

**Vuntut Gwitchin Climate Change and Health Research in
Northern Yukon:**

**What do our Changing Homelands mean for our Health?
*Phase 2: Knowledge into Action***



Arctic Health Research Network-Yukon



Arctic Health Research Network-Yukon is a First Nations co-led NGO that has been working with the community of Old Crow on climate change and food security issues since 2007. The organization includes Executive Director Jody Butler Walker and Associate Director, Norma Kassi, a Vuntut Gwitch'in citizen. AHRN-YT focuses on doing community-based research that aims to improve the health of Yukon First Nations and Yukon residents. It works on a variety of issues related to health including food security, diabetes, injury prevention, substance abuse, residential school trauma, and depression.

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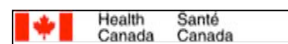
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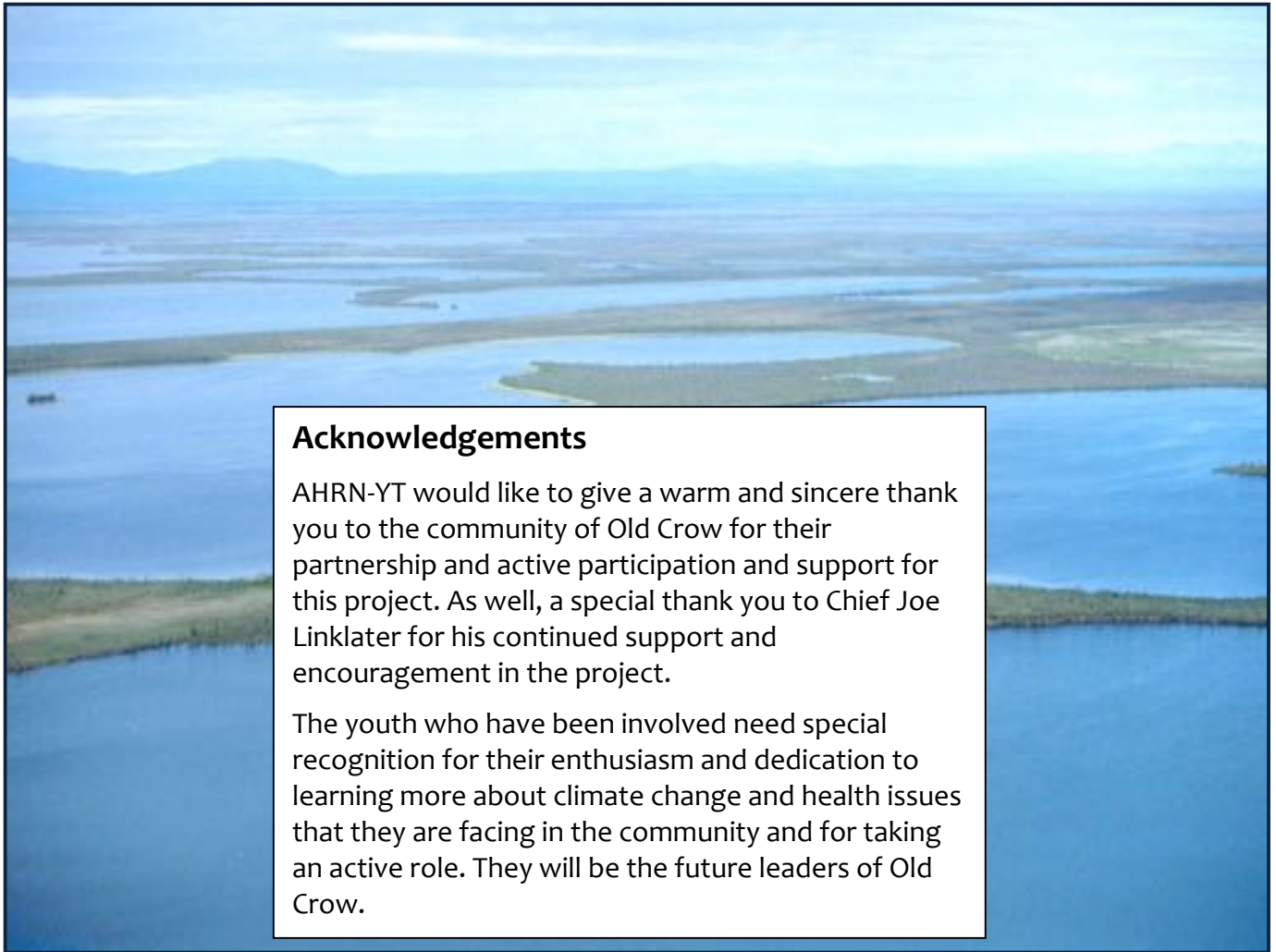
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The youth who have been involved need special recognition for their enthusiasm and dedication to learning more about climate change and health issues that they are facing in the community and for taking an active role. They will be the future leaders of Old Crow.

