coming together to give voice, power, and ultimately governing authority to constituent members on issues impacting the environmental quality of the River and its watershed through the Yukon River Watershed Inter-Tribal Accord (the Accord). The Accord defines the purpose of the YRITWC, provides for the rights and responsibilities of the Board of Directors, and establishes the Council. A multi-government advisory, advocacy, and monitoring group, the YRITWC has a two-fold mission: to protect the environmental integrity of the River's watershed and to preserve the cultural vitality of the indigenous communities that are dependent upon and part of the watershed. The Council is working to sustain the well-being of both the River and the people who rely on it for their livelihood so that tribal citizens will once again be able to drink directly from the Yukon River, a stated goal of key elders and chiefs involved in the original formation of the YRITWC.

Through the Council, member villages, and nations have asserted their sovereignty in making decisions about the use and preservation of the River. The accomplishments of the Council are astounding and ever-expanding. This effort is as a model of self-determination, governance, and collaboration, specifically because of achievements in three areas: the initiation of the YRITWC; the development of a complex and high quality operational system; and the impact and reach of the Council on the health of Native peoples along the Yukon River and beyond.

Member communities have a powerful vision for this collaborative initiative along the 2,300 miles of the Yukon River and its expansive watershed. This vision grew out of the distinct need for citizens to preserve the River and thereby sustain their communities and themselves. The conceptual focus and operational underpinnings of the Council are deeply grounded in the spiritual relevance and traditions common to its collective membership. The Council's overarching goal for community members to be able to drink directly from the River concerns health and wellness, values inseparable from the people themselves. One Executive Committee explains that the YRITWC is not about salmon, as salmon are about numbers and allocations and divisions among groups. Rather, the effort continues to be about the very substance cultural and otherwise of the tribes and their citizens. This philosophy drives decision-making and unites all of the citizens in over 60 rural communities - across hundreds of miles of river, several different cultures, and an area encompassing millions of acres of land for the purpose of developing effective and collective policy.

Strong and relevant leadership is key in representing the shared interests of these communities' preservation and advocacy efforts. Despite numerous outside powers suggesting the watershed was too big, and that the organization should focus on smaller areas, the Council's founders were undaunted in their recognition that the organization must encompass the whole Yukon River watershed from the headwaters to the sea. To connect across such a great distance, the Council established two regional offices one in Anchorage, and one in Fairbanks, Alaska. The Executive Committee serves as the governing body and consists of twelve representatives six members each from the Alaska and the Yukon Territory regions. Seats on the Executive Committee are allocated by sub-regions (e.g., Southern Tutchone and Yukon Flats) and selected by the Board of Directors. Every two years, the Council convenes a Summit Meeting, bringing together the Board Members, Executive

Committee, staff, elders and youth from member communities. Focusing on purpose, leadership, representation, and communication, initiatives that are relevant to and respectful of all member communities are generated, ensuring attainment of stated goals.

The simple, yet powerful, vision of cooperation informs the operations of the YRITWC. Because the Council is the vehicle where tribal citizens collectively strengthen the condition of the River's watershed, the staff works to build members' technical capacities to monitor and improve water quality, rather than relying on the efforts of outside regulatory agencies. Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping is employed to identify source points of contaminants and brownfields, and the staff provides advisory services related to landfill and sewage matters. The staff also offers educational programs to Native and non-Native youth, as well as education and technical support services to tribes and tribal employees.

The Council now has an EPA-approved Tribal (Water) Quality Assurance Plan. Results from its water testing anywhere along on the Yukon River or its tributaries are admissible in courts of law and are used to identify areas facing environmental risk. This clearly strengthens the Council's ability to prioritize its preservation activities. Additionally, the Council can hold non-tribal entities accountable for supporting preservation efforts. One such organization, the U. S. Geological Society (USGS), has formally turned over responsibility for monitoring the watershed sites and data collection to the Council. This allows the USGS to extend its current five-year data series, while providing the Council access to both existing and historical USGS data on the watershed. Ultimately, these operational advances positively influence the Council's efforts to exercise jurisdictional authority over the River and its tributaries.

