



## THELON WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

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2006

Final Wildlife Report, No. 10

Taylor, M. K. 2006. Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary. Government of Nunavut, Department of Environment, Final Wildlife Report: 10, Iqaluit, 3 pp.

## **Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary: Final Report**

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### **History:**

The Thelon Game Sanctuary was originally established by an Order in Council in 1927 to protect musk oxen and caribou. In 1930, a second Order in Council withdrew all lands in the Thelon Game Sanctuary from “disposal”, meaning that prospecting and mining permits could not be issued for that area. Even access was limited by a decision that written permission from the Canadian Minister of the Interior was required to enter the Thelon. The ban on hunting and requirement for prior approval before entering the Thelon applied equally to aboriginal and non-aboriginal people. In 1948, responsibility for the Thelon Game sanctuary was devolved to the Northwest Territories, and NWT required that anyone entering the sanctuary be licensed. Licenses were not issued for prospectors. In 1956 the NWT Game Ordinance was amended to redefine the geographic boundaries of the Thelon Game Sanctuary, with lands to the west being withdrawn and lands to the east being added. Hunting and prospecting in the newly defined sanctuary remained illegal. In 1978, the NWT adopted a new Wildlife Ordinance that continued the ban on hunting, but allowed anyone to visit the Sanctuary (mainly recreational canoeists). The current NWT Wildlife Act continued the no-hunting status of the Thelon Game Sanctuary. Territorial division in 1999 divided the Thelon into an NWT and Nunavut portion. A post-Territorial Division Thelon Co-Management plan allows for the possibility of aboriginal harvesting in the Nunavut portion of the Thelon Game Sanctuary, but the NWT has not co-signed the Thelon Management Plan because of ongoing land claims negotiations in their jurisdiction. In Nunavut, the NWMB has committed to broad public consultations on management of the Thelon in recognition of its special place in Canadian history and conservation.

### **The Purpose of the Thelon Game Sanctuary:**

The initial objectives of the Thelon Game sanctuary were initially “state” objectives (Caughley and Sinclair, 1994). The purpose was to conserve musk ox and caribou stocks, which were at low levels. By 1917, domestic and fur-trade hunting had almost exterminated North American musk ox populations (Tener 1965, Barr 1991). Between 1861 and 1916 when musk ox were not protected in Canada, the Hudson Bay Company recorded receiving over 15,000 musk ox skins (Barr 1991). Although muskoxen were protected in 1917, they continued to be legally harvested due to a loophole in the legislation (Barr 1991). It was also difficult for the RCMP to enforce this legislation in throughout remote and inaccessible regions of the Northwest Territories (Barr 1991). In 1924 the legislation was amended to eliminate the loophole and three years later, the

The Thelon Sanctuary was created to protect one of the two remaining herds of musk ox on the North American mainland. The Thelon had retained about 250 musk oxen partly because few Inuit and First Nation hunting parties went there for fear of meeting each other (Hone 1934, Clarke 1940). Caribou were also at low numbers in 1927, and were known to migrate through the Thelon and to calve there. The initial designation of the Thelon Game Sanctuary was to provide a refuge for the remaining stocks of musk ox, and for caribou while they were in that area (Pelly, 1996). However, with time these objectives were expanded to include protection for “ecological processes” (Caughley and Gunn, 1995) that were occurring within the Sanctuary.

The 1930 and 1956 prohibitions on prospecting and development, and limitations to access were clearly intended to retain the pristine ecology of the area as well as augment the “state” objectives of musk ox and caribou conservation. Early investigators became aware that the Thelon had some unique properties that other areas either did not possess, or did not possess to the same degree. The Thelon has a micro-climate associated with certain of its riparian areas that produces stands of fairly large trees in an area that is above the tree line. The “Thelon Oasis”, provides a rich mosaic of boreal forest habitat interspersed with tundra and arctic riparian that provides for greater species diversity than any of these habitats would have alone. The richness of wildlife and habitat species is made even more unusual by the relative freedom from the influences of man, both into antiquity and in modern times. The ecological relationships in the Thelon have evolved in unique circumstances that allow a “baseline perspective” that is possible nowhere else north of 60 degrees latitude. Preservation of the ecological processes in the Thelon by prohibiting any impacts added a dimension to the rationale for the Sanctuary before terminology had been developed to articulate that purpose. The Thelon provides an entirely un-impacted home for most of the terrestrial species in Nunavut, essentially unexploited fish stocks, migratory bird nesting habitat, and both tundra and boreal forest ecosystems.

The purpose and rationale for the Thelon Game Sanctuary was summarized by Jim Bourque, a Métis native of the Northwest territories who said as Deputy Minister of the NWT Department of Renewable Resources: “The Thelon is one of the few places in the Canadian North where wildlife can live free of any threat from man, and reproduce without having to deal with machinery or man-made noise. Its like a wildlife bank for us”. Mr. Bourque’s statement captures the state and process values, but also refers to a third value of the Thelon Sanctuary which is metaphysical rather than ecological. That third value is that modern man (both aboriginal and non-aboriginal) has inherited a love for unspoiled nature. There are few remaining places where man has not changed the underlying ecology as a participant (hunter) or as a user (development). The Thelon is one of these special places. The Thelon is a repository of ecological circumstances from a time that is now long past.

The Thelon Game sanctuary was created without consultation with Inuit or First Nation people. Political development has proceeded so that consultation and discussion on the fate of the Thelon may now proceed in a more appropriate fashion. However, the reasons for retaining the Thelon as a Sanctuary are stronger than ever. Caribou are beginning to

cycle down. Improved travel and hunting equipment make guide-outfitting and domestic harvesting in the Thelon not only possible but enjoyable and affordable. Development on the barren lands, especially uranium mining, is forecast to become a reality in the near future. Nunavut has no protected areas strategy, and harvesting is permitted in National Parks. Musk ox numbers have recovered from past over exploitation, but who knows what the future will bring. Much progress has been made in understanding ecological relationships in northern ecosystems, but there is still much to learn. Climate change may act as an ecosystem stressor or may cause some areas to become more benign, resulting in an advancing tree line and consequential shifts of plants and animals. There are tourism benefits to no-impact visits to the Thelon. Perhaps the biggest benefits will be to the vast majority of southerners and Nunavummiut who will never visit the Thelon, but who will derive great satisfaction from knowing it is there and that it remains pristine. These are all good reasons to continue to manage the Thelon as a Wildlife Sanctuary and to pass this priceless resource along to future generations the just the way we found it.

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