Co-management as an Ethical Space of Engagement:
Prospects for Reconciliation in Vuntut National Park

Kai Bruce[1,2] and Monica Mulrennan[1]

ABSTRACT. Parks Canada's commitments to reconciliation marks a significant shift in the governing paradigm of national parks, moving away from a colonial framework towards models that respect and elevate Indigenous forms of governance and knowledge systems. However, the extent to which a land claims–based co-management model, as the dominant mechanism of governance and engagement employed by Parks Canada, can serve as a vehicle for reconciliation is an open question. This paper endeavours to better understand the relational dynamics of co-management for their potential to advance reconciliation in national park settings. Using the lens of ethical space, we identify factors that either facilitate or impede relationship building between Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Parks Canada in the co-management of Vuntut National Park. Insights from semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021 with 11 community members and park managers indicate that an evolving-management relationship is sustained through extensive community engagement and Parks Canada's support for strengthening community connections to the land. By adopting an ethical space framework for analysis, we were able to highlight different conditions and elements necessary for a protected-area co-management arrangement to serve as a solid foundation for reconciliation. Our analysis also revealed various structural impediments to the establishment of an ethical space conducive to reconciliation, particularly in the context of co-management arrangements based on land-claims agreements. These challenges included: discrepancies in approaches to protected-area management between Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Parks Canada, further complicated by the governance system employed by Parks Canada; issues of scale related to Parks Canada's nested management structure, which affected relationship building between co-managers; financial constraints; and capacity constraints.

Keywords: Co-management; northern national parks; ethical space; Indigenous peoples; Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation; Parks Canada; comprehensive land claims; Indigenous engagement; reconciliation; self-determination; Indigenous governance.

RÉSUMÉ. Les engagements de Parcs Canada en matière de réconciliation constituent un important virage par rapport au paradigme de gouvernance des parcs nationaux, s'éloignant ainsi d'un cadre colonial pour passer à des modèles respectant et rehaussant les formes de gouvernance et les systèmes de connaissances autochtones. Cependant, la mesure dans laquelle un modèle de cogestion fondé sur les revendications territoriales (comme mécanisme dominant de gouvernance et d'engagement employé par Parcs Canada) peut servir de véhicule de réconciliation demeure une question discutable. Cet article vise à mieux saisir la dynamique relationnelle de la cogestion en vue de l'avancement possible de la réconciliation dans le contexte des parcs nationaux. En empruntant l'optique de l'espace éthique, nous déterminons les facteurs qui favorisent ou entravent l'établissement de relations entre la Première Nation des Gwitchin Vuntut et Parcs Canada en vue de la cogestion du parc national Vuntut. Les perspectives dégagées d'entrevues semi-structurées réalisées en 2021 auprès de 11 membres de la communauté et gestionnaires de parcs laissent entrevoir qu'une relation de gestion évolutive peut être maintenue par un engagement important de la communauté et par le soutien de Parcs Canada pour renforcer les liens de la communauté avec la terre. En fondant notre analyse sur le cadre de référence de l'espace éthique, nous avons pu mettre l'accent sur les différentes conditions et les différents éléments nécessaires pour qu'un arrangement de cogestion d'aire protégée serve de fondement solide à la réconciliation. Notre analyse a également mis au jour diverses lacunes nuisant à l'établissement d'un espace éthique propice à la réconciliation, surtout dans le contexte des arrangements de cogestion fondés sur les accord de revendications territoriales. Parmi ces lacunes, notons des écarts sur le plan des approches de gestion d'aires protégées entre la Première Nation des Gwitchin Vuntut et Parcs Canada, écarts qui sont exacerbés par le système de gouvernance utilisé par Parcs Canada; des questions d'échelle en lien avec la structure de gestion emboîtée de Parcs Canada, qui nuit à l'établissement de relations entre les cogestionnaires; des contraintes financières; et des contraintes en matière de capacités.

Mots-clés : cogestion; parcs nationaux du nord; cadre éthique; peuples autochtones; Première Nation des Gwitchin Vuntut; Parcs Canada; revendications territoriales globales; engagement autochtone; réconciliation; autodétermination; gouvernance autochtone

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[1] Department of Geography, Planning, and Environment, Concordia University, 1455 De Maisonneuve Boulevard West, Montreal, Quebec H3G 1M8, Canada
[2] Corresponding author: siralexanderbruce@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Researchers of conservation and environmental governance are increasingly recognizing that fulfilling global biodiversity conservation goals will be impossible without supporting Indigenous rights and responsibilities, which involves creating conditions for meaningful collaborative engagements between Indigenous peoples and the state in colonial settings (Gavin et al., 2018; Artelle et al., 2019; Zurba et al., 2019). This trend towards valuing Indigenous stewardship in biodiversity conservation is reflected in recent commitments to reconciliation undertaken by Parks Canada, the federal agency mandated to protect significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage. These commitments are intended to uphold the Government of Canada's pledge to build renewed nation-to-nation, government-to-government, and Inuit–Crown relationships with Indigenous peoples, grounded in the recognition of rights, mutual respect, co-operation, and partnership (Parks Canada, 2022). More specifically, Parks Canada has promised that "new and revised legislation, policy, guidance and tools will be developed that respect Indigenous rights and worldviews, and enable implementation of shared stewardship at heritage places" (Parks Canada, 2019).

Parks Canada faces significant challenges in fulfilling these commitments. Most glaringly, the objective of renewing relationships is overshadowed by a lack of trust between Parks Canada and Indigenous communities, especially those impacted by forced physical, cultural, and spiritual dislocation from their homelands due to the establishment of national parks (Binnema and Niemi, 2006; Langdon et al., 2010; Sandlos, 2014; Dearden and Bennett, 2016; Moola and Roth, 2019; Johnston and Mason, 2020). This legacy of exclusion continues to shape and undermine Indigenous-state relationships in national parks (Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018; Johnston and Mason, 2021), reinforced by conventional management structures that further marginalize and constrain Indigenous approaches to stewardship (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2014; Sandlos, 2014; Milko, 2020).

A further challenge in advancing reconciliation is Parks Canada's ongoing reliance on co-management, a tool originally designed for purposes other than reconciliation and legally constrained by the provisions of land claim negotiations (Notzke, 1995; Mulrennan and Scott, 2005; Alcantara, 2013; Pasternak, 2017; Grey and Kuokkanen, 2020). In the context of this paper, co-management is broadly understood as a spectrum of power sharing arrangements between the state and local or community-level resource users (Berkes, 2009). Co-management regimes have been implemented in a variety of conservation contexts throughout Canada (Notzke, 1995), most notably for fish and wildlife management. However, this paper addresses co-management within the realm of protected areas, specifically in the context of national parks.

While many definitions and understandings of reconciliation exist, for this analysis we have adopted the transformative perspective put forward by Neyaskweyahk (Ermineskin Cree Nation) scholar Danika Littlechild, settler scholar Chance Finegan, and Anishinaabe scholar (Whitefish River Nation) Deborah McGregor. Their viewpoint centres on "recognizing and reinforcing Indigenous ties to land, culture, and knowledge; directly supporting Indigenous communities' aspirations; and rebalancing relationships not only among people but between the human and nonhuman worlds" (Littlechild et al., 2021:669). The Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) (2018) embraced this perspective on reconciliation in their work as an independent advisory body assembled by the federal government. They were tasked with identifying and recommending appropriate conservation alternatives for meeting the ambitions of Canada target 1 challenge (an effort to add to conservation areas) in a manner that recentred Indigenous peoples in protected-area governance and management (Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018).

