

Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy: How Community Values Are Shaping the Protection of Wild Spaces and Heritage Places

Angela Stadel
Raymond Taniton
Heidi Heder

Abstract—The Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy (NWT PAS), approved in 1999, presents a unique community-driven approach to establishing a network of protected areas in the North. The NWT PAS arose from increasing resource development pressures in the Northwest Territories and is being implemented in the context of the land claim and treaty processes. Aboriginal communities in the Northwest Territories are using the NWT PAS planning process to identify protected areas that represent their values and meanings of wilderness. This is resulting in a shift in emphasis from tourism, recreation, and natural region representation largely reflected in the current system of protected areas to protected areas that represent the cultural, harvesting, wildlife habitat, and ecological values of Aboriginal communities. The first candidate protected area to receive interim protection under the NWT PAS was Sahyoue and Edacho, the two western peninsulas on Great Bear Lake in the Sahtu region. This candidate protected area is a nationally recognized cultural landscape, and is the source and living legacy of the stories of the Sahtu Dene. Sites like Sahyoue/Edacho being advanced through the NWT PAS present challenges for the agencies, legislation, and management regimes for protected areas, and point to the need for change in our definitions of wilderness, parks, and protected areas.

Introduction

Edehzhie, Mohwi Trail, Sahyoue/Edacho, Edzawoo Nahdeh ?ek'è, Waters of Desnedhé Che—the names of these proposed protected areas reflect the strength of the past, present, and future role of Aboriginal communities in taking care of the special places in the Northwest Territories. These special wilderness areas have always been highly valued by the people who lived on them, traveled through them, and are laid to rest there. As the pressure for industrial development of the natural resources of the North has increased, many communities have recognized the need for legislative tools and other effective designation mechanisms to protect special places for future generations. The discovery of diamonds in the 1990s and the more recent surge in gas exploration in the Northwest Territories has signaled the need for a concerted effort to identify, evaluate, and establish additional protected areas. As a result of a legal challenge by the World Wildlife Fund to the BHP diamond mine environmental assessment panel report in 1996, the Federal and territorial governments made a commitment to develop a protected areas strategy for the Northwest Territories.

It was recognized that a Protected Areas Strategy for the Northwest Territories would have to be developed and implemented in the context of both the settled land claims agreements and ongoing claims and treaty agreement processes. Currently, comprehensive land claims agreements have been signed in the Inuvialuit (1984), Gwich'in (1993), and Sahtu (1993) settlement regions in the northern half of the Northwest Territories. The Dogrib Treaty 11 Council, the Akaitcho Treaty 8 Tribal Council, the Deh Cho First Nations, and the South Slave Metis Tribal Council are at various stages in their negotiations with the Federal and territorial governments. To include the diversity of regional interests and to respect the precedence of these regional treaty and land claim agreements, a Protected Areas Strategy Advisory Committee was established in 1998, representing regional Aboriginal organizations

Angela Stadel is a Protected Areas Strategy Advisor, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, P.O. Box 1500, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2R3. E-mail: stadel@inac.gc.ca. Raymond Taniton is the Chairperson of the Protected Areas Strategy Advisory Committee, P.O. Box 155, Deline, NT X0E 0G0. Heidi Heder is the Protected Areas Strategy Implementation Coordinator, Government of the Northwest Territories, P.O. Box 1320, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9.

In: Watson, Alan E.; Alessa, Lilian; Sproull, Janet, comps. 2002. Wilderness in the Circumpolar North: searching for compatibility in ecological, traditional, and ecotourism values; 2001 May 15–16; Anchorage, AK. Proceedings RMRS-P-26. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

in the Northwest Territories. The Committee also included Federal and territorial government representatives, as well as industry and environmental nongovernment organizations. Through consensus and consultation with their respective constituents, the PAS Advisory Committee guided the development of the Protected Areas Strategy. The resulting document, approved by the Federal and territorial governments in 1999, outlines a common set of principles, a framework for planning and establishing new protected areas, and an action plan for implementation. The inclusive and partnered approach demonstrated throughout the development of the strategy continues today, with a renewed Advisory Committee overseeing the implementation of the NWT PAS.

Community-Driven Planning Process

The PAS Advisory Committee defined the purpose of the Protected Areas Strategy as follows:

The Protected Areas Strategy should focus on developing an overall framework and set of criteria to guide the work of identifying and establishing protected areas in the NWT. The task of developing concrete proposals should primarily be left to communities, regional organizations and/or land claim bodies and processes (NWT PAS Advisory Committee 1999: 8).

