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Supporting the Ross River Dena Council in IPCA Development - Grant

Grant Name	Supporting the Ross River Dena Council in IPCA Development - Grant	Today's Date	12/15/2023
Staff Size	9	Organization Name	CPAWS Yukon (Yukon chapter - Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society)
Total Membership	250	Annual Operating Budget	\$783,605.00
BIPOC-led	No	Operating Budget Year	
C-Suite Staff		Tax Status/Organization Type	Canadian Registered Charity
Notes			

Project Information

Project/Campaign Name	Supporting the Ross River Dena Council in IPCA Development	Project Address	
Project Location (State or Territory)	YU	Amount Requested from Alliance	\$50,000.00

Proposal Questions

<p>1. Purpose/History Of Organization</p>	<p>Founded in 1963, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) is Canada's only national environmental charity dedicated to the protection of public lands and waters. Since then, CPAWS has grown to 13 chapters bolstered by 40,000 supporters nationwide. Our chapter, CPAWS Yukon, was founded in 1992 by Yukoners passionate about protecting the Yukon's most valuable resource — our abundant wild spaces.</p> <p>As part of this work, we advocate not only for the lands, waters, and wildlife of this special place, but for the relationships between these irreplaceable things and the people who live here. As an environmental organization based in Whitehorse on the traditional territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, we approach our work through a lens of reconciliation, striving to partner with and support Yukon and transboundary First Nations.</p>	<p>7. Measurable On-Ground Outcomes</p>	<p>An established framework for the development of the IPCA, be it a national park, land use plan, or other mechanism as determined by the First Nation. That leadership, staff and citizens of the Ross River Dena Council remain fully supportive and engaged with CPAWS Yukon's efforts. This will be measured through review during meetings as well as with social media engagements from the community.</p> <p>The Tu Łidlini Land Guardian program is staffed, funded, and supported in their role and in contributing to the IPCA. Begin building a library of images and videos of the Tu Łidlini region's ecological and cultural values and prepared to share engaging storytelling content ahead of IPCA planning. Make progress on the development of Yukon New Minerals Legislation, with public support for tighter environmental regulations and considerations during public engagement windows.</p>
<p>2. Final Success</p>	<p>Led by the Ross River Dena Council, the proposed Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area would conserve 10 million acres of wilderness in central-east Yukon, a vast expanse which includes vulnerable alpine and gravel-bed river ecosystems along the continental divide,</p>	<p>8. Evaluate Your Progress</p>	<p>At the conclusion of each phase of the project, campaign staff meet to evaluate what worked well and what we can improve for the next campaign. Intermediate measures of success for 2024 will include: Announcement of a plan or framework</p>

and encompasses areas of high cultural and sustainable recreation value.

towards the development of the IPCA. Two or more visits to Ross River in 2024-25 to meet with RRDC leadership, staff and citizens. One wilderness trip or on-the-land experience, collaboratively organized with the Ross River Dena Council. Three media stories on the Ross River IPCA. Participation in New Mining Legislation steering committee meetings, as scheduled, approximately 1 per month.

3. Location Details

In early 2023, the Ross River Dena Council (RRDC) called for an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) within their traditional territory. The proposed IPCA covers approximately 8% of the territory, encompassing 10 million acres in central-east Yukon beginning in the Pelly River valley and extending to the Selwyn-Mackenzie Mountains along the continental divide. Being a small First Nation with limited road access, resources, and staffing, CPAWS Yukon is working alongside the RRDC at their request to support—physically, logistically and technically—the creation and implementation of an IPCA on their traditional territory.

Comprised of alpine meadows, vital headwaters, and vast peatlands, the diverse landscapes this IPCA will cover are of great ecological and cultural value. Among the rich tapestry of life it supports, this region provides critical habitat for grizzly bears, Chinook salmon, Fannin sheep, and sandhill cranes, which migrate through the area by the thousands each spring. It is also home to the Finlayson woodland caribou herd, which are listed as a species of special concern in Canada and are a cultural and subsistence touchstone for the RRDC.

The unique and sensitive environments and habitats this area encompasses are of critical importance when it comes to protecting biodiversity and climate resiliency in the Yukon. The North is warming three times faster than anywhere else in the world, and experiencing the impacts of the climate crisis at a rate which threaten many of the sub-Arctic and boreal ecosystems contained within the proposed IPCA. Conserving large areas of uninterrupted habitat allows plants and wildlife more options when adapting to changing climates, and helps maintain diverse, healthy gene pools for vulnerable species. This is especially true for the region’s salmon-spawning rivers, the preservation of which is integral to efforts to return Chinook stocks, which have suffered heavily in part due to climate change, to healthy and sustainable levels.

