

Research Bulletin

NWT Cumulative Impact Monitoring Program

A Century of Petroleum Extraction at Tłegóhłı (Norman Wells): Indigenous Knowledge for Indigenous Guardianship

Summary

Indigenous peoples' histories of oil extraction at Norman Wells are critical for understanding the cumulative impacts of a century of industrial development on land, water, animals, people, and Dene and Métis ts'ı́łı (way of life). This knowledge is also critical for ensuring more responsible and equitable development in the future. The Sahtú Renewable Resources Board (SRRB) led a project related to water and food security, fisheries, and ṯdzı (boreal caribou), as well as the role of community members in monitoring, stewardship, and decision-making.

Why is This Important?

This project helped to address questions raised by Sahtú community members in Norman Wells, Tulı́t'a, and Fort Good Hope about the history and cumulative impacts of petroleum extraction over the past century. This project is unique among petroleum histories for centring Indigenous voices and knowledges. Project results will help the SRRB and Sahtú Dene and Métis contribute to closure and reclamation planning for Imperial Oil's Norman Wells facilities and engage in resource development projects in the future.

What Did We Do?

Between January 2022 and March 2024, the project team gathered oral histories (contemporary and historical), conducted archival research, and undertook fieldwork at sites of concern. Fieldwork methodologies included observation, the deployment of cameras and audio-recorders, track surveys, and drone surveys. The information gathered through these various methods was discussed and interpreted with community members during regular virtual study circles and during a fieldwork results workshop.



*Petroleum Histories Project gathering in Norman Wells, March 2023.
(Credit: D. Blaine)*



What Did We Find?

- Dene and Métis experiences of and perspectives on the history of oil at Norman Wells are profoundly different than those of industry, government, and settler researchers.
- Dene and Métis knowledge of oil and oil usage long predates the Norman Wells development, but differs significantly from industrial development of oil.
- The cumulative impacts of the Norman Wells oil field on the land and people of the Sahtú include but are not limited to contamination through oil spills and buried debris; the displacement of families; changes to the river, water, and fish populations; changes in the movement and abundance of wildlife, including ducks, geese, and caribou; and changes in how Sahtú Dene and Métis are able to move through their homeland.



A lone t̥d̥zi (boreal caribou) captured by camera ENR336 on July 13, 2023.

What Does This Mean?

Bringing together Dene and Métis stories and knowledge, historical documentation, observations by Nę K'ádík'e (Keepers of the Land), and information generated through scientific methods ensures the best possible evidence for planning and decision-making. This evidence will help to empower Sahtú community participation in closure and reclamation planning, and to be involved in future resource development activities.

What's Next?

We will continue to gather and synthesize community stories and fieldwork data. Further research is needed to better understand the interrelated impacts of petroleum extraction on land, water, wildlife, people, and Dene and Métis ts'ı́ı.

For More Information

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Project Video:
<https://vimeo.com/945813188?share=copy>

NWT Cumulative Impact Monitoring Program
(CIMP224)

NWT CIMP is a source of environmental monitoring and research. The program coordinates, conducts and funds the collection, analysis and reporting of information related to NWT environmental conditions. If you're conducting environmental monitoring and research, consider sharing your information with northern residents and decision-makers in a Bulletin.