An eight-step planning process (table 1) outlines how communities initiate and direct the task of identifying proposed protected areas. In Step 1, the community or regional organization takes the initiative to set priorities for protection. In some regions, this has been carried out through regional land use planning such as in the Gwich'in Settlement Area or through heritage studies or inventories like those carried out in the Sahtu Settlement Area (Sahtu Joint Working Group 2000). In regions where there is no formal land use planning process or land claim agreement, it is traditional knowledge and land use studies that form the basis for identifying priority areas for protection.

In the early stages of implementation, several communities with past park establishment experience were hesitant to become involved in the Protected Areas Strategy. The denial of harvesting access to protected areas such as the Thelon Game Sanctuary and Wood Buffalo National Park had left some communities with a negative impression of parks and protected areas. The more recent experiences of the

Table 1—Steps in the Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy planning process and status of proposals (July 2001).

Step	Planning process	Status of proposals
1	Identify priority areas of interest.	Waters of Desnedhé Che, Jean Marie River Watershed, Pehdzeh Ki Deh, Hook Lake/Slave River Delta
2	Prepare and review protected area proposal at regional level.	Mohwi Trail Edzawoo Nahdeh ?ek'è
3	Review and submit proposal for candidate Protected Area status.	Edézhzié
4	Consider and, where necessary, apply interim protection for candidate area.	
5	Conduct detailed evaluation of the candidate area's cultural, ecological, and economic values.	Sahyoue/Edacho candidate protected area
6	Seek formal establishment of protected area.	
7	Approve and designate protected area.	
8	Implement, monitor, and review protected area.	

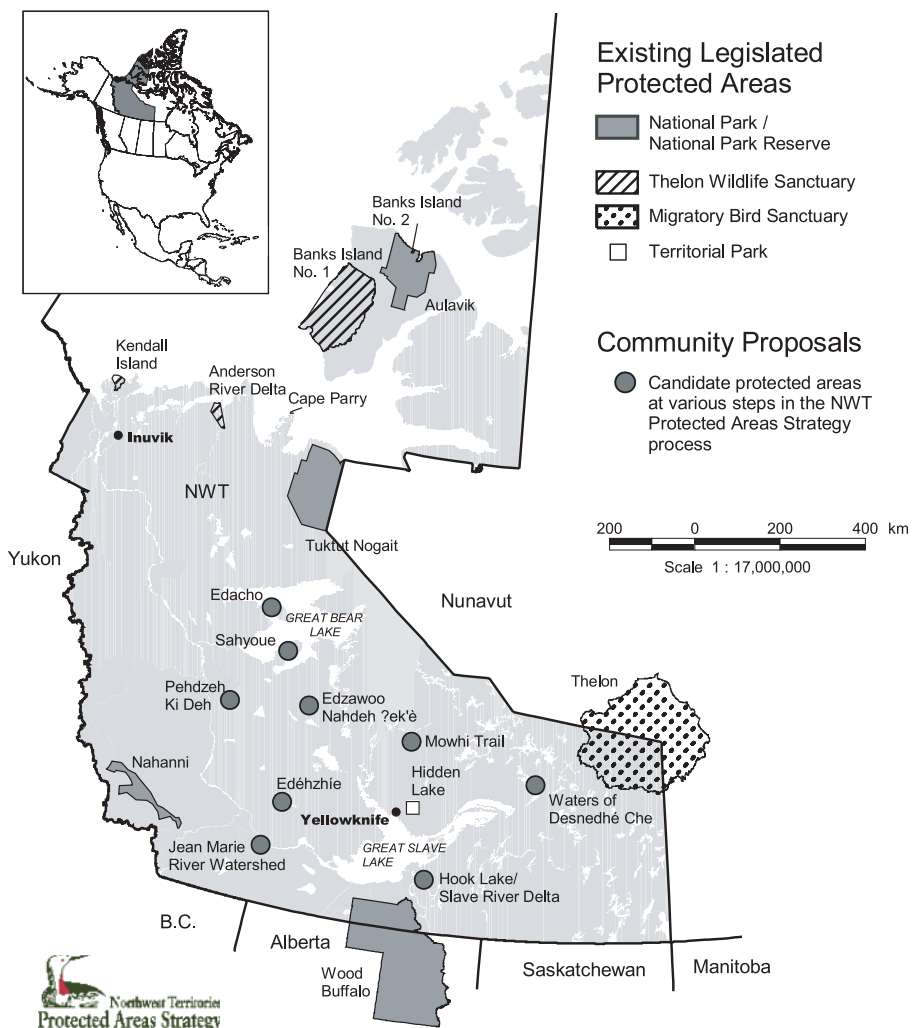
Inuvialuit with the establishment of Tukturnogait, Aulavik, and Ivavik National Parks, through the negotiation of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, have provided valuable examples of a new way to designate and manage protected areas. The Inuvialuit communities' priorities for protecting the calving grounds of caribou and ensuring the future of harvesting resulted in the establishment of these three new National Parks.