(VGFN Heritage Dept)



Hard times are coming, one day caribou and fish will be gone, then what you gonna do? You guys have to teach the younger people how to live in the future, make them strong again, only way. And look after our water- keep it clean.

(John Joe Kaye, Vuntut Gwitchin Elder)

(Mercredi 2009)

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(Kassi 2010)

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(Friendship 2009)

Overview

The purpose of this book is to provide you, the community of Old Crow, with the results of the *Food Security Options Project* that AHRN-YT in collaboration with Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, did over the summer of 2009.

This project was the second phase of a three-part project, which AHRN-YT with the community of Old Crow has been working on since 2007. In this book you will find some background information on how and why the project was started, how we did the project in 2009 (the methods), the results, and what the next steps (Phase 3) of the project are.

At the end of the book you will find a list of all the materials that have been produced over the course of the project, which are all available to you through the VGFN Heritage Department.



(Friendship 2009)

Background: How It All Started

Elders of Old Crow have been advising the community for many years that hard times are coming and that it is time to start planning for long-term changes related to food security. Since 2007, International Polar Year (IPY) researchers have been studying the effects of climate change on Vuntut Gwitchin lands. Our project has been based on the Elder's advice and the outcomes of IPY-related activities.



Don't let anybody spoil Crow Flats. That is our bank; our future depends on that place.

(Alfred Charlie, Vuntut Gwitchin Elder)

(Mercredi 2009)

Crow Flats, the traditional territory of the Vuntut Gwitchin, has been considered a 'bank' for traditional foods for many generations. Now, the permafrost under the tundra is melting away, and huge lakes, like Zelma Lake that were an important source of freshwater fish, muskrats and beavers, and were also home to many species of migratory birds, have drained. With this lake drainage the animals, fish and birds that have been the staple diet of the community of Old Crow since time immemorial have been disappearing.



(Smith 2007)

Norma Kassi stands in what was once her family's traditional area at Zelma Lake, Crow Flats. It drained overnight in May 2007.

Salmon, a key source of food for the community for generations, dwindled down to such a point that the community has been limited in how many fish that can be caught. We all remember in 2008 when only seven fish were harvested because there were not very many that came up the Porcupine River.



(Mather, date unknown)

Things change fast-really different now. I worry about the young kids' future.

(Irwin Linklater, Vuntut Gwitchin Elder)



(Friendship 2009)

Because of all the changes to traditional foods in Old Crow, both individual and community health are in jeopardy. We are starting to see increases in chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and other sicknesses such as *H. pylori* infections in the community.



(Kassi 2010)

The first phase of AHRN-YT's project in 2008-2009, trained Vuntut Gwitchin youth on how to search for information about climate change, health, and food security using the Internet. As you remember, there was a large gathering in January 2009 where the youth actively participated with the community in various climate change workshops with IPY researchers. At this meeting, Elders shared valuable Traditional Knowledge with the youth, and many people shared thoughtful wisdom and advice with them as well.