9. TCA Funding Plan

Conservation Alliance funding will allow us to continue working in collaboration with the RRDC, meeting regularly with staff to discuss priorities, and ensure our messaging supports their conservation and advocacy goals. There is strong community interest in CPAWS Yukon organizing a youth paddling trip on the Pelly River this summer and we would use the part of the funding to support this, including filming the trip, which would allow us to share the community’s vision for the land and IPCA in a compelling way to a broader audience. We will also provide financial support for the RRDC Land Guardians so they can continue to protect the land as they continue to contribute to IPCA planning. This grant will also help us organize a community gathering with RRDC to help inform RRDC community members about how to be more involved in the IPCA process.

The need for this IPCA is further underscored by conservation threats already present in the region, which is scarred with multiple abandoned mines. Ongoing exploration projects, such as the proposed Kudz Ze Kayah mine, threaten vital wildlife habitat, including that of the aforementioned Finlayson caribou herd. This IPCA is a chance to remove the threat of mining and begin to right the wrongs of the past, and support reconciliation and Indigenous self-governance.

4. Strategy & Timeline For Final Success

Ross River Dena Council is considering working with Parks Canada to pair their IPCA with a National Park designation. The first step of this process is a feasibility study, and supporting RRDC to complete the study is one of CPAWS major project goals. Permanently establishing an IPCA is a multi-year project—the RRDC is trying to make as much progress as possible before the 2025 federal and territorial elections—but setting achievable milestones will both help keep project momentum and make progress more difficult to undo by less favourable governments. One such milestone was met in November, when RRDC passed a resolution to establish the IPCA, demonstrating the commitment of RRDC citizens and confirming partners like Parks Canada can begin moving forward with support. For CPAWS Yukon, the resolution signals we can continue supporting RRDC in establishing the IPCA and continue putting resources towards this goal.

Economically, the IPCA will create job opportunities in sustainable tourism and outdoor recreation. Industries like eco-tourism and recreational services will boost the local economy and provide alternatives to working in the mining sector, and create on-the-land jobs for land and water stewards through monitoring, planning, and conservation roles. Improved environmental conditions may also lead to enhanced community well-being.

We can accomplish this through several strategies:

Strategy 1: Supporting RRDC's Conservation Goals

CPAWS Yukon regularly meets with Ross River Dena Council to ensure our work aligns with the goals and values of the First Nation. This is the right way to work, as it broadens our lens from environmental conservation to include Indigenous rights and values. It also builds a stronger and clearer case for conservation when CPAWS Yukon, First

10. JEDI Efforts and Impact

CPAWS Yukon has prioritized justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) in the past year through such initiatives as installing LGBTQ2S+ stickers so members of the queer and trans community know this is a safe space, sharing our megaphone with local groups organizing human rights rallies, and offering free use of our boardroom to other grassroots community groups.

Our commitments to JEDI and reconciliation are shared on our website. JEDI principles are central to our inclusive hiring practices, and have resulted in a more diverse team. Currently represented on our staff and board we have Yukon First Nations, persons of color, and members of the LGBTQ2S+ community.

We are actively engaged with Indigenous communities. We respect traditional and western knowledge and incorporate diverse perspectives into our conservation efforts.

Nations, and the public pull in the same direction.

Strategy 2: Public Advocacy and On-the-land trips

A strong show of public support for the IPCA is a critical tool RRDC can lean on as these negotiations are undertaken. CPAWS Yukon will continue to engage the public through on-the-land trips, digital storytelling, webinars, and in-person events aimed at keeping Yukoners personally involved, and reminding the Yukon government that people care—and are watching.

Our team was fortunate to explore the IPCA region with the Tu Łidlini Land Guardians who monitor these lands. Their activities are guided by their Elders and the phrase Gukēyeh sogadzeh'í —“We watch the land in a good way.” The Guardians spoke of the changes they've observed in the land and water over the years, and the importance of the future IPCA to protecting the land to their people.