A Protected Areas Strategy Secretariat was established to provide funding and technical and administrative support to communities, as well as to identify regional organization priorities and to plan for the establishment of protected areas in their regions. For the first year of implementation, the PAS Secretariat focused its efforts on informing communities about the planning process and supporting initial community workshops to identify priority areas and values. The implementation of the NWT PAS is still in the early stages, and to date, 11 communities have held workshops that resulted in the identification of eight priority areas of interest (fig. 1). Two of these areas have advanced further through the planning steps of the PAS (table 1).

New Goals for Protection

The NWT PAS outlines two goals for establishing new protected areas: (1) protect special natural and cultural areas, as defined by northern residents who know best which lands and waters are most critical to sustaining their land-based economies, values, and cultures; and (2) protect core representative areas within each ecoregion.

Figure 1—The Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy community proposals.



Goal 1 has been the driving force behind the protected area proposals being advanced by communities, while Goal 2 has been used to provide additional support to proposals. Many of the ecoregions of the Northwest Territories are still inadequately represented in the current system. Each candidate area is assessed to determine whether they adequately represent landscape units within ecoregions. Landscape units are determined primarily from soil characteristics and landforms, which along with climate and water, create the dimensions of habitat, which can be used to approximate biodiversity (Oosenbrug and Gah 2001, unpublished).

These areas of high biological diversity may in some cases overlap with the special areas that have been identified by the communities. There is increasing recognition that rich biological diversity often coincides with cultural diversity (Oveido and Brown 1999). Edézhíe, an area of high cultural value, encompasses an ecoregion (Horn Plateau) that is not represented by the current protected area system. This candidate protected area also includes Mills Lake, one of the richest migratory bird habitats in Canada. This area is valued by the Deh Cho communities for its cultural significance as a gathering place and as a place where game is always plentiful during times of scarcity. Edézhíe is also valued as a distinct and scenic physiographic feature, rising up to 600 m above the surrounding flat landscape, and as a source of fresh water (Cizek 2001).

Wilderness Values in the Northwest Territories

The emphasis on community priorities is influencing how protected areas are selected and how wilderness areas are valued in the Northwest Territories. The values for wilderness, land, and water that Northerners hold are reflected in the following excerpt from the PAS vision:

Our lands and waters sustain all life and are the primary source of spiritual inspiration, education, legends, history and economic well-being. For many northerners the land is an integral part of who we are and how we define ourselves. This deep-rooted connection to the land is reflected in words heard often across the north, "The land takes care of us, we take care of the land" (NWT PAS Advisory Committee 1999: 7).

Northern Aboriginal peoples are acting upon a perspective that integrates human, social, and cultural affairs in the definition and management approaches to wilderness areas (Roots 1995). Some of the key values for protection that are emerging from the community proposals in the Northwest Territories are: significant past and present harvesting areas, spiritual sites and burial grounds, and traditional travel routes. Documentation of traditional knowledge through oral histories and mapping is an essential component of the communities' proposals for protecting areas. Traditional place names and knowledge of habitat, fishing, hunting, and trapping areas are determining the location and size of the proposed protected areas. Watershed protection is another key value that is emerging from the protected area planning that communities are undertaking. Traditional knowledge is increasingly becoming an integral part of resource management planning, and is seen as a valuable source of ecological information by the Western scientific community (Johnson 1992). In the past, traditional knowledge has not commonly been used to define wilderness and protected areas (Huntington, this proceedings). In the case of the NWT Protected Areas Strategy, traditional knowledge provides the basis for the initial definition of the protected area and its values. Information on the ecological and economic values collected by government, industry, and environmental nongovernment organizations is used to support, and in some cases modify, the proposal.