Many of the challenges that Parks Canada faces in restoring relationships in existing protected areas reflect a long-standing debate regarding the capacity of co-management to facilitate power sharing, bridge knowledge systems, and advance self-determination (Plummer and Armitage, 2007; Berkes, 2009; Clark and Joe-Strack, 2017; Dietsch et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2021). There is, therefore, an urgent need for a rigorous examination of co-management's potential to support reconciliation in national parks. Kyle Artelle and colleagues contend that co-management offers a valuable tool for supporting Indigenous-led conservation that "could in turn support [Indigenous] agency and the resurgence of practices that have supported sustained interactions between people and places for millennia" (Artelle et al., 2019:4). Co-management arrangements were also endorsed by ICE in its 2018 We Rise Together report as a mechanism for relationship building within established parks. Indeed, co-management arrangements were one of the 28 recommendations, presented by ICE to the Canadian government to support deeper engagement with Indigenous peoples in promoting Indigenous-led conservation efforts in alignment with Canada's goal to protect 30% of lands and waters by 2030 (Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018).

Such positive assessments of co-management are at odds with those who argue that co-management serves to advance Western legal interpretations of reconciliation through recognition-based politics (Coulthard, 2014), rather than adequately addressing Indigenous peoples' calls for self-determination and nation-to-nation relationships (Nesbitt, 2016; Smith, 2020). More extreme positions assert that co-management fails to foster reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination by co-opting the interests of Indigenous communities (Finegan, 2018; Grey and Kuokkanen, 2020). As a state-imposed mechanism, co-management is viewed as insufficient in both its ability to affirm Indigenous rights and jurisdiction, as well as its capacity to advance reconciliation or offer redress (Finegan, 2018; Grey and Kuokkanen, 2020; Smith, 2020).

Many Indigenous leaders, conservation practitioners, and scholars have advocated for innovative approaches to re-imagining Indigenous–state relationships in conservation (Ermine, 2007; Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018; Laurila, 2019; CRP et al., 2020; Dietsch et al., 2021; Dietz et al., 2021; M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., 2021). In response, we ask whether co-management holds the potential to serve as an effective mechanism for building renewed relationships and reconciliation in national parks. We approach this research question through an exploratory analysis of co-management utilizing the concept of "ethical space" (Carlsson and Berkes, 2005; Natcher et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2012).

Ethical space, as promoted by Sturgeon Lake First Nation scholar Willie Ermine in 2007 (adapted from Roger Poole's *Towards Deep Subjectivity* [1972]), is conceived as a neutral space for reconciling worldviews at the "intersection of Indigenous law and Western legal systems" and re-imagining "archaic ways of interaction" (Ermine, 2007:194). According to M'sɨt No'kmaq et al. (2021:856), "ethical space can be envisioned as the safe, middle space that respects the strengths and limitations of two people, their cultures and communities."

For Greenwood et al. (2017), ethical space relates to specific actions when listening to and understanding one another. As exemplified in their study of the creation of ethical space by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health under the Public Health Agency of Canada, realizing ethical space extends beyond cultural awareness. It requires all parties to "enter into long-term relationships based on the genuine understanding, care, and respect that come from sharing time, space, and knowledge with one another" (Greenwood et al., 2017:185). This genuine understanding may be achieved, for example, by elevating and prioritizing Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and languages in collaborative decision-making processes concerning the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples.

While, to the best of our knowledge, ethical space has not yet been applied in the context of co-management, Nikolakis and Hotte (2021) argue that it offers a lens and a process for enhancing what Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill (2015) call "governance vitality." This is the capacity of parties to a co-management arrangement to adapt and learn through doing, thus creating sustainable and equitable conservation partnerships (Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill, 2015; Nikolakis and Hotte, 2021). This perspective aligns with the recommendations of the Indigenous Circle of Experts (2018) report, which endorse partnerships between Indigenous nations and Crown governments as potential models for Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA) or lands and waters primarily cared for by Indigenous nations (Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018). The report also recommends ethical space as a framework to facilitate open dialogue, discussion, and actions supportive of reconciliation and reflective of Indigenous aspirations for their role in decision making and management in existing national parks (Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018). Indeed, if we think of co-management as a governance approach to solving resource management problems through partnership, the success or failure of co-management will depend on co-operation and mutually respectful relations between those partners. As such, ethical space holds promise as a conceptual framework and set of guiding principles for nurturing and supporting those relationships. As Figure 1 illustrates, the concept of ethical space is a departure from conventional conceptualizations of co-management that envision the state and Indigenous/community as interacting spheres of dominance (Carlsson and Berkes, 2005). While co-management is only one of many contexts in which ethical space can be applied (Littlechild and Sutherland, 2021), as a formal governance approach widely used to share power and responsibility between the state and Indigenous groups, we argue that the potential of ethical space to strengthen co-management is core to advancing reconciliation efforts.

Building on Curran's (2018:820) assertion that "reconciliation is an ongoing and adaptive negotiation process that is place- and community-specific, "we adopt a case study approach to explore the evolution of relationships between the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (VGFN) and Parks Canada in the community-based co-management of Vuntut National Park. This case study is instructive for two main reasons: firstly, established in 1993 under the VGFN Final Agreement, Vuntut National Park stands as one of the earliest co-managed national parks in Canada; secondly, as exemplified by Yeendoo Nanh Nakhweenjit K'atr'ahanahtyaa, a community-led ecological monitoring collaboration with territorial and federal governments initiated during the 2007–08 International Polar Year (Sherry and Myers, 2002; Wolfe et al., 2011), VGFN is a community distinguished by its leadership in collaborative land stewardship approaches. Furthermore, as argued by Sherry and Myers (2002:356) based on an Old Crow study on traditional ecological knowledges and management systems, co-management should be rooted in mutual respect, and the "role of the state must be redefined to support and complement, rather than replace, local or regional self-management systems."