This past fall, CPAWS hosted a community film night in Ross River, screening the powerful films we produced from on-the-land trips with other Yukon First Nations. There was a lot of enthusiasm for a canoe trip next summer with RRDC youth and community members on the Pelly River. On-the-land trips like these provide an opportunity for us to grow relationships with the community, connect with the landscape we are helping to protect, and to gather materials for public advocacy. They also provide a chance for youth, community members, and elders to strengthen their relationship to the land, and to share their connection to the area.

Strategy 3: Preparing for IPCA planning in the Ross River (Tu Łidlini) region

While direct funding to RRDC is a critical piece of this puzzle, with enough resources CPAWS Yukon can also step in to support IPCA planning. In the past we have supported First Nations with community land vision workshops, bringing together Elders, youth and community members to develop a shared community vision and priorities. We hope to support a similar event in Ross River in 2024 to strongly integrate community and conservation priorities at the beginning of the IPCA planning process.

Strategy 4: New Minerals Legislation that better aligns with IPCA creation

Mining in the Yukon is governed by outdated legislation that is out of step

with Indigenous rights and modern values. Fortunately, new legislation is under development and our organization's voice is directly heard through an ENGO/industry input table. We are advocating for legislation to remove current barriers to creating protected areas and IPCAs.

Project goals & objectives within 2024:

To continue to bring media and public attention to the ecological, social, and cultural importance of the Ross River region.

To continue to support the Ross River Dena Council and their Land Guardians, complete an on-the-land trip in the Ross River region, and collect images and stories from at least one key wilderness area under threat of development but could be protected through the future IPCA.

To participate in the development of the Yukon's New Mineral Legislation and run a vigorous campaign encouraging public engagement and participation in development of the new legislation.

5. Key Decision Makers

Since the IPCA was proposed, CPAWS has been meeting regularly with RRDC's leadership and land guardians, spending four days in November in the community. RRDC has said they see CPAWS as a supporting partner in their work towards an IPCA.

11. Confidential Items n/a

The Government of Canada, through Parks Canada, has committed to establishing 10 new National Parks over the next five years. We meet every few months with members of the parks establishment team, and have connected the team to RRDC. We know from these meetings that Parks Canada is supportive of the IPCA, and wants to work with CPAWS Yukon as a supporting partner to the RRDC.

We meet quarterly with the Yukon's Minister of Environment and Minister for Energy, Mines & Resources, as well as key bureaucrats within these departments. These meetings give us insight into the Yukon government's thoughts around the IPCA and allow us to advocate for conservation-minded decision making. In 2022, the Yukon government committed to achieving 25% protection of the territory by 2025, and to working towards 30% protection by 2030. While we know from our meetings with these ministers that both remain committed to meeting these goals. However, this government continues to support mining projects in the IPCA region and it will take sustained advocacy from us and others, such as the federal government, to gain full territorial support for the IPCA.

Our Conservation Manager, Randi Newton, sits on the ENGO advisory steering committee for the development of Yukon New Minerals Legislation. Her involvement gives us direct input to the upcoming legislation.

6. Elevate Voices

CPAWS Yukon is dedicated to environmental conservation through the lenses of reconciliation and social justice. We strive to work alongside Indigenous Nations, not in front. We do so by meeting regularly with First Nation leadership and staff, visiting remote Indigenous communities, and checking in to ensure our messaging aligns with the values of our Indigenous partners.

Working with the RRDC to support this IPCA is in direct and active alignment with our organizational goals and values. Beyond its ecological significance, the IPCA is a repository of cultural heritage for the Ross River Dena people. Ensuring the area thrives as both a biodiverse ecosystem and a living testament to the history and traditions of the Ross River Dena people.

To this end, we use our resources to support the participation of Indigenous communities in decision-making processes related to environmental stewardship. For example, we regularly provide free canoe training courses to Indigenous Guardians and First Nation youth to help create opportunities for people to explore their traditional territory. We also support the participation of First Nation citizens from remote communities in Whitehorse-based events by covering travel and lodging expenses.

By fostering partnerships with First Nations and local organizations like community associations, youth climate groups, and other non-profits, CPAWS Yukon strives to ensure that our conservation efforts are guided by diverse perspectives. Through collaborative, community-based research and environmental education programs, we strive to bridge gaps in knowledge and build capacity within underrepresented communities. Recently, we conducted a wildlife fieldwork study in a beloved urban wilderness area, which included strong collaboration with local First Nations. We make our fieldwork data fully available online for free so it can be used by future researchers and community groups.

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