

Walk Softly

Newsletter of the
Yukon Conservation Society
Spring 2022



Inside: • Caribou Disturbance • Why Reduce the Peak? • Wolverine Mine Costs

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Cover Photo: Caribou by Atsushi Sugimoto & ArcticMediaCreation.com

Attention YCS members:

The Yukon Conservation Society will hold a
Special General Meeting (SGM)
March 24, 2022, from 6 – 7:30 pm
 online via Zoom.

This meeting will be to review and vote on
 proposed amendments to the bylaws.

The **Annual General Meeting** will
 follow immediately after the SGM
 from 7:30 – 9 pm.

Please RSVP to confirm your attendance and
 receive the Zoom link, from
outreach@yukonconservation.org.

For more information you may check the YCS
 website which will be updated with more
 information as it is received from the Board.



[http://yukonconservation.org/news-events/
 yukon-conservation-society-special-general-meeting-and-annual-general-meeting](http://yukonconservation.org/news-events/yukon-conservation-society-special-general-meeting-and-annual-general-meeting)



You may have heard that we have
 12 years to fix everything. This is
 well-meaning nonsense but it's still
 nonsense. Climate change isn't a cliff
 we fall off, but a slope we slide down.

And true, we've chosen to throw
 ourselves headlong down the hill at
 breakneck speed. But we can always
 choose to begin the long, slow brutal
 climb back up.

Climate scientist Kate Marvel,
 "Thinking about Climate on a
 Dark, Dismal Morning," *Scientific
 American*, December 25, 2018

Walk Softly

is published by the Yukon Conservation Society for members and subscribers. Memberships and information about the Society can be obtained by contacting the YCS office.

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We welcome newsletter submissions and letters to the editor. Deadlines for submissions are Feb 1, May 1, Aug 1, and Nov 1. Views expressed in **Walk Softly** are not necessarily those of the Society.

Publications Mail Agreement number 4154991
Changes of address or undeliverable copies should be sent to YCS at 302 Hawkins St., Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 1X6

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- Sebastian Jones
(Fish & Wildlife Analyst)
- Scott Pressnail (Energy Analyst)
- Eric Labrecque
(ETS Project Manager)
- Kirsten Reid
(Conservation Biologist)
- Noah Hill (Clean Energy Intern)

WORKERS ON THIS ISSUE

Tanya Handley, Deborah Donnelly
printed on 100% recycled paper



Editorial

Happy 2022! Yukon Conservation Society has had a busy start to the New Year preparing for an exciting 2022. Watch *Tread Lightly* for upcoming projects, announcements, and events. Deborah is tirelessly preparing for the coming trail guide season and *Created in the Canyon* so summer is not that far away. We are in the final stages of designing our new website: watch for it this spring!

We are delighted to welcome Noah Hill, our inaugural Clean Energy intern. He will be working closely with the Energy team on a number of energy projects.

In addition, we want to take a moment to say good-bye to Toshiba Govindaraj, our inaugural Helmut Grunberg Intern, and who stayed for a second term as a co-op student with the University of Victoria. We also wish to extend our thanks and gratitude to Toshiba for all of her work over these past months. As she leaves to continue her studies at the University of Victoria, we wish her well in both her studies and future endeavours.

We were unable to host our annual winter event this year due to COVID-19 measures but we nonetheless were delighted to award the 2021 Gerry Couture Award to Joy Snyder. Joy worked at Raven Recycling for 30 years, twenty as the Executive Director.

YCS has been busy finalizing our detailed submission for the draft Dawson Regional Land Use Plan as well as numerous YESAB, waterboard and energy submissions. The ETS project has continued installations and monitoring. The project now has 43 participants with 34 installations.

We are continuing to collaborate with the Priority Place Initiative for Yukon South Beringia (YSB PPI) project partners to publicize the breadth of research happening in this unique region. The YSB PPI is a multi-year, multi-partner project that includes the southern half of the Beringia region. The YSB PPI involves scientific teams studying the diverse ecosystems in Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in territory to understand how they function and how they are changing in these times of ever-increasing fluctuations of the climate. The Priority Place project just launched on social media (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), and there will also be a Yukon South Beringia website launched very soon so watch for future announcements in *Tread Lightly*.

As I stare out my window at the melting snow and longer, warming days, I wish you all a healthy and restful New Year.

Coral

Can We Save the Clear Creek Caribou Herd?

