## >> INSIGHT

WRIGLEY, N.W.T.—Half a century after he batheart of the Northwest Territories, Gabe Hardisty has changed his tune. The 69year-old former chief supports the territothe highway deeper into Canada's north.

Hardisty wears his salt and pepper hair tied back, and a floral-print shirt. His vibrant attire may contrast with his soft spoken voice but it works well with his candidness. It's not hard to imagine him as a voung activist and Indian Brotherhood muskeg, stretches north to Tulita, Norman member pushing for aboriginal rights in

"(The highway) will do good for the community and good for the Dehcho," he says. For centuries, the Mackenzie River has been the region's main travel route and hunting corridor, flowing 1,800 kilometres from Great Slave Lake through the vast, sparsely populated boreal forest and tundra of the Northwest Territories.

It crosses several First Nations regions the Dehcho, the Sahtu and, north of the Arctic Circle, the Gwich'in — before reaching the Mackenzie Delta in Inuvialuit region. There the river divides into a labryrinth of lakes and waterways covering an area roughly the size of Prince Edward Island before it empties into Beaufort Sea.

It is in this valley that the government of the Northwest Territories plans to build an all-season road, first to the oil town of Norman Wells and eventually connecting to the Dempster Highway – the existing road nity didn't want a highway because elders from Yukon to Inuvik. The total distance is more than 800 kilometres.

the chief of Pehdzeh Ki First Nation in Wrigley, it was his job to listen to the elders and protect his community from change. Now Hardisty is the elder and he wants highway development - and the jobs, it is - cess to supplies. hoped, that come with it - to guide his community forward

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made annual visits to the north and industry have been drooling over oil munity and gas resources in Mackenzie Valley for decades. But access has always been a major obstacle to extracting the riches.

I am canoeing the Mackenzie River between Camsell Bend, near Wrigley, and Inuvik along with a trip partner, Daniel Campbell, a Yellowknife-based journalist. Although I now live in Whitehorse, Yukon, I spent two years residing along the river in Fort Simpson, and I came to appreciate the challenge of living in remote northern communities. Travelling by canoe remains the most practical way to visit non-roadaccessible communities of Tulita, Norman

Wells and Fort Good Hope. The territorial government is in the process of applying to the local regulatory board to build the 333-km section of the road to Norman Wells. The difficulty of da by an adoptive family. He moved to building on muskeg and permanently fro- Wrigley a few years ago to reconnect with zen ground, combined with the sheer scale the roots he discovered as an adult. As of the project, makes it hugely expensive. That's one reason the territory decided to build in phases, rather than go all the way to the Dempster Highway in one shot.

The territory expects the highway extension to create jobs (in the construction phase and for ongoing maintenance), reduce the cost of living for the less than 2,000 people living in non road-accessible communities along the river, and increase

Imagine being able to drive a 3,600 kilometre loop from the Alberta border, north along the length of the Mackenzie to Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk. Then back through Yukon and northern British Columbia.

But the road will also open the region to development by increasing access and lowering logistical costs for oil and gas companies. And the Mackenzie Valley has arguably become more development-friendly since the '70s, when the Berger Inquiry recommended a 10-year moratorium on the development of a pipeline (now called the Mackenzie Gas Project) that would deliver natural gas from the Mackenzie Delta through the valley to southern markets.

A statement from Mr. Justice Thomas Berger's 1977 report read: "If a pipeline were built now in the Mackenzie Valley, its economic benefits would be limited, its social impact devastating."

A faded Mackenzie Gas Project sign and its abandoned office in Fort Simpson belies the current fate of the pipeline, but it is now economic, and not political, factors that are delaying Imperial Oil from breaking ground on the project. Now, in fact, four First Nations in the Mackenzie Valley own a partial stake in it, through an entity called the Aboriginal Pipeline Group. Imperial Oil has until the end of 2015 to break ground on the project without having to undergo another review with the National Energy

Meanwhile oil and gas exploration by multinational companies has been ramping up in the Sahtu. The recent buzz is guidebook mentions a few people who live about the Canol Shale Formation near Norman Wells and Tulita. It's a promising deposit that Sahtu MLA Norman Yakeleya has said could be an "economic changer in the north of Canada," although no one is sure of its true potential. And some people aren't sure they want this development happening in their backyard.