As the Council strengthens its internal capacity to manage waste and monitor water quality, it is making significant efforts to directly improve the condition of the River. The impact on the River and the people who live in its watershed has been immediate and deeply felt. For example, the Council established a significant backhauling program under which barge companies volunteer to pick up solid and hazardous waste from member villages on their return journeys to Fairbanks. This not only removes sources of contaminants and pollution over 200 tons have been removed so far it also assists the expansion of tribal environmental programs as communities work to identify hazardous waste for removal.

In addition to direct efforts to clean up the River, the Council's Executive Committee advocates for improvements that contribute to sustaining the watershed over time. In 1999, members of the Executive Committee offered testimony on behalf of the Council before the Yukon Territory Water Resources Board regarding a Canadian city's dumping of raw sewage in the Yukon River. Not only did this result in the addressing of the downstream impacts of the city's actions, but the Premier of the Yukon Territory now provides reports to the Council every three months on the status of the city's municipal waste system. Further, the Council insists on government-to-government meetings with the head of the State of Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) the department responsible for assuring the State's compliance with U.S. Federal Clean Water standards. Concerned that the lack of a comprehensive database of municipal waste systems operating within the River's watershed was compromising the ability to monitor pollution, the Council sought information on the status of the operational conditions of these systems. An Executive Committee member explained to the Commissioner of the DEC that the State stood in likely violation of the Federal clean water laws, because it was lacking any information on municipal waste systems within the watershed. In the next appropriation session, the State committed funds to develop a database of sewage and waste systems within the watershed the first of its kind.

By combining strategies of direct action with advocacy, affiliated villages and First Nations

through the Council extend their impact across communities, and over time, to ensure the continued preservation and sustenance of the environmental health of the Yukon River watershed and the people who depend on it. Indeed, the impact is now reaching beyond the Yukon River and YRITWC member organizations. Tribes and Native villages along the Kuskokwim River have begun conversations about a similar collaboration, and the Alaskan City of Nenana has formally requested membership in the YRITWC.

Not only is the Council characterized by its authentic, consistent, and visionary leadership, but relationship building with various entities marks another victory. Established relationships include: the State of Alaska; the International Joint Commission (governing the boundary waters of the U. S. and Canada); the EPA; Village and Regional Corporations; the Yukon Territory Provincial Government; and watershed municipalities. The Council maintains external effectiveness in part, because of the authenticity of its internal relations. Its operational procedures are grounded in traditions common to the membership. A previous attempt to use Western-style committees failed. The organization succeeds now because its guiding principles are culturally appropriate and explicitly based on the desired traits of an elder modeling inclusiveness, listening, patience, knowledge, wisdom, and tenacity in all activities. These traditional norms and procedures help maintain the Council's relevance to, and re-affirm its authority with, the citizens it serves.

The YRITWC has given a successful and growing political and regulatory voice to a group of Alaska Native villages and Canadian First Nations that, due to geography, population density, and a hostile political environment, had long been ignored. Yet now, because their governments recognized the dire impacts of environmental degradation and asserted themselves in the face of regulatory vacuums, their voices now bellow. The Council is a mechanism that the tribes and First Nations residing within the watershed use to direct the current and future health of the Yukon River. They have created a shared community along the entire length of the Yukon River, ensuring the continued health of this invaluable resource and the tribal citizens who depend on it for their own well-being.

Lessons:

- Diverse and geographically disparate Native communities can effectively take action on important issues if there are clearly defined, culturally-relevant, and meaningful goals to unify them.
- Since ecosystems are interrelated, it is important for Native nations to work even beyond their political boundaries in environmental preservation, land management, and community sustainability to reach their goals.
- Advocacy and action, founded on Native systems of organization and decision-making, can be powerful and complementary strategies for exercising sovereignty as tribal governments work to leverage resources and affect positive change.

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