A new study conducted by YCS suggests that this herd will be in serious trouble unless we drastically change the way we manage its habitat.

The Clear Creek Caribou Herd (CCCH) are a woodland caribou herd whose range extends between Mayo and Dawson, on the territories of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Nacho Nyak Dun First Nations. The most up to date population estimates of this herd indicate that it is stable at about 900 individuals (Yukon Government 2001). Woodland caribou herds, like the CCCH, are not migratory. That is, they use the same habitat year-round. Therefore, loss of any of their habitat through natural or human means, can be quite damaging to the herd.

Disturbances from industrial activity (forestry, mining, exploration, etc.) can influence woodland caribou habitat in two main ways. First, there are the direct disturbances, the area of the total footprint of the disturbance. Second, there are the areas around the physical disturbance which caribou (and other wildlife) avoid due to loud noises, high stress levels, increased risk of predation, etc. These are termed Zones of Influence (ZOIs).

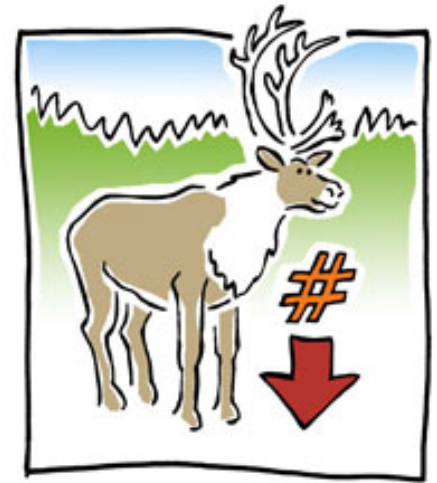
Current scientific understanding of ZOIs for northern caribou populations estimates that they range from 250 m to 4km (i.e., for each linear disturbance, there is an extra 250 m – 4 km on either side that caribou will avoid). From detailed investigations into other northern caribou populations, we collectively understand that if a herd's range remains at least 65% undisturbed, then the herd has a 60% of being self-sustaining. Of course, this also means that if 65% of the range is undisturbed, a herd has a 40% chance of disappearing...

There are no shortages of historical and contemporary disturbances within the CCCH range. In addition, like many places in the Yukon, this area is the potential home to future large-scale disturbances. While the extent to which the CCCH have already suffered from existing disturbances has not been thoroughly documented, it is presumably quite large. It is unknown whether we have already crossed the 65% undisturbed threshold. Future disturbances within their range may therefore have serious implications for the herd.

Lead by our summer intern Toshibaa Govindaraj with the assistance of Wildlife & Habitat Analyst, Sebastian Jones, and Conservation Biologist, Kirsten Reid, we set out to determine how much of the CCCH's range has already been disturbed. While we can't definitively say how much of their range will be disturbed in the future, having a baseline of understanding of what has already been lost will help us understand the current status of this herd and aid in advocating for them and their habitat if and when we need to.

Using the publicly available online YESAB recommendations, we calculated the total disturbance within the CCCH range, separated into a few disturbance types (Direct Disturbance). Using the range of ZOIs established for other herds, we applied a lower (250 m) and upper (4 km) bound of ZOIs (Indirect Disturbance). We consider both of these bounds to be conservative estimates. In total, we estimate that between 13 – 112 % of the CCCH range has already been disturbed via industrial activity*.

* 13 - 112% seems like a very big range: it all depends on the ZOI we use. 13% is from using the 250m ZOI; 112% from using the 4km ZOI. In all likelihood, the percentage of the herd's range made unavailable is somewhere in the middle. It's important to note that the Draft Dawson Regional Land Use Plan sets an upper threshold of disturbance at 4%....



This suggests that, given what we already know about how caribou avoid disturbance features, that further alterations to their habitat could tip this herd into a terminal decline, as we have seen with so many other Woodland Caribou herds in the Provinces.

This was a preliminary study and there were other questions that we could have explored had we had the technology, expertise, or time. However, we believe that this investigation significantly contributes to our understanding of caribou habitats and disturbances in the Yukon. We plan to conduct similar analyses on other, similarly pressured, herds in the Yukon (starting with the Finlayson and Klaza herds).

The full report will be publicly available on our website and social media channels within the next week. Please read, share, and let us know what you think.