In this paper, Indigenous Knowledges, or Traditional Ecological Knowledges, are understood as a comprehensive set of knowledge systems specific to Indigenous peoples, possessing governance value in terms of collective continuance (Indigenous social reliance) and resurgence (strengthening of Indigenous sovereignty through cultural regeneration) (Whyte et al., 2018). This notion of localized or community-based co-management is increasingly prevalent in studies exploring the maturation of co-management arrangements over time, contemporary research on community-centred conservation governance, and critiques of paternalistic state-led co-management (Jacobson et al., 2016; Armitage et al. 2020; Akonwi Nebasifu and Cuogo, 2021).
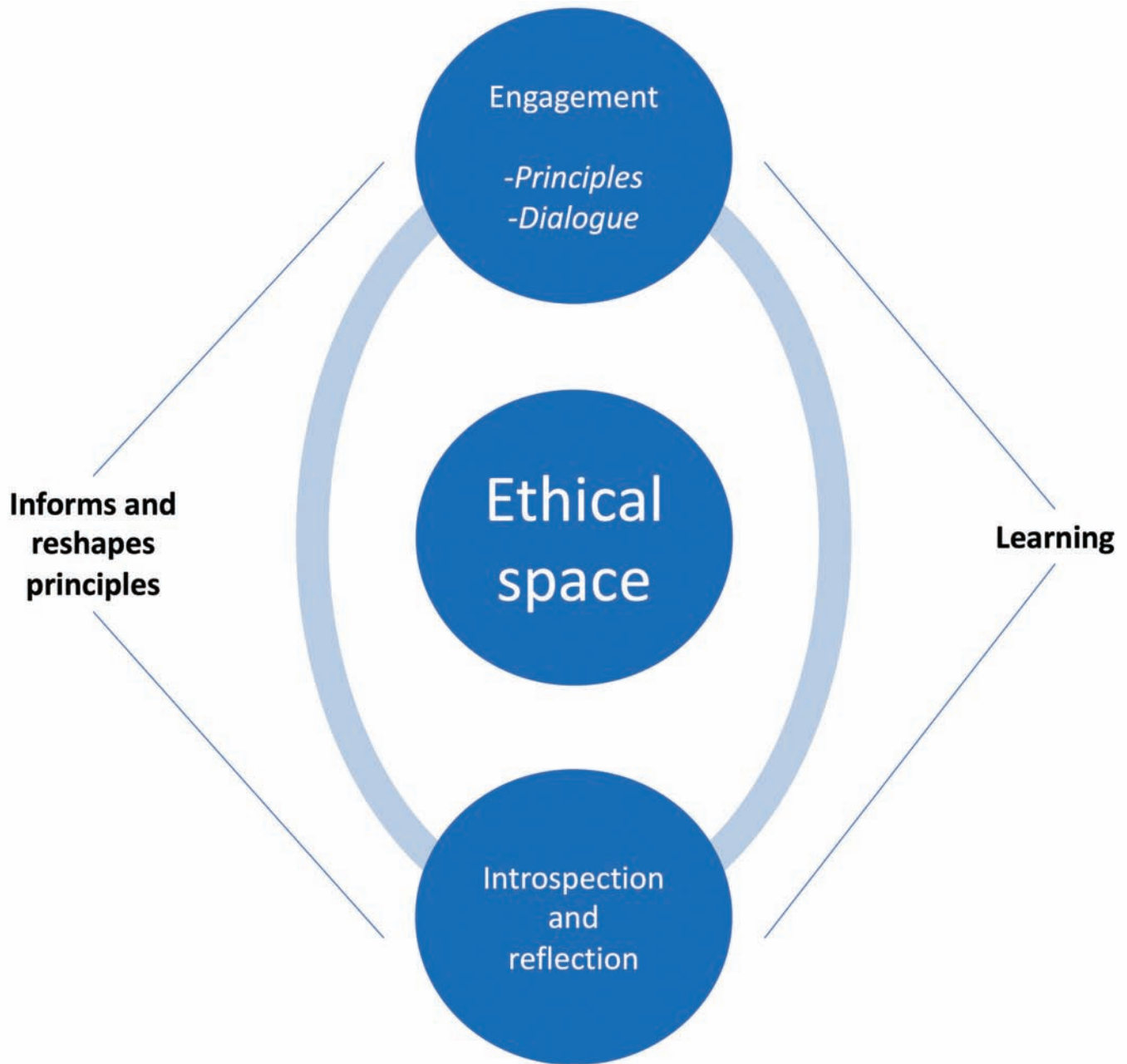
FIG. 1. Facilitating learning through engagement based in principles and dialogic processes (adapted from Nikolakis and Hotte, 2021).

We explore the narratives and experiences of relationship building between VGFN and Parks Canada within a functional and well-developed co-management relationship, employing the ethical space framework developed by Nikolakis and Hotte (2021). This framework, depicted in Figure 2, envisions ethical space as encompassing engagement guided by dialogic processes and principles that foster introspection and reflection. Dialogic processes encompass both formal and informal face-to-face interactions that promote co-learning and trust building, while principles, including respect, kindness, generosity, and reciprocity, are intended to "underpin engagement in an adaptive way, reflecting the dynamic nature of principles and values" (Nikolakis and Hotte, 2021:10).

Our analysis is centred on community-based perspectives on engagement, dialogic processes, and three critical, community-based principles for co-management, as identified through semi-structured interviews with community members and: 1) respect for equal partnership; 2) respect for Indigenous Knowledges; and 3) fostering of people–land relationships. The study evaluates the extent to which each of these principles has been upheld in the co-management arrangement, drawing on specific instances of trust building and co-learning processes, or noting any limitations due to various factors (e.g., technical, financial).

This approach sheds light on the transformation of Vuntut National Park's co-management, evolving from a procedural obligation of the VGFN Final Agreement to a

ETHICAL SPACE FRAMEWORK

INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE, LEGAL, AND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

ETHICAL SPACE

WESTERN GOVERNANCE, LEGAL, AND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

CONVENTIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF CO-MANAGEMENT

COMMUNITY — STATE

CO-MANAGEMENT AS AN EXCHANGE SYSTEM

COMMUNITY — STATE

CO-MANAGEMENT AS JOINT ORGANIZATION

COMMUNITY — STATE

CO-MANAGEMENT AS A COMMUNITY-NESTED SYSTEM

STATE — COMMUNITY

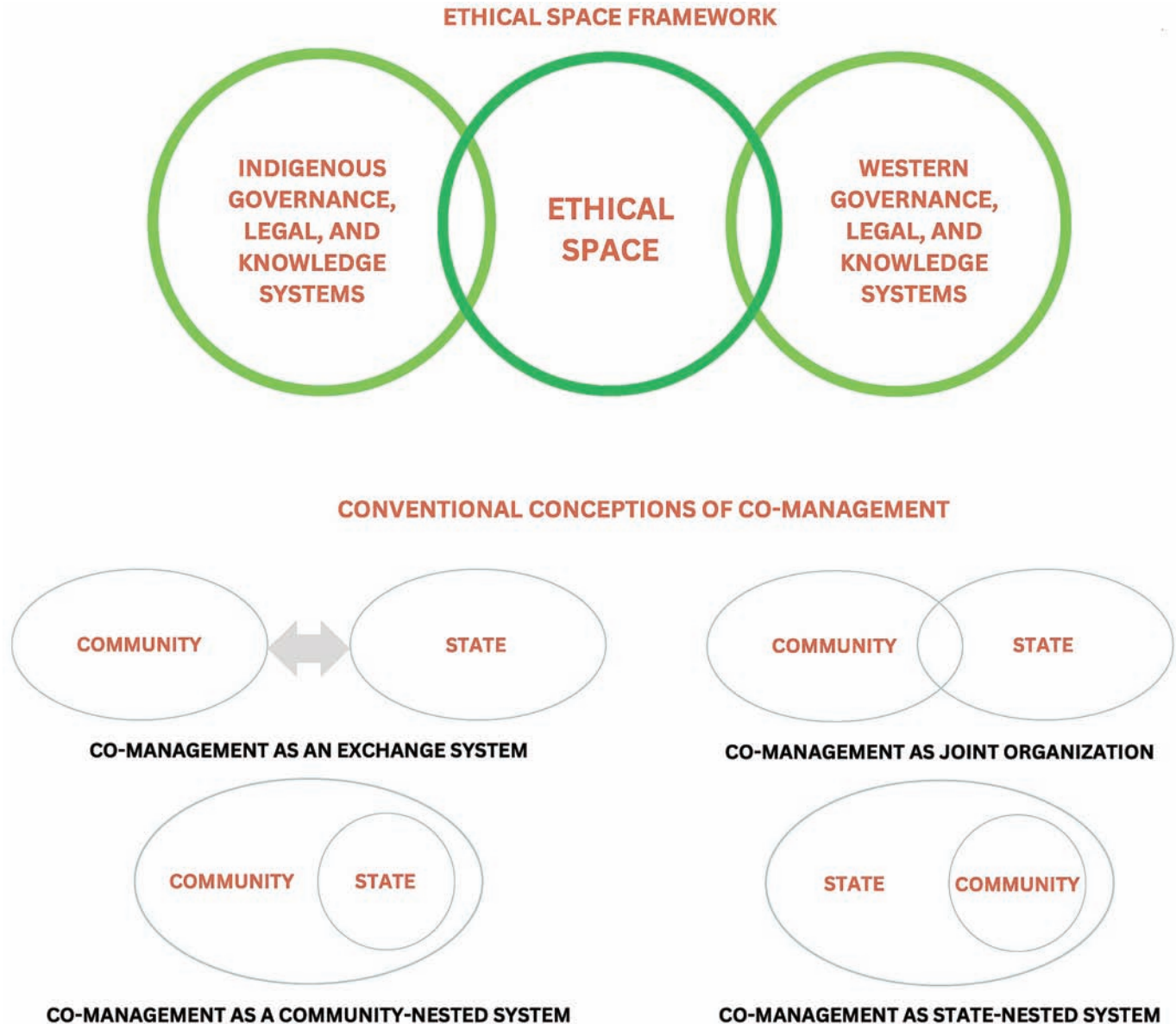**CO-MANAGEMENT AS STATE-NESTED SYSTEM**

FIG. 2. A generic ethical space framework for co-management (Victoria Island University, 2022) compared with conventional conceptualizations of co-management, as presented by Carlsson and Berkes (2005).