The wilderness values held by visitors to northern wilderness areas include: solitude, place of mystery and the unknown, and a place with little or no human occupation (Kaye 2000). These same areas are valued by the people who live in the North as gathering places, and places that are named and intimately known, and have been used and occupied since time immemorial.

Sustainable resource use by Aboriginal communities is a significant feature of many protected areas in the North and represents a necessary break from southern concepts of wilderness (Lucas 1995). There are some wilderness values that may be shared by both visitors and residents. In his study of wilderness meanings associated with the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Kaye (2000) describes other key values, such as wilderness as a place of intrinsic value, as a bequest for future generations,

and as a sacred place. Some of the values and meanings of wilderness may be shared, but how they translate into the management of activities in those areas can result in conflict. An example is the use of motorized vehicles, such as all-terrain vehicles, snow machines, or motorboats in wilderness areas, often used by residents to access remote areas for harvesting. Many visitors to a wilderness area travel by nonmechanized means, such as canoe or kayak. The draft Thelon Game Sanctuary Management Plan (2000) recommends a mandatory permit system for nonmotorized travel by visitors, commercial guiding operations, and non-Aboriginal people, while recognizing Aboriginal peoples' needs for motorized access to the Sanctuary for harvesting.

Sahyoue/Edacho: Land and Narrative

Wilderness areas in the Northwest Territories are also being defined as sources of cultural identity. Sahyoue/Edacho, also known as Grizzly Bear Mountain and Scented Grass Hills, is such a wilderness area in the Sahtu settlement area of the Northwest Territories. Sahyoue/Edacho exemplifies the shift that is taking place in which the history and values of Aboriginal peoples are changing the definitions of heritage places and wilderness areas in Canada. Sahyoue/Edacho is the first candidate area to receive interim protection through the NWT Protected Areas Strategy. This wilderness area is essential to the history of the Sahtu Dene, whose oral tradition and stories are tied to this land and help define who they are as a people. Sahyoue/Edacho are the two western peninsulas of Great Bear Lake, the eighth largest lake in the world, and the largest lake wholly contained within the boundaries of Canada. The people of Deline and the Sahtu settlement area want to preserve their stories by preserving their origin—the lands and waters of Sahyoue/Edacho. Through recording of oral histories and mapping the stories, and archaeological features, a proposal was made to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada for national commemoration of the area. The Agenda Paper to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board describes how stories are linked to the land. Some examples of this are stories of a time when giant animals inhabited the land—according to Dene elders, many land features are formed around the bodies of these animals (Hanks 1996). This is reflected in the story, “How Manitou Island Got its Name,” as told in this excerpt from a transcript by George Kodakin (in Hanks 1996):

One calm morning when everybody was asleep, a woman who was sewing heard something in the water in the direction of Grizzly Bear Mountain. She went outside to see what it was and saw a big animal going into the water where the whirlpool used to be. But just as soon as she saw it, the animal turned into a large rock. This animal, which was a giant mother wolf, turned into the island which today in English is called Manitou Island. That is why our elders before us taught us to show respect by making an offering when you are in the area. Our elders also taught us if you are curious as to how long you will live you can test that out by entering the cave and by running from the end of the cave to the opening without falling down.

In 1998, Sahyoue and Edacho were designated as National Historic Sites to commemorate the significant cultural landscape of the Sahtu Dene. A National Historic Site of this size (5,587 km²) is a first for Parks Canada in its National Historic Site program. The Commemorative Integrity Statement for Sahyoue/Edacho calls for the land base of these areas to be legally protected to a standard that maintains present-day environmental quality and that encourages Sahtu Dene cultural practices (Nesbitt 2000). The community of Deline recognized that commemoration of these areas alone would not protect the land base from industrial development, and therefore decided to seek land protection through the NWT PAS.

Challenges for Protected Areas Planning

Increasing recognition for Aboriginal rights to self-determination and respect for cultural diversity is having an important impact on the way protected areas are planned, established, and managed (Oviedo and Brown 1999). The protected area proposals emerging from the Protected Areas Strategy present challenges to the process and policy framework for protected area identification and establishment in the Northwest Territories.

For communities to effectively engage in the PAS process and continue to drive the process of identifying, evaluating, and establishing protected areas, they must have the capacity to do so. There are many demands on leadership at the community level, and competing priorities in self-government and treaty negotiations, health, social services, and economic development can make it difficult to maintain the momentum behind protected area initiatives.