Wrigley has a population that could fit in two Toronto streetcars — about 130 people — and not a lot going on, economically. Pehdzeh Ki First Nation is the largest em-

The community has a school that goes to tled to stop the Mackenzie Highway from Grade 9, a health centre staffed by a comreaching this small Dene community in the munity health worker and an RCMP detachment staffed part-time. It has no grocery store, recreation centre or restaurants. High school students and grocery shoppers rial government's long-term plan to extend must go to Fort Simpson, 21/2 hours south (students board there during the school

Wrigley is the current northern terminus of the Mackenzie Valley Highway which connects to the Alberta border through Fort Simpson. An ice road, built over the Wells and Fort Good Hope for about three months every winter. While development in the area is quiet now, Wrigley's spot on the map, where the road now ends, could set it up as a hub for future highway construction north.

The Mackenzie is a beast of a river in length and width but it moves sluggishly for the most part, sometimes barely at all. Daniel and I start our trip just upriver from Wrigley, planning to take three leisurely days to canoe there.

We arrive on Canada Day and set our tent up next to the river in a derelict campground that lacks drinking water, picnic tables and a pit for the outhouse.

Although Gabe Hardisty didn't commit to a specific meeting time, he told us he would come by the band office in the early afternoon, and he did.

In the 1970s, Wrigley was basically a "bush camp," Hardisty explains, and the commuwere worried about the impact of having a lot of non-aboriginal people move into the When Hardisty was a councillor and later community. And so the original Mackenzie Valley highway extension was kiboshed in 1977, just shy of Wrigley. It was finished in 1994 when the elders decided the community would benefit from having easier ac-

Two decades have passed, and Hardisty thinks it's time for the road to keep going. He trained as a highway foreman and knows firsthand the types of opportunities since he was elected in 2006. Governments road construction could bring to his com-

> "Young people don't go back trapping no more. (They) need employment to make things better for them." Hardisty wants to see training programs to help young people be ready for construction jobs when they

An influx of money and people from outside the community working on the road raises concerns about increases in drug and alcohol-related problems as well as domestic problems, and Hardisty wants the community to face these issues head-on.

"The social problems (are) always there, but people have to deal with it."

D'Arcy Moses also knows that development comes with its ups and downs. He is a fashion designer who was born to a family from Wrigley but raised in southern Canasomeone with a foot in both worlds, who has taught arts workshops at Indian reserves in eastern Canada, he offers a perspective on road building and development

that few others can. "People in the north, especially in these smaller communities, they don't realize how good they have it," he says. "It's xanadoo up here compared to remote reserves in northern Saskatchewan or, notably, northern Ontario, where they don't have the access politically. Or they haven't got the access in terms of consultation with private industry that we have here."

Although Wrigley and the local Dene are still working out their land claims with the federal government, the Sahtu, Gwich'in and Inuvialuit regions have finalized agreements with the federal government that give them more control over land use and development.

Moses thinks there is "tremendous opportunity" for local youth to get involved in projects like the highway and oil and gas work. although he knows this development will come with its challenges.

"There will definitely be changes with the influx of non-aboriginal people who are either travelling through or moving in to the community," he says. Many local people still subsistence hunt on the land, Moses explains, and he hopes increased development will not "dilute the culture."