co-management relationship that has become more flexible over time and responsive to community needs. The findings offer deeper insight into the necessary ingredients, whether existing or desired, for cultivating an ethical space where something new may transpire—in this instance, a more resilient and sustainable co-management arrangement aligned with VGFN's vision for the future of Vuntut National Park (Laurila, 2019). It is our hope that this study will make practical contributions to the community's land stewardship priorities and add scholarly insights to the expanding literature on ethical space and its application in conservation contexts, particularly those concerning the co-management of protected areas (Greenwood et al., 2017; Laurila, 2019; Littlechild and Sutherland, 2021; Nikolakis and Hotte, 2021).

This work was conducted as part of a broader project associated with the Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership (CRP), an Indigenous-led decolonial partnership comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, governments, and academic researchers, including Parks Canada, to address reconciliation in national parks. The partnership was established in 2019 to advance the recommendations of on the Indigenous Circle of Experts recommendations in a non-partisan approach over a seven-year period (CRP, 2020). Through the partnership, all stages of this present research project benefited from a significant level of collaboration with Parks Canada. In addition to the case study reported here, this research project has contributed to other academic and practical outputs, including various community and conference presentations, as well as the publication of Parks Canada Management Planning: A Guide for Indigenous Leadership (Bruce, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reconciliation in Conservation

Reconciliation, in general terms, concerns the restoration of broken relationships between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian settler state, along with redress for the continuing harms of colonization (Henderson and Wakeham, 2013). The term's application has been extended to encompass a spectrum "from serious political and socio-economic transformation to the maintenance of the status quo" (Henderson and Wakeham, 2013:9). According to Indigenous Watchdog (2022), despite Canada's claims of substantial progress in its reconciliation commitments, meaningful acknowledgement, reparations, and redress towards reconciliation have been slow in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action. These calls highlighted the testimonies of residential school survivors and the legacy of Canada's attempted genocide against Indigenous peoples. Additionally, while reconciliation is often presented as a shared framework for renewing relationships, it has led to fragmented and divisive interpretations within both settler and Indigenous communities (Littlechild et al., 2021; Townsend, 2022). Many Indigenous leaders argue that reconciliation requires more than symbolic gestures, it demands structural realignment, including pathways to Indigenous autonomy, land restitution, and the restoration of human–land connections (Youngblood Henderson, 2013; McGregor, 2018a; Whyte, 2018; Daigle, 2019). Some have gone further, rejecting the proposition of reconciliation entirely (Wente, 2021; Unist'ot'en Camp, n.d.).

The conservation sector, historically dominated by settler institutions now faces an urgent need for reconciliation (Townsend, 2022). As previously mentioned, there is justified skepticism about Canada's ability to move beyond simply recognizing Indigenous peoples and integrating their knowledges and perspectives into Eurocentric conservation frameworks. There is doubt about whether Canada can adopt approaches that genuinely support reconciliation imperatives (Smith, 2020, Hessami et al., 2021; Littlechild et al., 2021). Many scholars argue that reconciliation in conservation governance and management entails structural transformations that elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities, providing space for Indigenous jurisdiction, legal orders, and knowledge systems to flourish (Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018; Littlechild et al., 2021; M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., 2021). Various authorities have outlined guidelines and principles for such approaches. For instance, the Indigenous Circle of Experts report put forward recommendations for reconciliation through conservation, chief among them, a call for all levels of provincial and territorial governments in Canada to endorse and support the establishment of IPCAs through legislative amendments. This is needed to provide backing for Indigenous stewardship via their own governance, knowledge, and legal systems that predate those of Canada (Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018). Additionally, Indigenous rights–based approaches to conservation have gained traction through the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples, which Canada initially endorsed in 2016 and implemented in 2021, affirming the right of Indigenous peoples to the conservation and stewardship of their own lands (United Nations, 2007; Government of Canada, 2024). However, approaches to reconciliation through conservation vary widely and can be oppositional, particularly when comparing those adopted by the state to those adopted by Indigenous authorities. Globally, many Indigenous communities have initiated and are implementing Indigenous-led conservation projects, such as IPCAs (ICCA Consortium, 2021). Some of these projects have intentionally been implemented without formal state recognition, while others, according to both Indigenous and state authorities, have been negotiated in the spirit of reconciliation. The latter is exemplified by Łutsel K'e Dene First Nation's partnership with Parks Canada for the establishment of Thaidene Nëné (Łutsel K'e Dene First Nation, n.d.; CRP et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2020; Townsend, 2022).

The Imbalances of Co-management

In Canada, it has long been long acknowledged that fish and wildlife co-management leads to improved conservation outcomes by harmonizing state- and community-level management systems and mitigating conflicts over resource use (Usher, 1986). Nevertheless, co-management has become a contested concept, entangled with long-standing issues of trust, power, and identity, particularly concerning Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems (Dietsch et al., 2021). These issues have been extensively explored through theoretical and case studies spanning Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South America, and the United States. In its early iterations, co-management was perceived as a public policy tool designed to bridge two disparate management systems. Indigenous partners participated in various roles ranging from being simply informed or consulted to institutionalized, joint decision making arrangements, a broad spectrum of arrangements often grouped under the common heading of co-management (Feit, 1988; Berkes et al., 1991; Martin, 2016). However, early research highlighted concerns with the limitations of these arrangements, noting that Indigenous peoples were often confined to advisory roles within co-management structures (Nadasdy, 2003). As is widely known today, the majority of these co-management arrangements originated as a "state response to successful land claims challenges from Indigenous nations" providing a "way for states to resolve Native title issues short of Indigenous self-determination" (Grey and Kuokkanen, 2020:924; see also Pasternak, 2017). Notzke (1995) summarizes the various motivations behind co-management regimes. Noting that the original impetus for co-management agreements never centred on the rights and aspirations of Indigenous

peoples (Mulrennan and Scott, 2005). Indeed, early case studies in wildlife co-management in the North highlighted Canada's reluctance to relinquish decision making power (Rodon, 1998). Critics of early co-management argued that, through tacit acceptance of co-management's Eurocentric assumptions, Indigenous peoples and their governance and knowledge systems were pressured to conform to bureaucratic and scientific standards and processes (Nadasdy, 2003; Howitt and Suchet-Pearson, 2006). Their compliance was further entrenched by the patriarchal structures imposed by co-management institutions, often resulting in the inadequate inclusion of women in decision making positions concerning lands, waters, and traditional knowledge (Staples, 2014; Chiblow, 2019). During this period, co-management scholarship pointed to a fundamental challenges: bridging two worldviews rooted in distinct and opposing knowledge systems (Feit, 1988; Rodon, 1998). As Notzke (1995:190) wrote, these two perspectives "commonly have failed to acknowledge the other as having any legitimacy," leading to managerial dominance of the state ultimately marginalizing Indigenous Knowledge and knowledge systems (Berkes, 1994; Doberstein and Devin, 2004; Nadasdy, 2005). Kimmerer (2002) argued that such power imbalances result in extractions (one-way forms of acquisition) of Indigenous Knowledge that overlook the reciprocal and relational systems of understandings to which Indigenous Knowledges belong.