While funding and technical support is made available to communities, finding community people to focus on the protected area planning work can be difficult. Many of the communities in the Northwest Territories have populations of less than 500 people, and 44 percent of the population of the NWT is below the age of 25 (NWT Bureau of Statistics, based on 1996 Canada Census). The NWT PAS recognizes the need for flexibility and that each region or community has its own process for defining and documenting values and making decisions. At the same time, the NWT PAS Advisory Committee and the Secretariat are addressing the need to provide some consistency in the criteria and the level of information, both scientific and traditional knowledge, required to make informed decisions on the establishment and boundaries of the protected areas.

The NWT PAS is designed to be an inclusive and transparent process that involves other stakeholders such as industry and environmental organizations. Involving these partners in a community-driven process is challenging, but critical to gaining wider support for new protected areas. Two environmental organizations, the World Wildlife Fund and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, currently play a significant role in the early stages by providing funding to communities and, in some cases, participating in workshops. Industry organizations are primarily involved through the Advisory Community and are kept informed and involved as new sites are being advanced through the PAS planning steps. Industry representatives also contribute to the development of overall policy guidelines for nonrenewable resources assessment, interim protection, and compensation.

Current protected area legislation does not necessarily reflect the focus on cultural values and regional priorities that are emerging from the PAS community proposals. Parks Canada is guided by a national system plan with the goal of representation of each natural region of Canada. Parks Canada has made significant steps toward adapting its policies by agreeing to sponsor Sahyoue/Edacho and to consider it as a potential part of the National Parks System (Copps 2001). Parks Canada has also developed a definition of Aboriginal Cultural Landscapes, and has developed guidelines for their identification and evaluation (Parks Canada 2001). The current system of Territorial Parks focuses on recreational and scenic values through campgrounds and wayside parks. The Territorial Parks legislation is currently under review, as it has not been applied to large cultural and natural areas that require protection from nonrenewable resource activities. The Canadian Wildlife Service is exploring ways to adapt its National Wildlife Area legislation and regulations to areas of harvesting and cultural values, as a result of its work with the Deh Cho communities on the Horn Plateau. The role of regional land use plans in providing effective tools for protection presents challenges to the current definitions of protected area but also new opportunities for a more flexible and adaptive approach. The Gwich'in Land Use Plan and Sahtu Land Use Plan may become significant tools in defining and protecting significant areas on both Aboriginal owned land and Crown land.

New Directions for Wilderness

Some authors (Callicott 2000; Magga 1995) suggest that the term "wilderness" is ethnocentric and should be avoided. This may be difficult, as "wilderness" has become part of the conservation and tourism lexicon and will continue to attract visitors to the remote areas of the Circumpolar North. Instead, the definitions of wilderness should recognize northern peoples' values of wilderness areas as places that are part of a cultural identity, or as Stumpff (2000) describes, "places of origin and life." Protected area designations that encompass the values held by Aboriginal peoples need to be considered and incorporated into legislation and management plans. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) protected area Category V (protected landscape and seascape) is particularly appropriate to the types of protected areas emerging from the NWT PAS, as it recognizes the interaction between people and

nature over time and has specific objectives related to the conservation of cultural heritage. New designations, such as the Sustainable Development Reserves in Brazil (Charity and Masterson 1999) or “life reserves” suggested by Sochaczewski (1999), need to be explored for applicability in the Circumpolar North. Formal tribal wilderness designations, such as the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness in Montana and the Indigenous Protected Areas in Australia (Bridgewater and others 1999), provide potential models for protected areas on Aboriginal owned lands and require further examination for possible application in the north. Education of the public (visitors and residents, academia, and protected area managers) regarding definitions of wilderness that reflect a diversity of values will be critical for reaching understanding and perhaps even compatibility in how wilderness areas are defined, used, and managed in the future.

