

## YCS Commitment on Reconciliation – September 1, 2021

**Reconciliation** is about creating healing and balance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples and respecting Indigenous knowledge, practices, languages, and self-determination. **Decolonization processes** seek to dismantle structures that perpetuate the colonization of land and culture and instead, work to center Indigenous governance and self-determination. This letter outlines YCS’s commitment to both processes as they relate to our Vision and Mission.

We commit to working as allies with Indigenous peoples on our goal of safeguarding for future generations the land, air and water and the species dependent on them. Informed by Calls 43 and 52 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Articles 19, 29, and 32 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we will work with Yukon First Nations (including transboundary Nations) and the Inuvialuit in their efforts to protect the socio-ecological integrity of their land. We endorse the need for free, prior, and informed consent.

With these commitments in mind, it is important to acknowledge that we are an environmental organization that was founded by non-Indigenous newcomers and has a staff and board that remains mostly newcomers.<sup>1</sup> We recognize the history of colonialism that exists within conservation and environmental management, including organizations such as YCS. Colonial power structures continue to privilege many of us and influence our operating methods. We are responsible for changing this and for questioning decision-making when based in colonial environmental management practices. It is our desire and our obligation to reconcile the colonial past with the present and future of environmental conservation.

A key part of Reconciliation is **Education**:

1. We will educate ourselves on Yukon First Nation and Inuvialuit histories, values, and governance.<sup>2</sup> This includes ongoing education on how First Nations and Inuvialuit and their lands have been affected by Canadian Federal, Provincial, Territorial and Municipal government actions and legislation, such as the *Indian Act* and the Residential School

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<sup>1</sup> Taking direction from Castillo et. al. (2020). *ECHO: Ethnographic, Cultural and Historical Overview of Yukon’s First Peoples*, we have chosen to use the term ‘newcomer’ – as that is what is determined as appropriate in Yukon. Other terms, such as settler or non-Indigenous person are also commonly used, depending on the identity of an individual and the circumstances in which they came to the lands now known as Canada.

<sup>2</sup> In this letter, we use the terms Yukon First Nations and Inuvialuit to encompass the Nations that have territory within the border of what is now called the Yukon. We note that there are many Métis people, and people from other Indigenous communities living in Yukon who do not have traditional territories within Yukon’s colonially determined borders.

system. It also includes education on the history and ongoing impacts of colonial environmental management practices.

2. We recognize the critical value of Indigenous knowledge systems and commit to respecting this knowledge on its own terms, without the need for corroboration from other knowledge systems. We will respect that every Indigenous community has different worldviews, governance structures, and spiritual and cultural practices.
3. We will be as specific as possible when working with Yukon First Nations, transboundary Nations and Inuvialuit by referring to their specific name and, where appropriate, permitted and encouraged, the place names they choose.
4. We will be informed on the specifics of Yukon First Nations and Inuvialuit Final Agreements, including self-governance agreements, as they relate to environmental conservation and land use. We will also be informed on the environmental and land use practices and protocols of Nations who have not signed the Yukon Umbrella Final Agreement.
5. We will actively work to challenge our own biases and assumptions in order to avoid them negatively impacting our working relationships, recognizing that trust is difficult to earn but easily broken.
6. We will support and seek training and education for YCS staff and board in these matters.

We will put our learning into **Action and Decision Making**:

1. We will prioritize and be proactive in seeking out Indigenous partnerships and voices, and in doing so will carefully respect the principles and protocols of each community.
2. Where applicable/appropriate, we will support Indigenous-led land use planning and environmental assessment and endorse Indigenous efforts to set up protected areas.
3. We will create awareness of how colonial concepts such as the *Doctrine of Discovery* and *Terra Nullius* still inform current decisions about land management in Yukon.
4. We will work for change in conservation methods, for example, the conservation movement on this continent has viewed wilderness as a place without humans; we commit to reimagining “wild” as an inhabited place with pre-existing relationships and communities.
5. We will work for change in policies and legislation such as:
  - I. Ending free entry staking and non-consensual mining development.
  - II. Prioritizing and supporting meaningful co-management or independent management of First Nation’s land and resources, including hunting and fishing

- III. Creating a Yukon Species At Risk Act that centers Indigenous communities' concerns and objectives for plant and animal protection.