Evolving Understandings of Co-management

Though co-management has long been criticized for its shortcomings in power-sharing and respectful engagement of Indigenous Knowledge systems (Watson, 2013; Martinez-Reyes, 2014; Sandlos, 2014; Youdelis, 2016; White, 2018; Pinkerton, 2019), recent scholarship suggests that some of these earlier criticisms may be unfounded. Researchers have documented how various Indigenous communities use co-management to pursue self-determination and other goals, adopting it as a primary tool for engagement with the state. Additionally, there is evidence that many co-management arrangements are viewed positively by communities (Feit, 1989; Notzke, 1995; Zurba et al., 2012; Lyver et al., 2014; Diver, 2016; Reo et al., 2017). Responding to earlier critiques, Clark and Joe-Strack (2017:71) caution that portraying co-management as "merely another method to co-opt Indigenous peoples … breeds cynicism among those who will one day participate in or even run these systems." As theorists of adaptive co-management first proposed over 20 years ago, "co-management presupposes that parties have, to some extent, agreed on an arrangement, but the actual arrangement often evolves; it is a process rather than a fixed state" (Carlsson and Berkes, 2005:67). By learning through doing, adaptive co-management arrangements are able to mature towards higher degrees of "power sharing, shifts in world view, rules and norms, [and] the building of

trust" (Berkes, 2009:1699). In this manner, co-management has shifted towards managing relationships between people and fostering multicultural interaction through supportive social, organizational, and institutional mechanisms (Olsson et al., 2004; Carlsson and Berkes, 2005; Goetze, 2005; Natcher et al., 2005; Plummer et al., 2012). According to Zurba et al. (2012), based on partnered research with the Girrungun Aboriginal Corporation in Australia, this relationship building process involves the building of respect and rapport, the delineation of responsibilities, the practical engagement of traditional resource owners, and capacity building.

Co-management for Reconciliation

Emerging theories concerning collaborative conservation approaches resonate with the notion of reconciliation in conservation, especially in northern protected areas. By understanding conservation governance as a cultural expression of multiple actors, collaborative conservation partnerships, adaptive to socio-ecological changes, can be established (Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill, 2015). As highlighted by Evelyn Pinkerton (2019), in a study of fisheries co-management between Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Indigenous communities on the Pacific coast, legitimacy in the eyes of local community is crucial for the success of any co-management arrangement. Furthermore, conservation partnerships that consider community cultural values have the potential to strengthen cultural institutions that may have weakened over time, particular in northern, remote Indigenous communities facing rapid socio-ecological change (Infield et al., 2018). Many scholars have noted the importance of establishing deep relationships with the community is key to sustaining ethical partnerships (Carthew, 2007; Jacobsen et al., 2016; Akonwi Nebasifu and Cuogo, 2021; Nikolakis and Hotte, 2021). Several studies have identified the importance of respect for Indigenous Knowledges and support for Indigenous control over knowledge mobilization as crucial prerequisites for Indigenous engagement in collaborative environmental management (Reo et al., 2017; Dietz et al., 2021). This respect can be fostered through frameworks similar to ethical space, such as what Albert Marshall calls two-eyed seeing or *Etuaptmumk*. This approach involves "learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous Knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all" (quoted in Bartlett et al., 2012:335). Similarly inspired by two-eyed seeing, Zurba et al. (2021) propose a two-row model for Indigenous – state collaborations. This model incorporates both culturally framed and management framed forms of learning, facilitating a cross-cultural transformative learning process within community-based natural resource governance.

Furthermore, recent scholarship, as well as the Indigenous Circle of Experts' report, suggests that co-management

may support a new paradigm in conservation that elevates Indigenous rights and responsibilities, promising broad socio-cultural, ecological, and economic outcomes (Stevens, 2014; Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018; Moola and Roth, 2019). The Indigenous Circle of Experts (2018) called on all levels of government to shift to collaborative governance for parks and protected areas. However, Smith (2020) cautions that co-management arrangements supportive of reconciliation must go beyond recognition-based approaches (Coulthard, 2014) and evolve into models that centre self-determination and nation-to-nation relationships. However, few studies confront these intersections in practical terms. Political science scholar, Chance Finegan (2018:11), concerned by Canada's steadfast dependency on co-management, argued that "co-management is not a vehicle for Indigenous peoples to reclaim authority over their traditional territories, nor does it identify truth, acknowledge harm, or provide restorative justice." Grey and Kuokkanen (2020:920) contend that co-management "cannot be 'tweaked' to provide better outcomes." Indeed Finegan (2018) reminds us that parks have long been implicated in establishing and perpetuating and creating and maintaining settler-colonial regimes. For instance, scholars have argued that ecological integrity, a key framework within Parks Canada's current practices, perpetuates the long-standing ideological nationalism from which the concept of a national park was born (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2009). Other researchers have underscored the legal, political, and organizational challenges facing Parks Canada in advancing reconciliation. These include organizational fragmentation resulting from a division of roles and responsibilities among national offices, 33 field units, and 224 individual protected areas, ultimately impeding the achievement of coherent and locally responsive management (Carter, 2010; Thomlinson and Crouch, 2012; Dearden and Bennett, 2016; Johnston and Mason, 2020; Littlechild et al., 2021). For instance, management plans developed with local Indigenous input must ultimately gain approval from the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), but not necessarily from Indigenous leadership (Government of Canada, 2024).

While there is a general consensus on the significance of protected areas as potential sites for reconciliation in Canada, there are lingering uncertainites about Parks Canada's ability to adapt to the increasing expectations of Indigenous peoples and the evolving spectrum of their needs and interests. This uncertainty stems from Parks Canada's heavy reliance in co-management and whether it can align with the imperatives of reconciliation (Finegan, 2018). Indigenous groups establishing their own IPCA may consider collaborative arrangements with Parks Canada, as seen in the case of Thaidene Nëné. However, the foundation of co-management remains in land claims agreements. Given that co-management is Canada's primary mechanism for sharing governance, questions arise about its suitability for advancing comprehensive self-determination. Nevertheless, some scholars see the

potential of co-management to support the renewal of relationships (Nesbitt, 2016; Smith, 2020). From this perspective, co-management may be viewed as an adaptive learning process that fosters relationship building and the development of effective conservation partnerships (Zurba et al., 2012). It holds the potential accomodate and benefit from the integration of Indigenous frameworks, such as ethical space and two-eyed seeing (Reid et al., 2021). Indeed, co-management may yield the best outcomes when there is a shared alignment in interests and objectives (Usher, 1996). This suggests that ethical space offers distinct advantages for the co-management of protected areas, especially those originating from the negotiation of Indigenous—state relationships and responsibilities. This is in contrast to fish and wildlife co-management regimes, which, though not always the case, historically emerged as state-led solutions to resource crises (Notzke, 1995). This paper seeks to reconcile these conflicting perspectives through an in-depth exploration of one particular story of relationship building in national park co-management, examined through a lens of ethical space.