Even after paddling through hundreds of kilometers of boreal forest, past eroding banks and fish-filled tributaries, the Mackenzie River never feels quite like a wilderness river because signs of humans are

Most days, we pass at least one cabin and sometimes several. For the most part they are small and rudimentary — this is not cottage country. The bugs are bad and it's not moose-hunting season, which means most cabins we pass are empty. Our river at their cabins year-round, but when we seek them out, we find the places abandoned. We are later told they were elders who died recently or have moved back into

In the song Safe Passage, Yellowknife musician Leela Gilday sings "the river is the road," about the Mackenzie. But I would have to disagree: It's not a road - it's a



'The transition

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GOOD HOPE

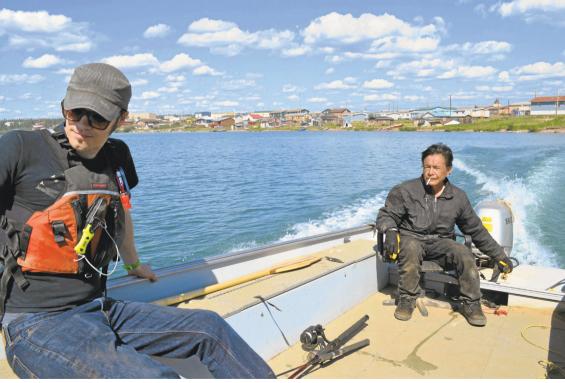
JOE GRANDJAMBE,

By now past Tulita, the end of the land road far behind them, Karen McCall paddles with trip companion Daniel Campbell past Bear Rock Mountain. Here, as the Dene story goes, the hides of a three giant beavers were stretched and nailed. The trip was all downriver, with the canoe finally shipped home from Inuvik via the Dempster Highway.

> THE NORTH

## Where the river is the road

But not for much longer — the North's mighty Mackenzie is to be twinned by a highway, eventually all the way to Inuvik. Ahead of the oil- and resource-driven transformation, writer Karen McColl traversed it the old way, by canoe, talking of the economy and the future with locals all along the way



Heading out for an afternoon of fishing near Deline on Great Bear Lake. A different kind of development self-governance, is on the table here, with the hope traditional values can be better reflected in law and policy.

highway — and everyone seems to be in a hurry. Jet boats pass us almost daily, the passengers wave but the boats hardly even slow down. People would help if they saw us in distress, but not just to say "hello."

Anti-fracking posters and quotes are taped outside the home of Tulita's most vocal fracking opponent, Sheila Karkagie. Inside, she sits in her living room wearing a pair of pajama pants and a tank top, surrounded by piles of papers that include petitions and research documents.

Wrigley, through wind and waves and then blasting heat, to reach Tulita the day before. Formerly called Fort Norman, the place "where two rivers meet" sits at the Tulita feels like a metropolis after Wrigley.

Beaufort Sea Inuvik NORTHWEST **TERRITORIES Fort Good Hope** Blackwater River National Park

• McColl's route

Existing road

weather road

----- Planned all-

ALASKA

With a population of about 500 people,

late-night snack shops. But unlike Wrigley, no all-season road connects it with the outside world.

Daniel and I sip green tea and listen to Karkagie share her concerns about fracking poisoning the land and water — "destroying the backyard freezer" where people still hunt and trap. Her vocal opposition has resulted in heated arguments with other community members and allegedly even a death threat.

It's unlikely there will be much drilling or fracking happening in the Sahtu this winter. Last spring, Husky Energy and ConocoPhillips, two large leaseholders in the area, rocked Tulita and Norman Wells when they separately announced they wouldn't be drilling in the Canol Shale Formation during the 2014-15 season. Both companies had been doing exploration work, and people in Tulita were caught off

"When oil companies come here, they talk up a storm," says Mark Pocklington, general manager of the community-owned Mackay Range Development Corporation. "We had been negotiating on the basis of their exploration work carrying on for a number of years."

While neither company said exactly why they decided not to come back in 2015, Conoco is applying for future water licenses and land use permits. Husky has invested substantially in a 20-kilometre all-season road to support its work and said it has long term plans in the area.

Eddy McPherson, part-owner of HRN Contracting Ltd. in Tulita, says his company will be impacted "big time" by the cease in activity. HRN recently dropped "a good couple million" on things like trucks for hauling rocks in anticipation of continued work. Last winter he had as many as 60 workers — mostly from the Sahtu, he said - but he thinks he'll be down to a "skeleton crew" of five this winter, scraping by with some work on the ice road.