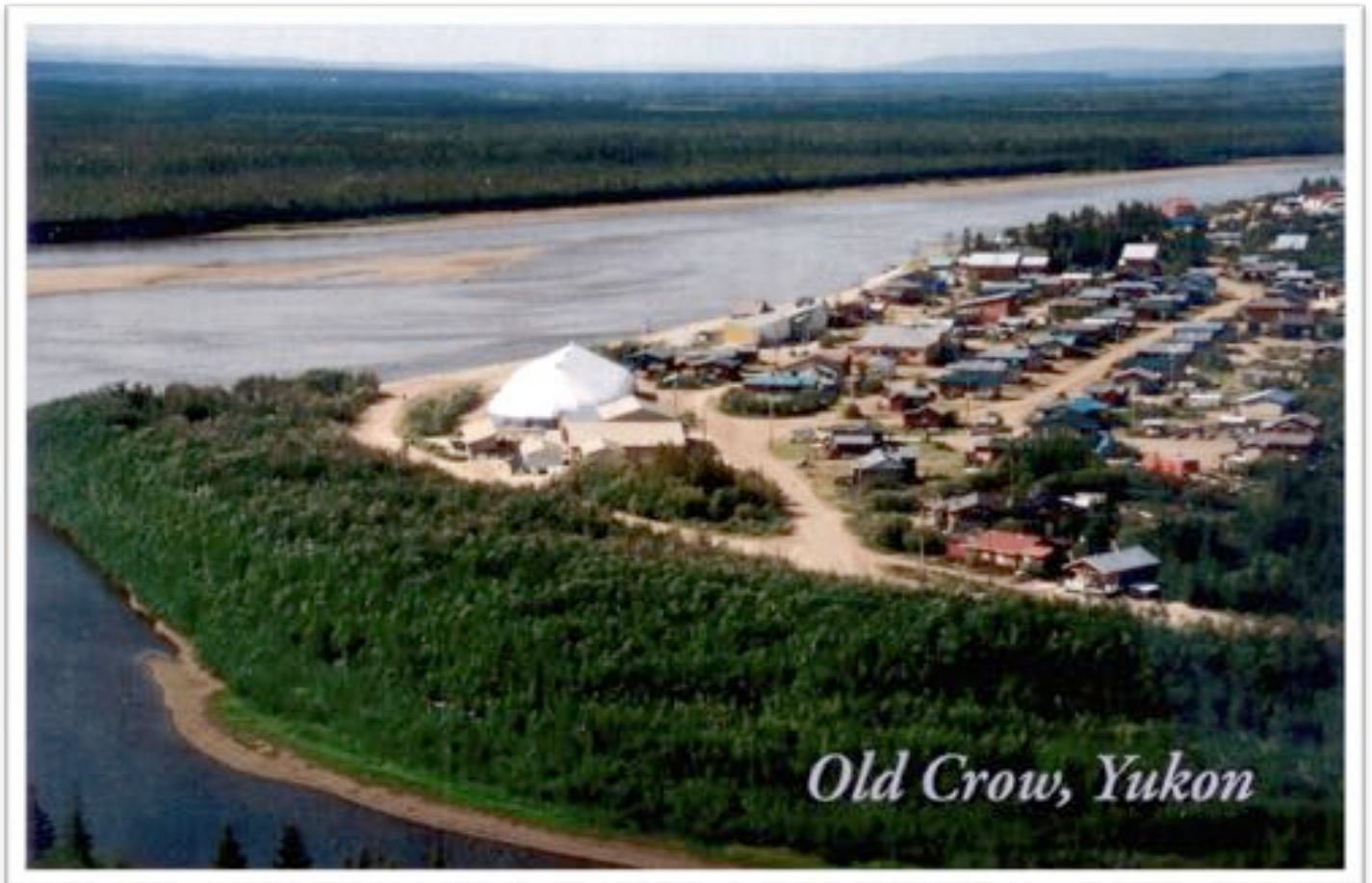
The importance of traditional foods for the physical, emotional, cultural and mental well-being of Vuntut Gwitchin people, and the drastic changes to the land reported by IPY researchers that are impacting the availability of our traditional foods, were very strong and important messages. Following this gathering, both the youth and the rest of the community recommended that the research work continue, and so AHRN-YT developed a proposal for Health Canada and received funding to do *Phase Two*. *Phase Two* research focused on learning what food security activities the community has been doing and what they could do in the future to help cope with climate change. The project was built on the recommendations of the Vuntut Gwitchin people of Old Crow.