CASE STUDY

Co-management in Vuntut National Park

The Van Tat Gwich'in or Vuntut Gwitchin is one of 15 communities that form the Gwich'in Nation. It is a self-governing First Nation of nearly 240 people located in the remote community of Old Crow on the Yukon North Slope (Gwich'in Social & Cultural Institute, 2016). Vuntut National Park, situated within a cluster of protected areas in the region, was established in 1995 under the provisions of the VGFN Final Agreement (1993) (Dearden and Bennett, 2016). Located 150 km north of the fly-in community of Old Crow, Vuntut National Park encompasses 4345 km^2 of the northern portion of the Crow Flats. At the time of the Final Agreement's ratification in 1994, this area was threatened by oil and gas exploration (see Fig. 3). The establishment of Vuntut National Park aimed to safeguard a critical segment of the migratory route of the Porcupine caribou herd, essential to VGFN for harvesting, as well areas of cultural and archeological significance. The park recognizes and protects VGFN rights, including continued traditional use of lands and waters and traditional harvesting practices within the park (Parks Canada, 2010). The agreement offers various socio-economic benefits linked to park management, such as a 50% VGFN hiring quota, tourism opportunities, and recognition of oral history as a legitimate form of research. These provisions are reflected in the 2010 management plan, which incorporates VGFN priorities, including support for the continuation of traditional lifestyles, intergenerational knowledge transfer, shared ecological stewardship, tourism development, and the protection of cultural resources (Dearden and Bennett, 2016). Presently, the region is experiencing significant
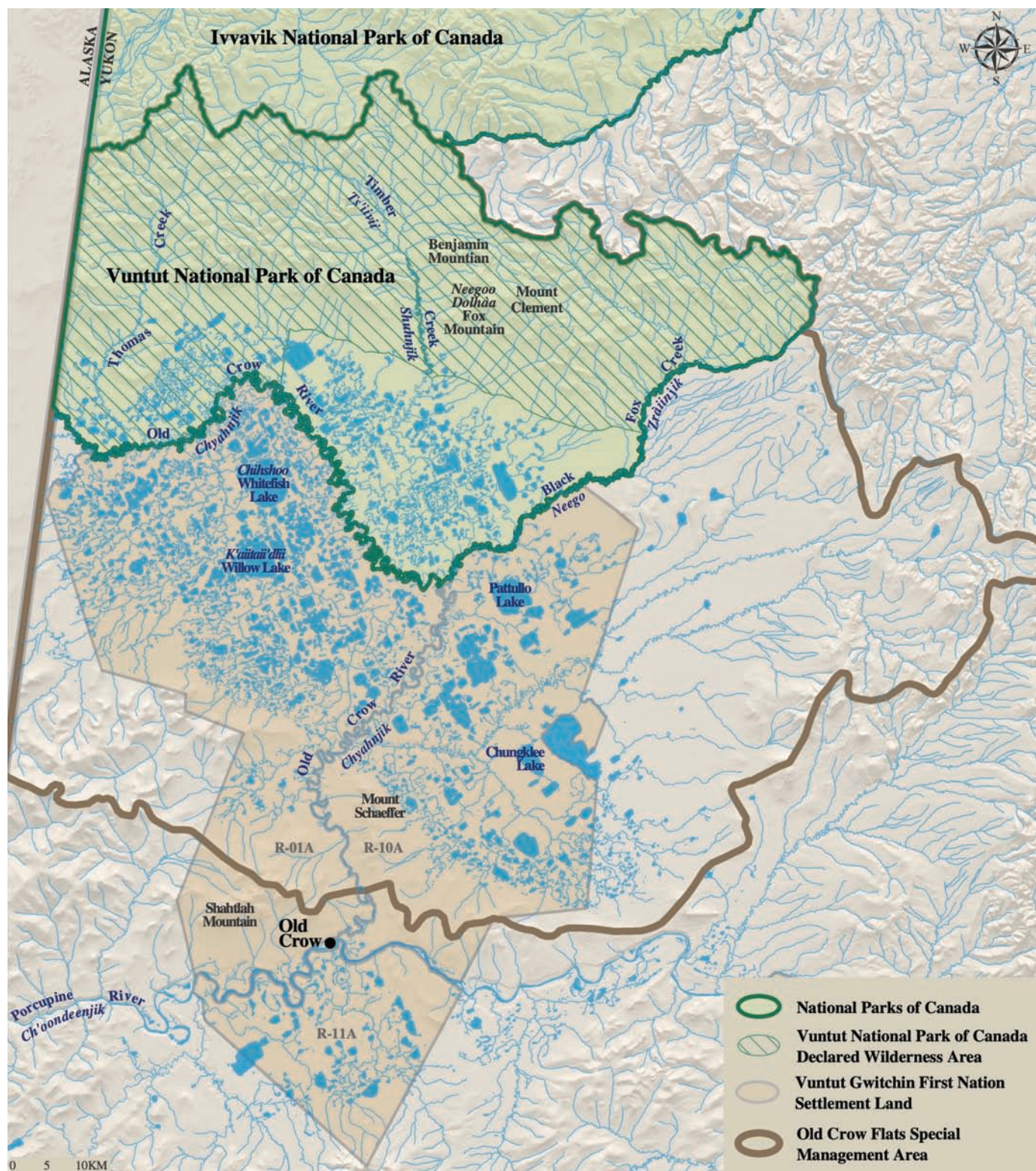
FIG. 3. Map of Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Settlement Land, Vuntut National Park, and other protected areas in the Crow Flats and Porcupine River area (Parks Canada, 2024).

socio-ecological shifts driven by climate change. This has prompted VGFN to take action by enhancing ecological monitoring through community-centred and collaborative approaches to adaptation and resilience-building (The Firelight Group and Vuntut Gwitchin Government, 2018).

For instance, a joint Ecological Monitoring Program is currently focused on tracking ecological changes that impact the migratory route of the Porcupine caribou herd and the hydrology of the Van Tat K'atr'anahtii (Old Crow Flats) wetland region (Parks Canada, 2023).

Vuntut National Park operates under a tripartite management arrangement between Vuntut Gwitchin Government (VGG), Parks Canada, and the North Yukon Renewable Resource Council. The renewable resource councils were established as the central mechanism for local renewable resources management through individual Yukon First Nation Final Agreements across the Yukon and may provide advice on national park management (Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board, 2022). Unlike subsequent modern treaties, the VGFN Final Agreement did not prescribe a structured co-operative management board with operational protocols. This has posed a challenge for partners in establishing a mutually beneficial relationship. Notably, VGFN's role remained formally ambiguous until a subsequent, legally binding cooperative agreement in 2005 clarified that Parks Canada and VGFN serve as decision making partners, granting approvals in their respective jurisdictions. Meanwhile the renewable resource council retains an advisory role (Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation et al., 2005). Adding complexity to these relationships, the federal government retains jurisdiction over national parks, as stipulated in current federal legislation, where the Minister of EDDD is tasked with the administration, management, and control of parks (Government of Canada, 2000). Many of these responsibilities can be delegated to field unit superintendents who oversee multiple protected areas within a designated region and are typically tasked with fostering the development and stewardship of Indigenous relationships in co-operative management regimes (Bruce, 2023).

Vuntut National Park is managed and operated by staff based in Old Crow and a field unit headquartered in Whitehorse, which also manages Kluane National Park and Park Reserve, along with various national heritage sites, including the Chilkoot Trail. According to the Final Agreement, half of the Vuntut National Park management unit should be comprised of Vuntut Gwitchin employees. At the time of writing, four out of six positions are designated to be based in Old Crow as per the organizational structure (Fig. 4).

Scholars widely recognize that the outcomes of land claim negotiations and their implementation have varied across Indigenous communities because of socio-cultural and political factors (Alcantara, 2013). However, it's essential to note that the findings from the present study unquestionably depict the particulars of one national park within one territorial governance system. Nevertheless, we hope that these findings offer practical guidance for comparable co-management arrangements in other areas governed by comparable organizational and governance structures, particularly northern national parks based on land claims and co-managed with external field units. Rights-holders and stakeholders engaged in comparable arrangements may gain valuable insights from community-based research that investigates the factors facilitating or constraining the implementation of ethical space. Such insights can be instrumental for practitioners with well-established co-management contexts ensuring enduring relationships and continuity.