Despite McPherson's staffing estimates, Douglas Yallee doesn't think many Tulita locals gained employment through regional oil and gas activity. He thinks businesses are the only ones suffering from the pull-

"(The community) didn't lose anything," he said from his home near Tulita's large Catholic Church. "We didn't get anything in the first place."

The 51-year old used to sit on the board of the Tulita Land Corporation, one of the bodies that signed the access and benefits agreement with oil companies. Yallee said they were told that local people would be employed, but the reports he's seen indicate otherwise. "We don't see our own people working.

Yallee doesn't think the community is ready to take advantage of this development; he thinks it should focus instead on increasing capacity at its school and health centre, and getting young people educated. Karkagie says she is not against development, just fracking. "I'm saying let's push for our highway."

Tulita relies on the seasonal ice road, air cargo and the river to bring in food and supplies. Barges run the length of the Mackenzie River during the ice-free season, delivering fuel, equipment for oil and gas companies, cars and other supplies, but not passengers. Families usually drive out on the ice road once every year to stock up in Yellowknife or northern Alberta, but the increase in industrial traffic in recent winters has beaten up the ice road, making it a slow, difficult trip.

But with an estimated price tag of \$700 million, the road extension to Tulita and Norman Wells is certainly not just about lowering the price of milk.

If a flood of resource development is rising through the Mackenzie Valley, it's not flooding Deline, formerly Fort Franklin. The town has a population of about 500 people, but unlike Tulita, it isn't eager to jump on the oil and gas bandwagon. Nor does it want the all-season road.

"Not that we want to be isolated and not that we don't want people to come here," says Danny Gaudet, chief negotiator of Deline's self-government process. Deline is not part of the proposed all-season road to Norman Wells. Gaudet said the community needs to be strong and healthy before the leaders will agree to build a road.

Deline is about 100 kilometres east of the Mackenzie, on Great Bear Lake, the largest entirely within Canada. To get there, we jet-boated up Great Bear River with a man Daniel met while getting his butt kicked at cribbage one afternoon. We're happy to spend a few days in a place where the 'f' word is fishing, not fracking, and a different form of development is on the table.

Part of the Conservative government's stated northern development strategy is to improve northern governance and give northerners "a greater say in their own

Deline is doing that, through its Final Self-Government Agreement, approved by the community this past spring.

The agreement will combine local administrations into one body with the chief as the main leader. Right now, Gaudet explained, the community is "over-governed," by three different leaders, councils and boards, as well as territorial and federal agencies.

If ratified by the territorial and federal governments this fall, it will be the first arrangement of its kind in Canada to amalgamate aboriginal and public government together to the extent proposed.

Gaudet says self-government will allow

and enable the community to address issues in its own way, without relying on

Yellowknife and Ottawa.

"We want to change the mental thinking of a lot of people because they've become so dependent on government that they are no longer even looking after themselves any-

more," he says. Part of Deline's reluctance to jump headfirst into resource development may come from the teachings of Prophet Ayah, a spiritual leader who lived in Deline and died in

It might have been surprising to hear Deline's chief negotiator talking about predictions made more than 70 years ago, had we not been told about the prophecies from several other well-respected community members.

Gaudet says Deline is guided by one prophecy in particular: water will become the most important resource in the world and Great Bear Lake will be the only water left in the world. That's why the community wants to make sure its land and water remain protected, and that self-government is up and running before committing to any major projects.

"If we're going to do development, let's do it right," says Gaudet.

Great Bear River and Lake have some of the coldest, clearest water imaginable. Flying high above the river in a five-seater airplane, on the way back to Tulita, I can see all the way to its rocky bottom.