*Kirsten Reid,
YCS Conservation Biologist*

Yukon South Beringia – Priority Place Initiative

Some *Walk Softly* readers will know what the Yukon South Beringia Priority Place Initiative (YSB PPI) is, but you can be forgiven if you have not heard of it. The general public has heard very little about it yet.

But, the YSB PPI is one of the most significant integrated ecosystem plans in the Yukon outside of Chapter 11 Land Use Planning.

Yukon South Beringia, the part of Canada that was not covered in ice during the last glaciation, is arguably the oldest continually existing ecosystem in Canada. It is home to the last remnants of Mammoth Steppe in Canada, and a suite of unique species that occur nowhere else.

As with most ecosystems around the world, YSB is under threat as a result of human activities. Broadly, these threats fall into two categories: a warmer and wetter climate and increased land use such as roads, mines and farming.

Recognizing that better understanding of this special place will be key to looking after it for generations to come, Canada, the Yukon, First Nations and conservation groups got together to sponsor and conduct research and put together an Integrated Conservation Action Plan (ICAP).

This plan is intended to complement and support the Dawson Regional Land Use Plan, which encompasses most of the YSB.

YCS saw a role that it could play, even though we do not typically do field research: we can tell the story of Yukon South Beringia, and of the work that its partners are doing.

So, who are some of the partners, and what are they doing?

Yukon Government is investigating:

- Endemic Plant Meadow Mapping. Understanding what meadows exist, to predict where we'd find them elsewhere. 2022 results will include a better predictive map of where meadows/steppes are.
- Mammal Diversity in riparian and mining areas, focus on Wolverines, using camera traps starting March 2022
- Carnivores in the Klondike Plateau Estimate bear density, using camera traps and hair snags.
- Rapid shrub encroachment

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Na-Cho Nyak Dun are leveraging the initiative to build its research and monitoring capacity by supplying students to work with other partners.

Yukon Government and the Canadian Wildlife Service Building on the successful Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Bioblitz in 2021, the goal is to hold another Bioblitz at the southern reaches of YSB in 2022.

Wildlife Conservation Society Canada will:

- Map climate refugia- places where current conditions are likely to persist as the climate warms so that we can better protect the special species that depend on them.
- Map the future distribution of a suite of species.
- Map existing and future distribution of Lichen (an important food for caribou)
- Build a Web portal for researchers to use to project vegetation shifts
- Investigate the cumulative effects of environmental changes on Breeding Birds - see 'Canary in a Gold Mine' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMfTcA3ljsk>)

University of Alberta will research: The Intersection of Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science for Species at Risk and Endemics


Ducks Unlimited Canada is working on a wetlands handbook on how to identify and work around wetlands without harming them.

Sebastian Jones, YCS Wildlife Analyst



YSB PPI

Follow along by checking out our website
www.yukonsouthberingia.ca
(to be launched at the end of March)

 @YukonSBeringia
 @yukonsouthberingia
 @yukonsouthberingia

Why Reduce the Peak?

I was recently asked why the Yukon Conservation Society is encouraging Yukoners to reduce how much electricity we use during the peaks in demand on the Yukon's electrical grid, which typically occur in the morning and evening throughout the winter, even on really cold days when Yukon Energy often has at least some fossil fuel generation throughout the day and overnight.

The matter arose from the appearance that any electrical demand shifted from on-peak times to off-peak times, on days when at least some fossil fuel generation is occurring all day, would just be shifting that fossil fuel generation – it would have no impact on how much fossil fuels we're using to produce electricity. It was a thoughtprovoking question that has really stuck in my head ever since.

The question took me to Yukon Energy's Current Energy Consumption website, which provides the amount of power they're generating from fossil fuels and hydropower over different periods: currently, in the last 24 hours, or over the last week, month, and year. The graphs in this article are based on data from that website.

The question boiled down to this: why reduce our consumption during peak periods, like around 9 am and 6 pm, only to shift it to off-peak periods, like overnight, when any additional need for electricity is just going to be met by fossil fuels anyways? Fair point at first glance, and it's true that decreasing our consumption outright – when possible – is always better than shifting it to off-peak times. But there are a few things to consider that may not be immediately apparent.

Let's talk about why we're trying to "reduce the peak" – and by that we mean decrease the maximum amount of power that Yukoners use in the winter. That amount has been rising rapidly in recent years, exceeding what Yukon Energy can meet with renewable energy like hydropower. To keep the lights on, fossil fuels like natural gas and diesel have been used to fill the gap between what renewables can provide and what Yukoners need; otherwise there would be planned rolling blackouts on cold days, putting thousands of Yukoners and their homes' pipes at risk of freezing.