METHODS

We embarked on this project guided by decolonizing and Indigenist research methodologies and reciprocity throughout the research process prioritizing committing to approaching research as a relationship (Smith, 1999; McGregor, 2018b). As settler-scholars and members of the CRP, we approached this research with a mindful acknowledgement of our own interconnections, responsibilities, and accountability. For the lead author, who conducted the field research component, this commitment entailed establishing research relationships with the people of Old Crow as an invited guest, with no pre-existing connections to the broader community. The second author has more than three decades of experience sustaining relational research in Indigenous-led conservation contexts.

The realization of this research and its potential value was facilitated by the willingness of VGFN to collaborate at every stage of the research process. The project began with a research proposal extended to multiple Indigenous communities to assess their interest in sharing the story of co-management in national parks overlapping or bordering their territories. Old Crow emerged as the nearest community (to the lead author living in Whitehorse) keen on participating and open to inviting researchers despite the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time. Due to constraints in time and funding, we made the decision to focus on this one community. A research agreement and community ethics protocol, overseen by VGFN's heritage committee, were formalized in the spring of 2021. Concordia University's Research Ethics Board (#30015011) and the Parks Canada Agency Research and Collection Permit system (VUN-2021-39090) subsequently granted ethical approval. As the primary researcher was a Yukon resident, the Yukon Scientists and Explorers License was not required. The lead author visited the community three times (November 2021, May 2022, and January 2023) to provide updates on the research progress and validate the findings throughout the research project.

We prioritized qualitative research methods that honour oral traditions, particularly semi-structured interviews. These methods allowed for what leading Indigenous researchers have long called for: giving centre stage to Indigenous voices and stories and creating spaces for sharing and learning (Kovach, 2009; Castleden et al., 2012; Mulrennan et al., 2012; McGregor, 2018b). Given that the concept of ethical space represents a novel framework in terms of Parks Canada's management approach, the interview guide primarily consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit tangible stories and examples of relationship building. The language was intentionally crafted to be accessible to all participants. Questions included:
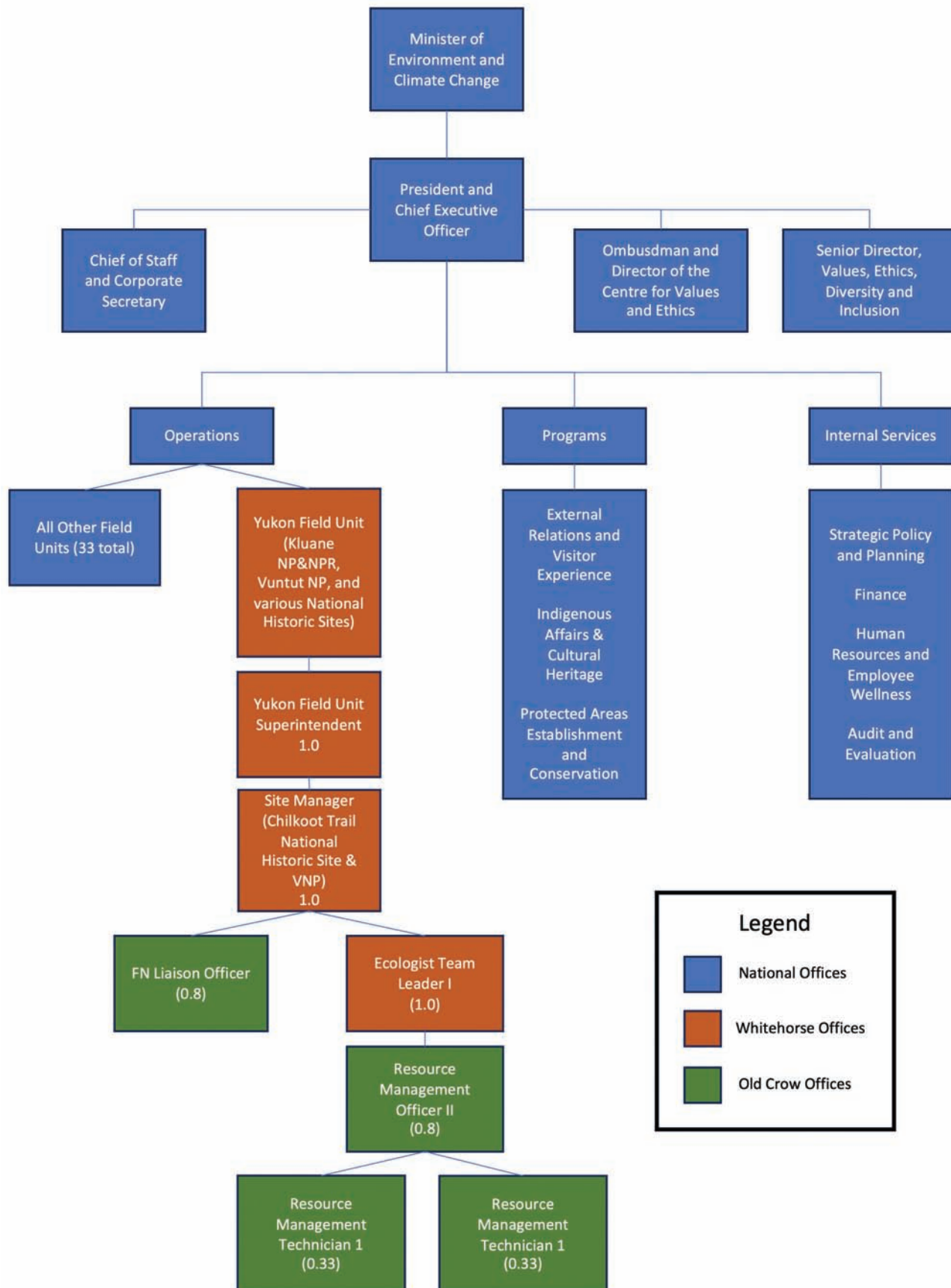
FIG. 4. Vuntut National Park organizational structure classified by location. Vuntut National Park management positions include employment duration (1.0 = full time). Note acronyms: NP = national park, NPR = national park reserves, and VNP = Vuntut National Park.

1. How would you describe the relationship between Parks Canada and VGFN?
2. How has the relationship changed over time? And why?
3. How would you describe the relationship between Parks Canada and the community?
4. What are the signs of a strong relationship between Parks Canada and VGFN?
5. How are challenges met and resolved between partners? Specific Examples?
6. What are your aspirations for the Vuntut National Park management relationship?
7. How can Parks Canada better listen to community values and aspirations for the park?
8. What value do you see Parks Canada bringing to the community today versus before?
9. Do you consider VGFN as a full and equal participant in decision-making regarding the Vuntut National Park?
10. To what extent do VGFN ways of knowing and doing inform park management?
11. In what ways do you see Parks Canada supporting reconciliation or strengthening nation-to-nation relationships?

We identified participants with the assistance of the VGG heritage committee, through networking opportunities at community-held research gatherings, and via word of mouth. With the intent of elevating community perspectives, we selected Parks Canada representatives primarily based on their active relationships to the community at the time of the study, as per the recommendations of the heritage committee and community members. This excluded senior management staff, such as the field unit superintendent, who are based in Whitehorse and had limited presence with the community at the time of the study. Given the small size of the community, many participants fell into multiple categories spanning a diverse range of voices, including women, youth, active hunters, and Elders. Nearly all interviewees have held, or currently hold, leadership positions within the community or Parks Canada. Due to time and resource constraints associated with the lead author's research position as a master's research student, interviews with the North Yukon Renewable Resource Council were not conducted as part of this study. Table 1 lists participant biographies.