The Mackenzie is five kilometres wide at "The Wells," and spread across it are oil platforms or "islands." Imperial Oil ships crude south from here through an Enbridge pipeline built in 1985. The oil field has produced more than 226 million barrels since production started in the 1920s. Oil extraction is the reason Norman Wells exists, but Warren Wright, president of North-Wright Airways, wants no part of it — at least not anymore. North-Wright hadn't done much work directly with oil companies in the past, but Wright says it

like Shell, Husky and Conoco. "The next oil guy that comes in better come with a hundred thousand (dollars)," Wright says, his voice booming from the porch of a North-Wright building over-

got caught up in the talk from companies

looking DOT Lake in Norman Wells. Wright explaines that his company, 51 per cent aboriginal owned, is leasing two extra Twin Otter aircraft for a three-year term because of expected work with oil companies. It's costing North-Wright about \$29,000 per aircraft per month for aircraft that are getting zero use.

Wright says if he hadn't invested in the aircraft, oil companies would have brought in aircraft from the south and his company would have lost the business.

Husky didn't respond to this specific situation, but wrote in an email that the company undertakes "numerous open houses and consultations with stakeholders to provide updates on work undertaken and

work planned." Dudley Johnson isn't as angry as Wright but he knows his business will suffer too. He owns Creations gift shop in Norman Wells and says business spiked during recent booms in oil and gas exploration.

"In the last two years since the activity picked up, my business has increased anywhere from 30 to 42 per cent. With the down play in activity, I expect to see a drop

Johnson says he sells the most Aurora Diamonds of any store in Canada, and attributes a large part of this to oil workers buying gifts for loved ones back home. "I'm very concerned about what's going to

happen in the next few years," he says. Norman Wells is different from the other

communities we visit. Its population of about 700 people (which doesn't include shift workers who fly in and out) is less than 50 per cent aboriginal, and the community is run by a mayor, not a chief. It has a few decent hotels, restaurants and even a liquor store. Norman Wells is an oil town.

But it's still a part of the Sahtu. The day before we arrived, a young man went missing after his canoe capsized in the Mackenzie River not far from shore. He had been living in the community just a couple of weeks but it didn't matter — volunteers came from communities up and down the river to help with the search. The body of the young man was found after 10 days. The only two rapids on the Mackenzie

River are between Norman Wells and Fort Good Hope, but the tremendous width of the river makes it easy to paddle around Just before Fort Good Hope, the Macken-

zie River a squeezes itself between cliffs one-tenth its upstream width in an area called the Ramparts. Approaching it from a distance is unsettling. "We're going through there?" But the river seems in no hurry to reach the Arctic and we passed below the limestone cliffs with barely an increase in speed.

Fort Good Hope is the last non-road-accessible community on the Mackenzie and it will likely remain that way for some time. It has been cut out of the territorial government's most recent road development plans, and according to Joe Grandjambe the community isn't happy about it. He picks Daniel and me up on a rainy

Sunday and drives us a short distance to the Hare Indian River. We sit around a green picnic table while the 61-year-old pulls out a pack of cigarettes. He told us the community paid for its own feasibility and environmental study for the highway and he is disappointed the leaders didn't stand up

It has a hotel, grocery store, pool and two traditional values to be entrenched in law for the entire Sahtu when the territorial government announced its plan to build the highway in phases.

> Is the road for the people? I asked. "To foster development," Grandjambe

> and Husky. It's not for the people." Grandjambe has worked with in the oil industry for decades, believing it's "easier to protect the land if are you inside" the firms. He doesn't have an issue with development — he was involved with the community's recent Mackenzie Gas Project negotiations before the pipeline was stalled by the 2008 recession. But he wants to see

> answers immediately. "More for Conoco

tangible benefits for the community. "The transition from the old world to the new world is kind of tough and the easiest way to transcend between the two worlds

is through education," he says. And that's a problem, because Daniel and I have heard complaints about the education system in every community we visited. The Northwest Territories has the secondlowest high school graduation rate in Canada, beating only Nunavut. We heard that the students who do graduate need to spend at least one or even two years upgrading skills in order to qualify for college

getting an education in the south and still knowing the culture. Grandjambe pauses. "It's the ideal world but there's going to be

or university. Most don't make it that far.