(Butler Walker 2009; Frost 2009)

Research Question

How will the Vuntut Gwitchin people of Old Crow adapt to changing food security options to maintain their health in the face of declining traditional food species resulting from climate change?



Methods: What We Did Together

There were three main parts to this project.

- Youth training to do research on identifying food security options, in partnership with Elders and other community members;
- Youth training to develop filming skills and to produce videos in order to share their climate change and food security concerns with the community;
- Production of a full-length film documentary to highlight the rapid changes to our traditional land and how the changes are impacting our people and our traditional ways of life.

Seven youth were chosen to be film and researcher trainees based on their participation and interest in the previous climate change workshop and training held in 2008/2009. Dustin Charlie, Chelsea Charlie and Daniel Frost were the youth researchers who worked with Norma Kassi and community-based researcher Katelyn Friendship. Rhiana Kaye, April Kassi, Yudii Mercredi, and Clifton Nukon worked with film producer, Tookie Mercredi, on film training throughout the summer.



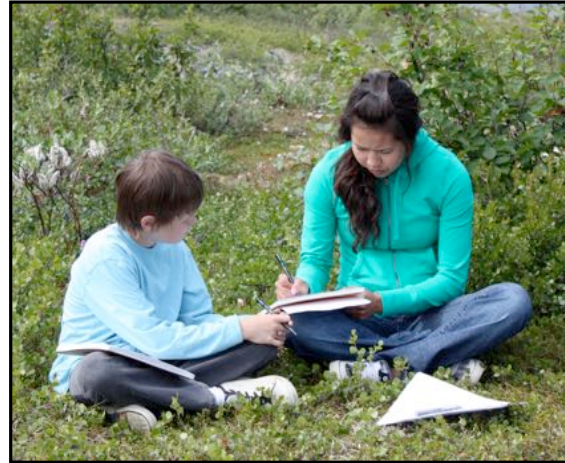
(Chelsea Charlie, Dustin Charlie, Daniel Frost, Yudii Mercredi, April Kassi, Clifton Nukon, and Rhiana Kaye)

It should be noted that because of the project, some students have now taken a key interest in applying what they learned over the summer of 2009 to contribute to ongoing climate change work in the North. Chelsea Charlie, for example, was a participant in the Young Leaders' Summit on Northern Climate Change in Inuvik in August 2009, and was a part of the Canadian Youth Delegation at the UN Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen in December 2009.

In June 2009, we held a two-day training orientation with the youth in Whitehorse, before we went to Old Crow. There, they learned communication skills, personal development skills, assertiveness training, and research techniques.

Youth Food Security Researchers (Dustin, Chelsea and Daniel)

Once we got to Old Crow on July 1st, the youth researchers began learning how to conduct interviews and studied more about communicating so that they were able to introduce the project on the phone and were responsible for calling and setting up interviews. In the beginning, Katelyn went with the youth researchers to help with the interviews. The youth however, were responsible for doing the interviews. This included introducing the project, signing of the release forms, recording the interview, asking the questions, and taking notes. They asked questions about different food security options such as how many families would



be willing to build a [greenhouse](#) or a [garden](#) to grow their own food and the possibility of [small-scale animal farming](#). The young researchers also asked people about [long-term storage options](#), [traditional ways of preserving food](#), [trading and sharing among the Gwitchin nations](#), [Traditional Knowledge](#) and [land-based skills for youth](#), and [traditional roles and values of Vuntut Gwitchin people](#). It wasn't long before the young researchers were comfortable and confident to do the interviewing completely on their own. When all the interviews were done, we then had to transcribe-or type up the interviews and the notes. The youth researchers also helped Katelyn to do this.