As our peak demand keeps rising, and without enough new renewable energy projects that can help in the winter like wind power, Yukon Energy has needed to increase the number of diesel generators rented each winter, and how much diesel and natural gas they burn to ensure there's enough power to go around. The rentals and fuel are quite costly, which can raise electricity rates for Yukoners. The increasing peak demand can also stress out the power grid, making outages more likely. So even while shifting our power usage to overnight hours when the demand is lower may not immediately decrease our consumption of fossil fuels, it does help keep rates down and the lights on.

Now, can shifting electricity consumption to off-peak times EVER decrease the Yukon's consumption of fossil fuels? In short, yes. The graphs provided here help us again.



The top graph shows the typical mix of where our power comes from on a relatively warm winter day; there's very little fossil fuel power generated overnight, though there is significant fossil fuel power generated during the morning and evening peak periods. On these days, shifting our power consumption to overnight hours is likely to decrease the territory's consumption of fossil fuels for power generation, reducing our collective carbon footprint and the cost of electricity in the Yukon – exactly what we want!

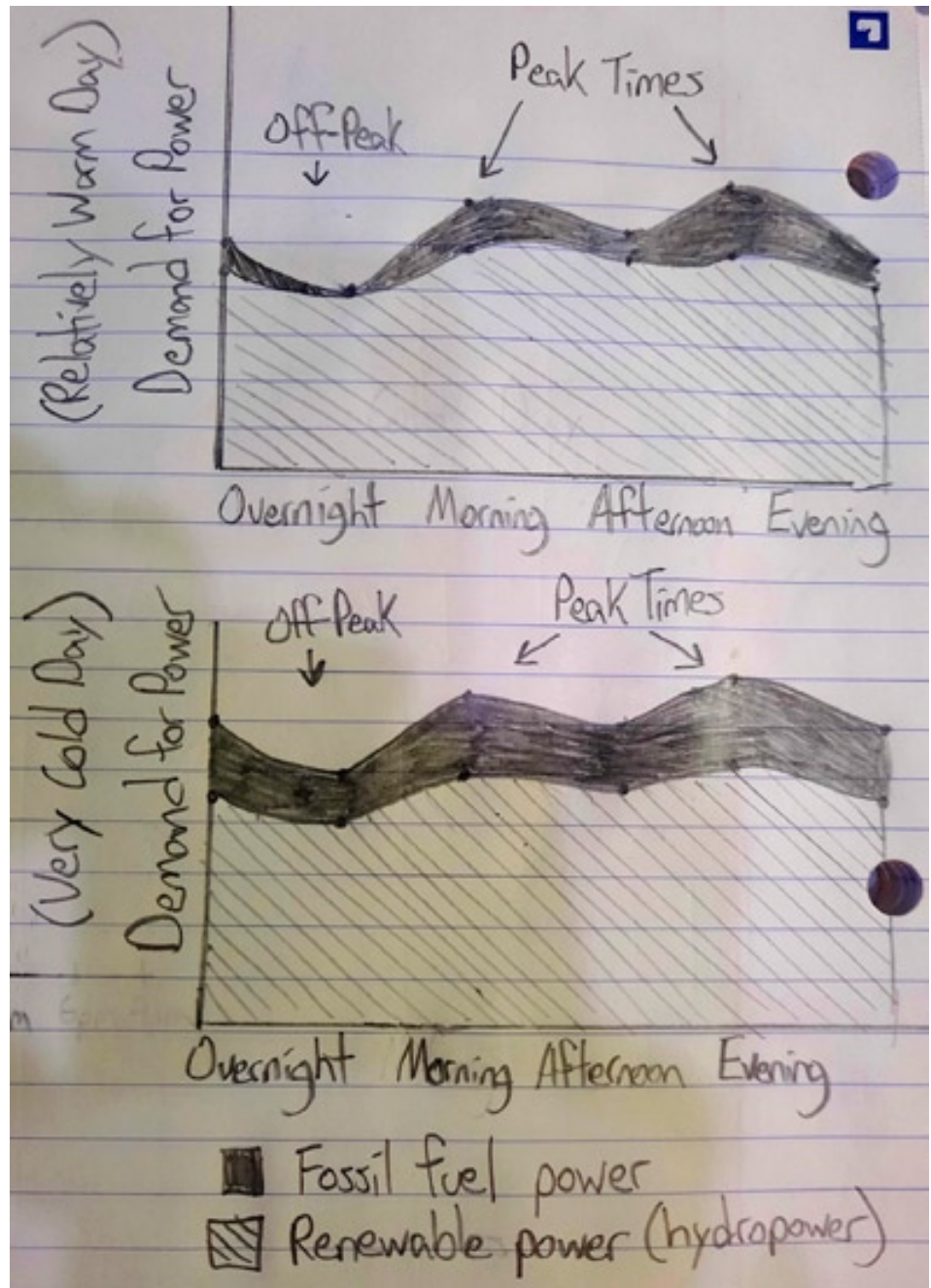
The bottom graph shows the typical colder day. On these chillier days, it's less likely that shifting usage to off-peak times will reduce our fossil fuel consumption, but it's on those days that the grid is most stressed out, potentially leading to outages. It's also the peak demand on those cold days that determines how many diesel generators Yukon Energy needs to rent. If we can reliably reduce the peak demand on those days, Yukon Energy will rent fewer diesel generators. So reducing that peak has big financial and environmental benefits for all Yukoners. Together, that means there's always a benefit to reducing the peak demand in the winter, regardless of how cold it is outside.