I ask if balance can be struck between

a lot of ups and downs trying to find that

Daniel and I leave Fort Good Hope clad head to toe in rubber to protect against the rain — not the most uplifting way to start a seven-day stretch. Our next stop will be Tsiigehtchic, 350 km downriver, followed by Inuvik, our final destination. After a short paddle, we reach a fishing camp where there are tents set up on shore

as well as a teepee where fish are drying over a smoky fire. A fish net sits in the water close to shore, next to a canoe. It is the first occupied camp we have come across and I am excited to

meet the inhabitants Two men, probably in their twenties, sit around a fire and watch us quietly as we walk over to them

Hi, are you from Fort Good Hope? How long have you been here? What kind of fish are you catching? My questions yield monosyllabic answers

and lack an invitation to hang around. A young woman pokes her head out of a canvas walled-tent. She returns my smile but disappears back in the tent. We wish them well and head back to the

— With files from Daniel Campbell

## >TIMELINE OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE MACKENZIE VALLEY

**1960:** Aboriginal people get the right to vote in Canada without having to give up

treaty status 1970: Indian Brotherhood of N.W.T. formed to protect Dene rights. **1972:** Federal government announces plans to extend Mackenzie Highway from Fort Simpson, N.W.T., to the Demp-

ster Highway. **1975:** Dene Declaration signed by 300 people in Fort Simpson. Asks for "independence and self-determination" within Canada and just land settlements. **1975:** Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry begins. Judge Thomas Berger visits 35 communities in the Mackenzie Valley and Western Arctic to examine the impacts of a natural gas pipeline from the Mackenzie Delta south along the

1977: Pipeline Inquiry concludes. Berger recommends a 10-year moratorium on pipeline development. Pipeline project later referred to as Mackenzie Gas Pro-

1977: Mackenzie Highway construction stops 18 km shy of Wrigley. 1982: Inuvialuit Final Agreement signed. It is the "first comprehensive land claim agreement settled in the N.W.T." 1992: Gwich'in comprehensive land claim agreement signed. 1993: Sahtu Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim agreement signed. **1994:** Mackenzie Highway to Wrigley

2000: Aboriginal Pipeline Group formed to represent the interests of the Dene, Sahtu, Gwich'in and Inuvialuit as full participants in the Mackenzie Gas Pro-

2011: Canol shale play in Sahtu region draws interest from large oil companies including Shell, Exxon, Imperial Oil, Husky and ConocoPhilips as well as iunior oil companies. 2011: National Energy Board approves

Mackenzie Gas Project, a 1,220 km pipeline linking natural gas field in the Mackenzie Delta with Northwest Alberta. 2014: ConocoPhillips and Husky Oil announce separately they will not be drilling in Canol shale play in winter 2015. To date, Conoco Phillips has drilled two vertical wells and two horizontal wells. Husky has drilled two vertical wells and completed about 20 km of an allseason road to support its work. **2015:** Deadline for Imperial Oil to start

**2018**: Estimated completion of Inuvik to

construction on Mackenzie Gas Project

without having to go through another Tuktoyaktuk Highway.

communities to be cared for. Then there are the barges that pass almost daily, carrying supplies — but not people – to communities up and down the river between Hay River and Tuktoyaktuk. ☆ ☆ ☆ Channel markers and reflective signs line the banks at almost every kilometer.

> Tulita may be isolated, but it's facing the same debate over hydraulic fracturing as

other regions in Canada. The territorial government allowed some exploratory fracking to take place in the Canol Shale formation across the river from Tulita and Norman Wells, and it's become a conten-

"This town is literally split in half," Karkagie told me when I spoke with her on the phone last spring. She's been busy working on anti-fracking petitions and pushing for

answers from community leaders. Daniel and I paddled four long days from

mouth of Great Bear River and across from Bear Rock Mountain, where, as the Dene story goes, the hides of three giant beavers were stretched