(Both photos: Friendship 2009)

When the youth were not working hard with interviews, they were busy doing research on the Internet. Dustin and Daniel wrote a short paper on climate change and salmon and its importance as a traditional food. Chelsea wrote a paper on climate change and the importance of caribou for the Vuntut Gwitchin. As well, the youth took part in all community events and activities (Canada Day festivities, Gwitchin Days) throughout the summer. The researchers decided that they wanted to learn more about food security to help to address food security issues in Old Crow. During the summer they promoted physical activity in the community (floor hockey, baseball), went berry picking, and fishing with other youth.



(Friendship 2009; Mercredi 2009)

In August, Norma Kassi and the youth presented their preliminary findings at the Annual General Assembly. This was an important meeting, which spurred a lot of community conversation about food security issues. It was an emotional presentation for both the youth researchers as well as members of the community (particularly women) when they discussed their findings on the [traditional roles of Gwitchin men and women](#), in relation to food security and the [values of sharing](#). The community was very happy with the youth's work and commented on how excellent it was to see their own youth doing the research in the community.



(VGFN Heritage Dept 2009)

It's excellent and encouraging to see our own youth doing research. This will provide them with the tools they will need to assist the community in the future.

(Chief Joe Linklater)



Once all the interviews were typed up, AHRN-YT looked carefully at the data (analysis) and from that identified the key themes, and validated the results (October 2009 and February 2010). This was done with the community by coming to talk with them and making sure that everyone agreed with the findings. This has led to the development of recommendations for the community regarding long-term food security strategies.

Film Trainees (April, Yudii, Clifton, and Rhiana)

Throughout the summer of 2009, you may have noticed four youth filming different events and people. Tookie Mercredi trained the youth in producing a video documentary and developing 2-minute trailers on food security and climate change issues. They did this in the Old Crow edit suite over a period of three weeks. The film trainees also received training in sound and lighting. At the Annual General Assembly, the youth working with the film were able to showcase the trailers that they had made. The community was very proud of all of their hard work.

Tookie has also been busy producing a 45 minute video documentary called **Our Changing Homelands, Our Changing Lives**, which spans 15 years of footage documenting the impacts that climate change is having on Vuntut Gwitchin people's food security and livelihoods. The film captures Traditional Knowledge practices in relation to healthy living and traditional food options as described by Elders and community members. This film will be very important for informing the world about the challenges that the community is facing because of climate change.



(Friendship 2009; Mercredi 2009)

Results: What People Said

Over the course of the summer, the youth researchers interviewed 35 Vuntut Gwitchin citizens. Many in the community expressed that this research was an eye opener to them as they were able to see what was happening on a global-scale with respect to climate change and food security, as well as understand and connect the changes and impacts being felt locally.

Our findings suggest that there are already some food security activities underway in the community. A few families, for example, [have gardens and two are farming chickens and turkey.](#)



(Wilcox 2010)

There were several key issues that came from our results.

- Recommendation for VGFN government to develop a [long-term storage facility for dry goods](#) and [emergency supplies and tools.](#)

People felt that this was a very important issue that had to be carefully planned. For example, decisions on whether to build something new or to use an abandoned building, and to have the building “green” and energy efficient, were considered important planning discussions.

I think we should always have food ready. I was talking about survival caches for tools and food that's not going to spoil, like coffee and food that's in cans or freeze dry foods. We should always have food ready because nobody is going to know what's going to happen in the future.

(Allan Benjamin)



(Mercredi 2009)

They need a building self-sustained, a green building run on solar power or wind power. You know if that power plant ever shut down or run out of diesel it's got to be able to keep those products safe and rodent free.

(Old Crow Renewable Resource Council)

- A [community freezer](#) was thought to be a good way to store an emergency supply of food.

The structure would have to be carefully planned. A freezer, which used electricity, would not be sustainable and so the community would need to look at [traditional ways of storing meats](#) and look at the possibility of building a [traditional permafrost cellar, using high caches](#), or a different [“green” way to store food](#).