References

- Bridgewater, P.; Cresswell, C.; Szabo, S.; Thackaway, R. 1999. Indigenous protected areas: a new approach to the use of IUCN Categories V and VI in Australia. In: Stolton, S.; Dudley, N., eds. *Partnerships for protection: new strategies for planning and management of protected areas*. London: Earthscan Publications: 69–78.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 2000. Contemporary criticisms of the received wilderness idea. In: Cole, David N.; McCool, Stephen F.; Freimund, Wayne A.; O’Loughlin, Jennifer, comps. *Wilderness science in a time of change conference—Volume 1: Changing perspectives and future directions*; 1999 May 23–27; Missoula, MT. Proc. RMRS-P-15-VOL-1. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station: 24–31.
- Charity, Sandra; Materson, Don. 1999. Mamiraua Sustainable Development Reserve, Brazil. In: Stolton, S.; Dudley, N., eds. *Partnerships for protection: new strategies for planning and management of protected areas*. London: Earthscan Publications: 109–117.
- Cizek, P., ed. 2001. Edézhíé candidate Protected Area: Mills Lake, Horn River, Horn Plateau and Willowlake River. Report submitted to: Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment Canada by Deh Cho First Nations. 79 p.
- Copps, S. 2001. Transcript of speech by Honorable Sheila Copps, Minister of Canadian Heritage. CBC Radio, Yellowknife. March 23, 2001, in Deline, Northwest Territories.
- Hanks, Chris. 1996. Narrative landscape: Grizzly Bear Mountain and Scented Grass Hills as repositories of Sahtu Dene culture. Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada Agenda Paper. Yellowknife, NT: Hanks Heritage Consulting. 74 p.
- Johnson, Martha, ed. 1992. *Lore: capturing traditional environmental knowledge*. Ottawa, Ontario: IDRC. 190 p.
- Kaye, Roger W. 2000. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: an exploration of the meanings embodied in America’s last great wilderness. In: McCool, Stephen F.; Cole, David N.; Borrie, William T.; O’Loughlin, Jennifer, comps. *Wilderness science in a time of change conference—Volume 2: Wilderness within the context of larger systems*; 1999 May 23–27; Missoula, MT. Proc. RMRS-P-15-VOL-2. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station: 73–80.
- Lucas, P. H. 1995. National Parks and Protected Areas in Polar Regions. In: Martin, Vance G.; Tyler, Nicholas, eds. *Arctic Wilderness: The 5th World Wilderness Congress*. Golden, CO: North American Press: 161–169.
- Magga, O. H. 1995. Indigenous peoples of the North. In: Martin, Vance G.; Tyler, Nicholas, eds. *Arctic Wilderness: The 5th World Wilderness Congress*. Golden, CO: North American Press: 27–31.
- Nesbitt, Tom. 2000. Commemorative integrity statement for the Ehdacho (Scented Grass Hills) and Saoyue (Grizzly Bear Mountain) National Historic Site. Draft Paper.
- NWT Bureau of Statistics. [Online]. www.stats.gov.nt.ca
- NWT Protected Areas Strategy Advisory Committee. 1999. *Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy: a balanced approach to establishing protected areas in the Northwest Territories*. Yellowknife, NT: Department of Resources Wildlife and Economic Development. 102 p.
- Oveido, Gonzalo; Brown, Jessica. 1999. Building alliances with indigenous peoples to establish and manage protected areas. In: Stolton, S.; Dudley, N., eds. *Partnerships for protection: new strategies for planning and management of protected areas*. London: Earthscan Publications: 99–108.
- Parks Canada. 2000. An approach Aboriginal cultural landscapes. [Online]. http://www.parksCanada.pch.gc.ca/aborig/aborig20_e.htm.
- Roots, Fred. 1995. Polar wilderness: what does it contribute and to whom? In: Martin, Vance G.; Tyler, Nicholas, eds. *Arctic Wilderness: The 5th World Wilderness Congress*. Golden, CO: North American Press: 118–127.
- Sahtu Joint Working Group. 2000. Rakee Gok’e Godi: places we take care of.
- Sochaczewski, Paul. 1999. Life reserves: opportunities to use spiritual values and partnerships in forest conservation. In: Stolton, S.; Dudley, N., eds. *Partnerships for protection: new strategies for planning and management for protected areas*. London: Earthscan Publications: 137–143.
- Stumpff, Linda M. 2000. In Wilderness there is life: an American Indian perspective on theory and action for wildlands. In: Watson, Alan E.; Aplet, Greg H.; Hendee, John C., comps. 2000. *Personal, societal and ecological values of wilderness: Sixth World Wilderness Congress proceedings on research, management, and allocation—Volume II*; 1998 October 24–29; Bangalore, India. Proc. RMRS-P-14. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station: 98–102.
- Thelon Game Sanctuary Management Plan. 2000. Draft.