Thankfully, the number of diesel generators rented by Yukon Energy to meet the growing peak demand is expected to come down in the coming years as Yukon Energy's 10-Year Renewable Resource Plan gets rolled out.

The grid-scale battery project that expected to start working in Spring 2023, paired with demand-side management projects like our Electric Thermal Storage project and the recently launched Beat the Peak Yukon project, will put a serious dent in the gap between the Yukon’s peak demand and how much power we can get from renewables in the winter. Yukon Energy’s need to rent diesel generators is expected to be eliminated by the end of decade, especially if the Moon Lake seasonal pumped storage project is successful in that time.

At some point along our journey to eliminating our reliance on fossil fuels, a time will come that regardless of how cold it is outside, shifting our electrical usage to off-peak times will allow us to avoid generating power from fossil fuels all together. At that point, the benefits of any peak-reduction habits we’ve developed – like delaying the dryer until later at night or using block heater timers, will really come to fruition.

That’s also when the full benefits of any peak-shifting equipment we’ve installed, like electric thermal storage systems, and policies we’ve advocated for, like time of use rates (where it’s cheaper to use electricity during off-peak times), will be realized. At last, our reliance on fossil fuels for electricity will be a thing of the past! This can’t be achieved overnight – it took decades of poor planning and policies to get to this point, so it will take time to get to that future – but we’ve been making important progress in recent years.



So, where does that leave us with the original question? Developing habits and policies, and installing equipment, which helps us reduce our peak demand contributes to our effort to reduce the number of diesel generators we need each winter to keep the lights on, helps us avoid fossil fuel-generated power on warmer winter days, and prepares us for the future when peak-reduction will help us avoid using any fossil fuel generated power entirely – regardless of how cold it is. Sounds like a win-win-win!

*Eric Labrecque
(ETS Project Manager)*

Wolverine Mine Cleanup Costs are on Us

The abandoned Wolverine mine site is located on the Robert Campbell Highway between Ross River and Watson Lake. It was an underground lead-zinc operation that operated between 2012 and 2015. During that time, it didn't pay a cent in royalties. Since 2015 it has been embroiled in tedious issues such as who actually owns the site, why did the Yukon Government not get adequate financial security to cover the cleanup and remediation costs associated with it, and could it actually be sold to another operator who would clean up the mess.

Well, we now have some answers. The court appointed receiver for the Wolverine Mine has declared in its report to the bankruptcy court that they were "unable to find a purchaser...best course of action...to transition the mine to YG, who will manage care and maintenance in the long term".