(Kassi 2010)

- People were interested in gardening projects but many felt that they needed to learn more about how to garden.

It was thought by some that a [community garden](#) would be a good way for people to learn how to garden and then it may be easier for them to have their own.



A community greenhouse is very important for this community. It might be hard work but using abandoned houses or building something that can lead to community self sustainability so we don't rely on outside vegetables and fruit.

(Participant in focus group session, Oct 2009)

Tracy's "Ever-good Greenhouse"! (Wilcox 2010)

- Most participants felt that [animal farming was a possibility](#) for Old Crow.

[Poultry farming](#), [pig farming](#), and [rabbit farming](#) were thought to be possibilities. As well, farming and [stocking local lakes with local species of fish](#) was also suggested as a possibility.

Well I know from experience that chickens work really well, and I think the other forms of agriculture just needs some experimenting to work it out.

(Megan Williams)

- There is a need to identify where the small animals and fish are living around the community so we can hunt/trap and fish them during hard times.



I live in the bush all my life. Our animals, fish, birds are getting less and less and they taste different to me now.

(Georgie Moses)

(Friendship 2009)

- If people are going to have to substitute traditional foods with more market foods then it was suggested that there be [more education in the community about healthy diet and food choices](#) by dieticians and nutritionists.



(Friendship 2009; Kassi 2009)

- Recommendation for a greater effort in [training on land-based skills](#) and [Gwitchin traditional culture for youth and young parents](#).

[Empowering and teaching youth leadership skills](#) were thought to be very important. This could happen by [going out on the land](#) where youth could learn from experience with Elders, and with their parents and others who are knowledgeable about the land. This hands-on experience will help them to have the necessary survival skills for living in hard times. It was thought that people, and especially the [youth need to be physically fit](#) so that they are in shape for being on the land. It was also suggested that [cultural camps be extended and happen more often \(seasonally\)](#) with [separate training for males and females on traditional Gwitchin roles](#).

We always talk about the youth, we need to pay more attention to them, give them positive feedback and a lot of credit for things like hunting and bringing back caribou and sharing-youth need to be encouraged.

(Participant in focus group session, Oct 2009)

You have to see your parents and your grandparents doing it on the spot when you're out there. You know sometimes you have to do something, you don't have the necessary tools to do it so then you have to improvise and things like that, they can't be taught through books and stuff like that. You have to actually see it being done by the people who are teaching you. The best way to learn is by experience. (Brandon Kyikavichik)



When I think of hard times, I have a lot of teachings from my grandma and that's what I'm telling you now because these things we have to share, we got to stop keeping our knowledge to our self. We have to start sharing with these young people. (Marion Schaefer)

(Mercredi 2009)



(Friendship 2009; Kassi 2007)



- Vuntut Gwitchin have to go back to the traditional value system of sharing and ensure that everyone in the community, especially single parents, widows, and Elders have traditional foods to eat.



(Mercredi 2009)

If the community notice hardship coming and we have to start looking at people that can't provide for themselves, they can't go out on the land, we got to start helping and sharing whatever we catch to ensure our young people, to learn and not to go hungry in the future.

(Esau Schafer)

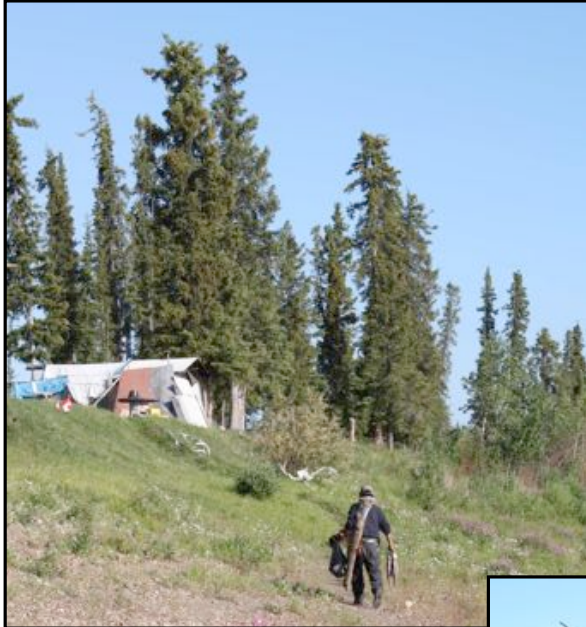


(Friendship 2009)

- Many people thought it was very important to start preparing for hard times in the future.

