

# Youth Land Stewardship and Junior Guiding Program: Final Report

## Project Activities

To support the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun (FNNND) in connecting youth to their traditional territory and the fish and wildlife within it, CPAWS Yukon set out to provide a land stewardship and junior guide training program for FNNND youth this summer. This 13-day program (August 15-27) took youth and community mentors on a 350-km canoe journey through their ancestral lands on the Beaver and Stewart Rivers.

Our group included five FNNND community members: two youth under 18, a youth in her mid-20s, and two community mentors in their 30s. Two certified wilderness guides, including a Teetl'it Gwich'in citizen who is a founding member of Youth of the Peel, passed on outdoor and leadership skills. Two CPAWS Yukon staff, including myself, participated in the trip. I oversaw the trip and the other staff member worked with one of the guides to document the trip through photography and video.

We boarded a float plane to begin our journey and landed at Clarke Lake, where youth spent two days learning basic camp skills and picked up flat water paddling strokes. We spent 13 days travelling from Clarke Lakes to Mayo, and each day the youth became stronger in their outdoor skills and confidence.

Meals, prepared with help from the youth, were shared around an evening campfire as we looked out at the flow of the river. Our campfire discussions were wide-ranging: one community mentor taught youth about the modern land claims, another mentor talked about the importance of water and salmon, and other evenings were spent simply enjoying each others' company and sharing stories.

Every few nights one of the youth or community mentors would read out a letter written by a community member. This was always a moving experience, as the letters included teachings for youth to carry with them while out on the land and as they grow into leadership roles in their community.

The group stopped at cabins along the route, places where family members and ancestors had travelled and lived. We lingered at one cabin to leave a memorial sign for an Elder who had travelled the Beaver River last year with CPAWS and who had recently passed. Our Teetl'it Gwich'in guide shared traditional teachings and her perspective on stewardship and leadership with the youth.

One of the community mentors works for the FNNND Lands Department and collected water data throughout the trip. He shared this skill and his passion for healthy waters with the group.

On our 13<sup>th</sup> day, the community welcomed us back with bright welcome signs and cheering. The FNNND women's drumming group played us in as we bumped our canoes onto shore. FNNND staff directed participants onto a float, and we were paraded around the community, with police and fire truck sirens playing behind us. We gathered afterwards at a local park for speeches, including from the Chief of FNNND and the local MLA. The community beamed when the youth and community mentors were presented with Certificates in Backcountry Leadership.

## **How did work contribute to the protection, enhancement, or restoration of fish, wildlife or their habitat?**

This program provided youth with on-the-land experience and mentorship to deepen their understanding and appreciation for fish, wildlife, and their habitats. Each day we watched for wildlife like moose, eagles, and salmon, and we scoured our campsites for tracks (for safety and interest!). We followed and discussed leave no trace camp practices as a small way to care for wildlife habitat and reduce attractants while out on the land.

Letters from community members and campfire discussions about the final agreements, the Beaver River land use plan, stewardship and salmon all worked to increase the ability of youth to take part in processes that protect fish, wildlife, and their habitat. I also witnessed the strength of connection youth built with the watershed, and their passion for stewarding it. One youth recently testified at the Yukon Water Board's public interest hearing on placer mining in wetlands, and she spoke of her time on this trip in the Beaver River Watershed.

We had hoped to spot Chinook salmon on the trip and mark their locations, as we had in 2019, but unfortunately we did not spot any salmon to report back to wildlife managers. We did collect water data along the way and this information will be used by FNNND.

The youth returned to their community with new outdoor and paddling skills, and the confidence to make safe decisions in the backcountry. This will enable them to participate in future paddling and on-the-land pursuits, and to run or support future trips and camps for their community.

## **What would you do differently?**

We had to make some program changes due to COVID-19:

- We originally intended for the group to meet with a group of Elders at Fraser Falls Fish Camp. We felt the risk of COVID made this too dangerous to undertake, even with precautions in place. Instead, the group stopped at the fish camp for a few days, and we were joined by four members of the FNNND Lands Department for one day. Because we knew Elders wouldn't be able to join the trip, we asked community members to write letters for the youth, with lessons they wanted them to consider during the trip. We feel that connecting with Elders and other community members is a key part of on-the-land trips and we hope it will be possible to do safely with future trips.
- We had hoped that youth and trip leaders would be able to gather in Mayo two days prior to the trip so the youth could learn from Elders and other knowledge keepers. We did not do this to decrease the risk of COVID transmission. Again, letters from the community were a meaningful way to fill this gap.
- The timing was tight to pull the trip off. We had just over two weeks between our COVID safety plan being approved by Yukon Government and FNNND, and the start of the trip. This tight timeline, among other things, meant that it was difficult to find youth to join the trip when other youth dropped out at the last moment. Given the circumstance of this year, we are extremely pleased that this trip was able to go forward.

Unrelated to COVID-19, we wish we had thought to bring camera traps so we could show youth how to set them up, and could have tried to capture nighttime wildlife visits.

## Communications

### **Sharing results with appropriate groups**

As noted above, water data was collected during the trip by a community mentor who works for the Lands Department of FNNND. We also reported back our lack of Chinook salmon sighting this year to FNNND and the Mayo Renewable Resource Council, when last year we had seen dozens below the Rackla River.

Photos and stories from this and last year's trip have made it easier for people to connect with the land and wildlife that are being considered under the Beaver River Watershed land use plan. This will also hold true for the future Northern Tutchone regional land use plan.

### **Recognition of Yukon Fish and Wildlife Enhancement Trust**

We recognized YFWET contribution to this program in our November 2020 newsletter, sent on Dec. 4, 2020 to over 1900 people. A screenshot has been attached to the report email. Once the film documenting this year's trip is complete, we plan to acknowledge in the credits and on the film's webpage that YFWET's contribution made the trip possible. We expect the film will be complete in January 2021. Once we are able to host events to screen the film, we will also acknowledge the contribution at those events.

### **Communications materials, strategies and techniques to promote the project and its objectives**

CPAWS Yukon is working with the youth to help them share the trip and the landscape of the Beaver River Watershed with the community of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun and Yukoners. Photos and stories from the trip were shared at the General Assembly and one youth has submitted an article on her trip experience, which we hope will be published in What's Up Yukon in January 2021. We recently featured the trip in our November newsletter and have a webpage dedicated to the Beaver River Watershed.

This is the second CPAWS trip into the Beaver River Watershed, and past participants continue to share their experience in creative ways. As noted, a youth recently testified at the Water Board's public interest hearing on placer mining in wetlands and spoke of her experience in the Beaver River Watershed; another youth featured his photos from the 2019 trip and the story of the Beaver River Watershed in an online art show. Overall, we feel that the stories shared from these trips have helped to boost community familiarity with a part of their traditional territory that is difficult to access.

A short film created from last year's trip, [\*Places like This\*](#), won best environmental film at the 2020 Waterwalker film festival. The filmmakers who created that film, including one of our trip guides, are working to shape our 2020 footage into another short documentary that we will use to share the trip with FNNND and boost awareness about the Beaver River Watershed, and the fish and wildlife within. We plan to work with youth participants to organize COVID-safe community screenings in Mayo and Whitehorse.

## Project Photos