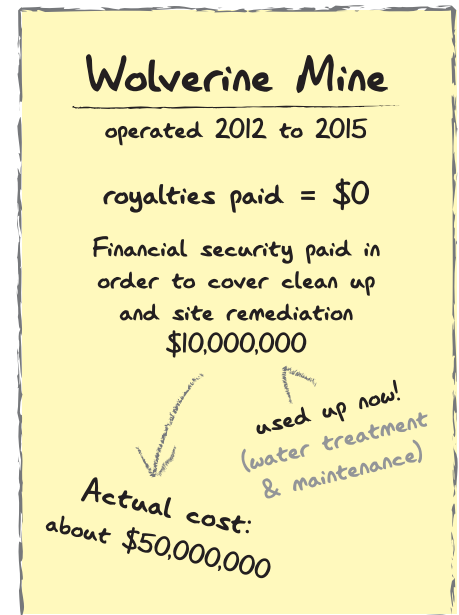
Yet another Yukon mine has officially been declared unsaleable and it is now up to the public to pay for its long term care and maintenance while the Yukon government dithers around trying to decide what should be done with the now non-mine. Once the futility of paying for potentially perpetual care and maintenance has sunk in, the site will need to be reclaimed and restored so the site can be permanently closed.

Oh yes, the public in the form of us taxpayers will have to pay for that final closure too.

There is one slight quirk when the word taxpayer is used. Up until now, when mines were abandoned in the Yukon, the clean up was the responsibility of the Federal government. This meant southern taxpayers were essentially paying for it. The reason is that mines like Faro, Mt Nansen, Keno, and Clinton Creek were approved by the Federal government prior to devolution in 2003 (when the Yukon Government assumed responsibility for approving mines).

The issue with the Wolverine Mine is that it was approved after devolution by the Yukon Government, so it is financially responsible for any and all costs at the site. These costs are not insubstantial. Water treatment and ongoing care and maintenance are in the neighbourhood of a million dollars a year. Closure and remediation costs were initially calculated at \$35 million. Even the amount YCS thought was too little. YCS estimates that the cost for closure and remediation to be well above that, most likely in the \$50 million dollar range.

But it gets worse. Only about \$10 million dollars worth of the originally anticipated \$35 million was actually paid. That \$10 million is all gone now, having been spent on ongoing care and maintenance. Some of it, \$1.6 million, went to the bankruptcy process. If people are interested in the bankruptcy proceedings and related paperwork, the good folks over at PricewaterhouseCoopers have put everything online. This openness and transparency is somewhat unusual in the Yukon mining world, where getting documents (especially from certain government departments) can be akin to pulling teeth. The Wolverine Mine bankruptcy documents are available at <https://www.pwc.com/ca/en/services/insolvency-assignments/yukon-zinc-corporation.html>.



Assuming the Yukon Government actually decides to close the site and remediate it, let us consider what the money could have been spent on instead. \$50 million would probably pay for a new school or two, the odd nursing station, and tens of kilometres of highway upgrades (with some very nice bicycle paths alongside them). Alternatively, instead of building stuff, that amount of money would have paid for a lot of snow clearing. If you're of a small government/low taxation mindset, think of how much lower taxes could have been for Yukoners if that money wasn't actually required to be spent on an abandoned mine.

Of course there is a lesson in all of this, and it is a lesson that the Yukon Government needs to take to heart. Do not approve mines without asking for a hefty financial security deposit up front. When (and it is usually when, not if) the mining company goes bankrupt and leaves the government to clean up the mess, taxpayers must should not be on the hook to pay for it. The era of mining promoters skimming off profits and leaving the costs to the public and degradation to the land has to end.

The calculation of the security deposit is far too important an issue to be left to the mining company and a conflicted Yukon Government to hammer out – the same department charged with promoting the mining industry is charged with holding it to account. A completely independent entity must be brought in to examine the proposed mine, determine the security, and then let all Yukoners review the calculations. This entity (whether it is a consultant company, another government, or an institute or non-governmental agency) should be composed of experts in the field, but have no links to the mining company in question.

Now this means that some big mines that are on the horizon, such as the Kudz Ze Kayah Mine, the Coffee Mine and the Casino Mine, should be expected to front the big bucks as financial security prior to a single shovel of dirt being moved. If the mine operators are unable to provide these funds up front, well, then they should be considered as unsuitable to operate a mine anywhere in the Yukon Territory.

For too long the work and the cost of mine cleanups has been abandoned by the companies that created them and handed over to taxpayers. The companies have privatized the profit but socialized the risks of their operations. The environment has suffered, and the opportunity cost of those tax dollars (which could have been spent on schools and hospitals) has been blithely ignored by the powers that be. This must happen no more.

Let Wolverine be the last mine that Yukon taxpayers have to pay to clean up.