There were many suggestions on how to do this. In addition to the suggestions above, people talked about how important it is to plan ahead and that the community will have to start sharing and working together as a community, as it will be a means for survival. It was suggested that another community site be prepared up river or that people start building cabins on the land. It was also thought that it would be best to work together with other communities.

A lot of people, we have easy times and we think that's going to continue on forever but we're wrong, we have to wake up and start thinking about the future because there is going to be lots of hard times coming and we're not going to have oil and gas forever. (Allan Benjamin)



(Friendship 2009; Kassi 2009)

Overall, from the interviews, people in the community felt that it is the responsibility of the individual, parents, family, the VGFN government, and the community as a whole to ensure that the people of Old Crow are food secure.

I think every household should have the responsibility. Really I think the community needs to prepare for this. (Danny Kassi)



(Mercredi 2009)

It's all of ours, individually. You know, parents, brothers, sisters, aunties, and cousins. I mean family. We look out for each other, we help each other. It should not be put solely on one person. I mean it's not because of one person that we're at the point we're at today, it's because of all of us and all of our actions, so we should all be accountable for what we've done and for where we are.

(Brandon Kyikavichik)

Next Steps

- **Plans for Action**

AHRN-YT will work with the community as well as with other researchers to support and help develop the recommendations from the community about food security, into programs and policies to benefit Vuntut Gwitchin citizens both now and in the future. To do this, AHRN-YT with the collaboration of VGFN proposed to Health Canada to do more research on the recommendations of priority during the summer of 2010. Norma and Katelyn with several youth will hold focus groups in Old Crow to look at the key issues in detail and to develop feasible plans of action. As a part of this, AHRN-YT will continue to train the youth and develop their skills in research and climate change and health issues.

- **Climate Change curriculum**

AHRN-YT will help to support the development of a land-based curriculum that is being developed by Vuntut Gwitchin Government. The curriculum will include land-based skills and cultural training related to the traditional methods of food security and sustainable food practices.

- ***Our Changing Homelands Our Changing Lives* film release**

The video will be shown worldwide to educate others about the importance of preserving the Vuntut Gwitchin's way of life. It will be an important tool to be used for educational purposes in schools and Universities to bring the much-needed awareness to how fast the Arctic and its Indigenous peoples are being impacted by the changing climate.

Resources Developed

The following is a list of resources that have been developed throughout the course of the project. AHRN-YT has given all of these to the VGFN Heritage Department where they are free for the community to use.

- Interview Questions used during Phase 2 (Summer 2009)
- Interview Transcripts from Phase 2 (Summer 2009)
- Training module: *How to do research on the Internet*
- Resource binder on climate change
- Community Newsletter (July 2009): AHRN-YT and the youth's project update
- Research papers on caribou and salmon by Chelsea Charlie, Dustin Charlie, and Daniel Frost
- Diabetes Youth Intervention training manual
- DVD: *Prepare for Hard Times: Old Crow Youth Face Climate Change* a short film by Melissa Frost
- DVD Trailers: *The Good, The Bad, The Ugly*
- Climate change and food security in Old Crow trailers (*The Good, The Bad, The Ugly*) produced by Rhiana Kaye, Clifton Nukon, and April Kassi.
- DVD Trailer: *Our Changing Homelands Our Changing Lives*
- DVD Documentary: Full-length feature film *Our Changing Homelands Our Changing Lives*
- PowerPoint Presentations related to project
- Photos: Photos that were taken throughout the project include many activities and people. They too, are also available at the Heritage Department.