We commit to **being held accountable to our promises**: YCS Board and staff will regularly review and, when necessary, revise, this document. We will include a progress update as a regular part of the annual reporting that we complete for the public and will integrate this outline into our strategic planning.

We will only ever **speak for our own organization**; we do not speak for First Nation or Inuvialuit peoples, and we will never present ourselves as an authority for their positions.

We will **make our platforms available for First Nations and Inuvialuit citizens** to share their own stories, perspectives and views.

We are still far from Reconciliation, although some progress has happened - as can be seen in the collaborative work of many Yukon First Nations and various newcomer organizations/governments.<sup>3</sup> This statement and action that results from it are a work in progress, and success will be determined by Yukon Indigenous peoples, not by us. We hope we can play a small role towards ongoing Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and will do so with humility, respect and hope for the future.

We have worked alongside CPAWS Yukon in the development of this document and will continue to collaborate with them in the implementation of actions.

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### **YCS Vision and Mission**

The Vision of YCS is that “Indigenous and non-Indigenous Yukoners are united in nurturing, protecting and celebrating the Yukon's biodiversity and ecosystems.”

Its 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.”

### **Definitions**

**Reconciliation** is the ongoing process through which communities or individuals establish, repair, and maintain relationships based on mutual respect, understanding, trust and

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<sup>3</sup> See Castillo et. al., 2020 and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation's “How we can walk this land Together” land use planning document for examples of hopeful steps forward in Yukon.

acceptance. As such, reconciliation requires more than apologies – reconciliation entails making amends for past injustices and concretely seeks to repair past wrongs.

**Colonialism:** A system where one power or nation exercises control and domination over other people, most often to claim and exploit their land, labour, resources or wealth to benefit the colonizing power. In settler colonialism, land is taken away from the original inhabitants and given to people from elsewhere. Resource colonialism is closely related to settler colonialism, but emphasizes the dispossession of land in order to extract resources that increase wealth/power for a dominant society.

**Decolonization:** The process of dismantling colonization by challenging its assumptions (including ideologies of racist, cultural and gender superiority and privilege) and by acting to change colonial policies, structures and practices that perpetuate colonial oppression, domination and exploitation. At the same time, decolonization affirms, values, supports, and revitalizes Indigenous knowledge, practices, languages, and self-determination.

**Privilege:** having certain advantages, rights or protections because one is part of a specific group, race or gender.

**Doctrine of Discovery:** Originally expressed by Pope Nicolas V, the doctrine justifies the invasion, subjugation, and enslavement of non-Christian peoples by Christian powers and states. It persists today as “underlying crown title” which affirms that the colonizing power (or its successor) holds sovereignty over territories claimed via the Doctrine of Discovery.

**Terra Nullius:** A Latin term meaning an uninhabited land or land belonging to no one. The concept was used to justify European conquest; since the land did not belong to people they considered “civilized”.

For a specific explanation and history of how these processes and structures have unfolded in the Yukon, see [Victoria Castillo, Christine Schreyer and Tosh Southwick \(2020\). \*ECHO: Ethnographic, Cultural and historical Overview of Yukon's First Peoples.\*](#)

### Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action

43. We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation.

52 We call upon the Government of Canada, provincial and territorial governments, and the courts to adopt the following legal principles:

- I. Aboriginal title claims are accepted once the Aboriginal claimant has established occupation over a particular territory at a particular point in time.

- II. ii. Once Aboriginal title has been established, the burden of proving any limitation on any rights arising from the existence of that title shifts to the party asserting such a limitation.

### UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

#### Article 19

States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.

#### Article 29

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources. States shall establish and implement assistance programmes for indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that no storage or disposal of hazardous materials shall take place in the lands or territories of indigenous peoples without their free, prior and informed consent.
3. States shall also take effective measures to ensure, as needed, that programmes for monitoring, maintaining and restoring the health of indigenous peoples, as developed and implemented by the peoples affected by such materials, are duly implemented.

#### Article 32

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources.
2. States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources.
3. States shall provide effective mechanisms for just and fair redress for any such activities, and 24 appropriate measures shall be taken to mitigate adverse environmental, economic, social, cultural or spiritual impact.