

Roads: More than lines on a map

Place: Central and southern Labrador

Case study #2

Road: Phase III of Trans Labrador Highway

Issues: Mitigating impacts through route selection; increase in access and resource development in a previously remote, intact forest area; monitoring and control of environmental impacts.



In an effort to provide road transportation linkages between western, central and coastal Labrador, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador began constructing the Trans Labrador Highway (or TLH) in the late 1980s. The TLH, an all season two-lane gravel surface highway, has proceeded in three phases. Phase I, completed in 1992, connects western and central Labrador, passing through the communities of Labrador City, Churchill Falls and Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Phase II, completed in 2003, connects a number of communities on Labrador's south coast, extending from Cartwright to Red Bay. Phase III will provide the final linkage between phases I and II, connecting central Labrador to the coast, from Happy Valley-Goose Bay to the Cartwright Junction.

The original route promoted for Phase III, known as the northern route, posed a number of threats to the intact forests of Central Labrador, including:

1. Increased accessibility to Park Lake, Crooks Lake and associated networks of sensitive wetlands – all of which are ecologically important to wildlife and are important harvesting areas for local aboriginal groups;
2. Increased disturbance to the threatened woodland caribou herd of the Mealy Mountains. The route would pass through the herd's southernmost range, including habitat used during the calving and post-calving period;
3. Increased access to the headwaters of the Eagle River, which has ecological importance for salmon, cultural importance for local aboriginal groups and economic importance to local outfitting groups. The route would require the construction of a bridge over

the main stem of the river, providing increased and potentially unregulated access to the river.

4. Increased access to the proposed Mealy Mountain National Park – the route would bisect the proposed park, which could jeopardize the area as a national park candidate site.

As the shortest and potentially least costly route, the northern route was the only route considered in the original 2002-03 environmental assessment. However, in response to negative feedback from Aboriginal groups, outfitters and conservationists, the assessment was later amended to include a southern route that avoided many of the major problems of the northern route. This route was eventually selected as the preferred route with construction beginning in the summer of 2004.

But even with the selection of the less environmentally damaging southern route, there is still a need to carefully consider the impacts of this road. The Trans Labrador Highway Phase III, will cross a mosaic of habitats in a completely undeveloped and remote region of Labrador. Unlike the northern route, the southern route will go around the core area of the proposed Mealy Mountains National Park, but will still run along the southern edge of the park study area.

Concerns include over harvesting of wildlife populations as a result of increased access to the area — in particular, the illegal hunting of the Mealy Mountain caribou herd — but also over-hunting of waterfowl in the surrounding wetlands and over-fishing in rivers and lakes easily accessed from the road. Other concerns include disturbance to calving caribou and nesting birds; animal-vehicle collisions; increased use of and habitat destruction by ATVs, particularly in sen-

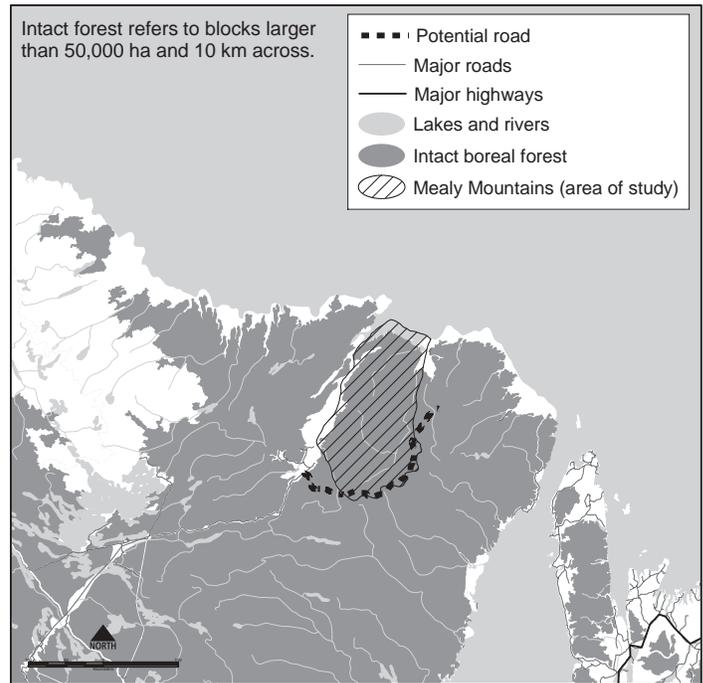
sitive wetland areas; illegal cabin building along the road; improper culvert placements at stream crossings; increased siltation of streams and rivers and garbage dumping along the road. Given the remote nature of the area and the limited resources of local enforcement agencies, there is also a lack of enforcement capacity to monitor and address these problems.

As well, despite generally widespread community support for the road, there is some concern that the TLH is being built primarily to provide access to forest resources, particularly on the south side of the Churchill River. Many are concerned that there will be a high demand for Labrador wood from the three pulp and paper mills located on the Island of Newfoundland.

Perhaps the best tool available to address this concern is the development of a comprehensive forest management plan for the area *before* the wood is accessed. Through a co-management agreement, the Innu Nation and the provincial Department of Natural Resources (Forestry) have developed a forest management plan for the area based on ecosystem-based management principles. It is hoped that this plan will ensure the forest resources are managed in a sustainable manner.

It is also hoped that the lessons learned from the first two stages of this project will be remembered with phase III. Following construction of phase I (between Labrador City and Goose Bay), locals observed that fish populations in water-bodies adjacent to the road were severely depleted. Mitigative measures, such as a no-fishing policy within a certain distance from the road and increased enforcement must be implemented to prevent the same problem from occurring again.

A joint study done by the Labrador Metis Nation and Coasts Under Stress (Memorial University) on the TLH-Phase II found that greater than



50% of culverts were installed improperly and that over 70% of river width was lost after the construction of causeways at the St. Lewis River and Gilbert's Bay estuary. These findings have serious implications for fish habitat, fish passage and local hydrology. Proper design and placement of culverts and causeway structures must be undertaken to prevent a similar situation on the TLH-Phase III.



Woodland caribou do not survive in areas with high road densities.

The TLH could become a classic example of the cascading impacts of providing access to previously remote areas if activities along the road are not managed carefully. Plunging through a remote and intact forest area for over 280 kilometres, the road provides ready access to areas that were previously difficult to reach and makes the economics of resource exploration and exploitation much more attractive.

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