*Lewis Rifkind,
YCS Mining Analyst*

Welcome to Noah Hill

YCS would like you to give a big welcome to our newest staff member, Noah Hill. Noah's position is funded largely by Indigenous Clean Energy's Generation Power program, which seeks to empower Indigenous youth pursuing careers in clean energy while developing a more equitable working environment in Canada's clean energy sector.

We are pleased to have Noah join our team!



Greetings, my name is Noah Hill, I live in Belleville, Ontario but grew up on a small Indigenous First Nation's Mohawk territory. I studied at Loyalist College in their General Arts and Sciences program and graduated in Spring 2020. A few of my interests include: reading, hunting, and technology such as computers, video games and photography.

I have been accepted to be an intern for the Yukon Conservation Society and look forward to this exciting opportunity. It feels great to be apart of an organization that thrives to make a difference in the world by researching and exploring new methods of sustainable/clean energy.

I hope to learn more on the benefits of the ETS systems and other renewable energies like wind power. This internship I feel will gain me many valuable skills I will use moving forward with my goal to help ensure my children have less of a carbon footprint then the generations before them.

YCS is looking for Board Members

YCS has a governance board, which plays a key role in the success of YCS's work.

Our mission is to:

Strengthen the Yukon's resilience, resistance and response to the twin climate and biodiversity crises through meaningful partnerships - recognizing that all life is dependent upon healthy ecosystems.

To fulfill this mission, YCS is looking for board members with diverse skills and experience – and a passion for conservation! We specifically welcome people of diverse cultural backgrounds and people from communities outside Whitehorse to apply. Nominees for the board must be members of the Society, and must be normally resident in the Yukon.

The general membership will elect the board at the AGM on March 24. Membership can be acquired at: <http://yukonconservation.org/you-can-help/join-as-a-member/>

The YCS Board has a Search Committee which will make recommendations to the Board with respect to applicants' skills, experience and diversity. The terms of reference are at http://yukonconservation.org/docs/Bylaws_relevant_to_Board_Recruitment_2022.pdf.

Interested members who are not specifically recommended by the nominating committee may self-nominate or be nominated by another voting member during the election.

Branch out!

Specific skills and experience that would be helpful to the Board at this time include:

- Knowledge of accounting and/or financial management
- Human resources experience and skills
- Experience in energy systems, fish & wildlife management, mining practices
- Advocacy skills
- Fundraising experience
- IT/Computer skills
- Experience working with First Nations
- Team building skills

The board meets monthly, usually for two hours, with two to three hours reading and emailing between meetings. Each board member is also expected to participate in a governance committee, supporting the functioning of the board and/or a program committee supporting staff in an area of interest (eg. mining, energy, etc.) Executive members may also spend more time on communication.

Thank you for completing the form available here: http://yukonconservation.org/docs/YCS_Board_nomination_form.pdf

Please send it to board@yukonconservation.org, or drop it off at the YCS office at 302 Hawkins Street. (The blue house at the corner of Hawkins and 3rd Avenue) The Board Search Committee will contact you to discuss your application and address any further questions you may have.



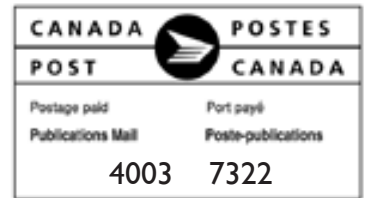
Hello YCS members,

With regret, I'm resigning from being YCS board president as of January 31, 2022 due to a significant health issue. The Board has been great to work with, and so has YCS, with whom I've been involved since 2008.

Board leadership will be in the very capable hands of Kim Melton, the Vice President, now Acting President, until the Board elects a president for the rest of this term.

If you or a friend would enjoy the challenge of being a YCS board member, do check out the notice for applying on the YCS website: <http://yukonconservation.org/news-events/call-for-board-members>.

Mary Amerongen



**Thank you
for a being
a member of
the Yukon
Conservation
Society!**

Switch to digital!

We are a conservation organisation and as such would encourage you to choose to receive *Walk Softly* by email in order to reduce our carbon footprint. If you wish to switch from a paper copy to digital (in colour!) – please call us, or send us an email at outreach@yukonconservation.org.

Got some time and energy to help conserve the Yukon?

We are always looking for volunteers for a variety of tasks, if interested please contact membership@yukonconservation.org.

Follow us!

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