The primary author conducted a total of 11 individual conversational interviews in fall of 2021. Interviews ranged from 30–120 minutes and took place face to face in Old Crow, with virtual interviews conducted as needed. The limited time in Old Crow did not allow for a formalized process of involving community members in the analysis stage. However, follow-up conversations to discuss themes and validate preliminary findings took place during the subsequent two visits. During these visits, participants were also given the opportunity to review or redact their transcripts. Respecting the research relationship and VGG's ownership of the research findings, as outlined in the research protocol, and after conducting final one-to-one reviews of individual contributions and overall findings with each individual participant, the lead author obtained community consent from the VGFN heritage branch to publish the results. This process concluded with an oral presentation open to the community. The final results were shared directly with the heritage branch and Parks Canada at national, field unit, and local levels in spring of 2023.

An initial review of the transcriptions identified general themes. This was followed by an iterative coding process based on the ethical space framework (Benaquisto, 2008). These codes encompassed various themes, including community engagement, respect for Indigenous Knowledges, decision-making, human–land connections, dialogic processes, and constraints to relationship building. Certain findings are interwoven through a narrative approach, featuring intact quotations to maintain context and honour the voices and stories of participants. Others are presented conventionally, organized into discrete themes where appropriate (Clandinin, 2006; Castleden et al., 2017).

The analysis was informed by our interpretation of participant perspectives on forms of engagement, dialogic processes, and three community-based principles of engagement: 1) respect for equal partnership; 2) respect for Indigenous Knowledges; and 3) fostering of people–land relationships. The analysis explores the extent to which these mechanisms and principles have been encouraged through co-management, with specific examples of trust-building and co-learning processes, or constrained by other structural, attitudinal, economic, or other factors.

It is important to clarify that this study does not aim to perfect an ethical space framework; rather, it explores its application within the context of co-management as a practical endeavour. We acknowledge that efforts to address the concerns identified in this study may be ongoing at both field-unit and national levels. At a minimum, this study offers preliminary insight into the compatibility of ethical space and claims-based co-management. The study addresses only one facet of the ethical space framework outlined in the literature as, from the beginning, we considered introspection and reflection less measurable and as offering fewer tangible constructs for study. There was limited focus on cultural sensitivity training, an aspect highlighted in other studies on ethical space for its importance in fostering an ethical space (Greenwood et al., 2017).

The lead author provided an oral presentation of results to members of chief and council, community members, and other research partners at a community hosted research gathering in Old Crow in February 2023.

RESULTS

Engagement

According to our research participants, engagement manifests through both internal channels (within

TABLE 1. Participant biographies.

Mary Jane Moses	Tetlit Gwich'in Elder based in Old Crow. Now retired, Mary Jane worked 20 years as the Heritage Coordinator for Vuntut Gwitchin Government and has worked as a filmmaker, researcher, and translator. She received an honorary Bachelor of Northern Heritage and Culture studies in 2022 from Yukon University, YT.
Esau Schafer	Vuntut Gwitchin Elder. Previously worked as First Nations liaison officer at Vuntut National Park in the mid-2000s. Served as councillor (2003−10, 2016−18) and district representative in territorial government (1996).
Sophia Flather	Vuntut Gwitchin. Language coordinator in Vuntut Gwitchin Heritage and participant in park patrols as a Vuntut Gwitchin summer student.
Jeffrey Peter	Vuntut Gwitchin. Worked for Vuntut National Park as a seasonal patrol, resource management officer (formerly referred to as park warden), and First Nation liaison, 2004−15. Worked for Kluane National Park Reserve for a number of years.
Roger Kyikavichik	Vuntut Gwitchin Elder. Previous chief of Vuntut Gwichin First Nation (1988−92, 2014−16). Served as councillor (1988−2010).
William Josie	Vuntut Gwitchin. Government services director for Vuntut Gwitchin Government. Director of Natural Resources for Vuntut Gwitchin Government during establishment of Vuntut National Park. Served as councillor (1994−96, 1998−2006).
Brenda Frost	Vuntut Gwitchin. Current First Nation liaison officer for Vuntut National Park. Served as councillor (1992−94).
Colton Schafer	Vuntut Gwitchin youth. Grade 12 student at Chief Zzeh Gittlit School in Old Crow.
Megan Williams	Old Crow/Whitehorse-based. Heritage manager for Vuntut Gwitchin Government since 1998.
Jacqueline Menzies	Old Crow-based resource management officer for Vuntut National Park (2019−22).
Ian McDonald	Whitehorse-based ecologist team leader I for Vuntut National Park since 2007. Began his career with Parks Canada in 1999 (Inuvik).

management structures) and external venues (informal interactions with community members). Elder Roger Kyikavichik notes, "they [Parks Canada] always send good people up here. Just about every park warden that we have here communicates well with the people… The relationship is good and that's what needs to happen" (Kyikavichik, pers. comm. November 2021). Ian McDonald, who has served as the ecologist team lead based in Whitehorse for 14 years, emphasizes that maintaining these relationships and making progress requires regular visits throughout the year:

If I was spread a bit thinner, I wouldn't be up there as much and I wouldn't have the personal relationships that I do with people… It's nice to go up in the winter. You know, the field season is good, but it's not a good time to talk with people. You're just so busy… So, it really speaks to the need for people to commit to a place and commit to a relationship and to give it time.

McDonald, pers. comm. November 2021

However, numerous participants pointed out that the transient nature of Parks Canada's presence in the community, attributable to Vuntut National Park's organizational structure, poses a challenge in sustaining co-manager relationships over time. For instance, the management team in Whitehorse experiences a high turnover rate, necessitating VGG to repeatedly establish relationships and build trust with new staff (Megan Williams, pers. comm. November 2021). Other participants indicated that Parks Canada's ability to engage with VGFN is further limited by the dynamic between Vuntut National Park and the Yukon field unit in Whitehorse, which is responsible for overseeing and managing several other

heritage sites. As previous Vuntut National Park employee and VGFN citizen Jeffrey Peter explained in November 2021:

If no one is holding you to the flame … not much seems to happen … There are resources in Whitehorse that Parks [Canada] has, but they're often put to other places like Kluane [National Park and Park Reserve] or Chilkoot [National Historic Site] that have a much higher profile.

In addition to Parks Canada facing its own constraints in engagement, several participants also pointed to broader political challenges within the community that hinder VGG's ability to reciprocate engagement with Parks Canada. "You know, for several years now, our community… we're going through really tough times" (E. Schafer, pers. comm. November 2021). VGG has limited capacity and much "bigger fish to fry," according to Peter, often leaving engagement with Parks Canada on the backburner (pers. comm. November 2021). Said Peter: "It's not a good use of the First Nation's time when there's so much going on to try and engage or try to elicit more out of Parks Canada." For him, community expectations for Parks Canada have evolved. While Parks Canada initially had a substantial presence due to its newness in the community, today "Parks isn't seen as the type of organization that's ever going to be a big presence in Old Crow" (Peter, pers. comm. November 2021). Some participants suggested that this perception may be influenced by its remoteness, which, over time, has led to some commitments within the Final Agreement, such as tourism, being seen as impractical. Although the Final Agreement included various provisions

for economic development related to the Park, including tourism ventures, very few outsiders have visited the Park since its establishment (E. Schafer, pers. comm. November 2021). "It's not made for tourists, it's not made for walking, and it's not made for hiking" (E. Schafer, pers. comm. November 2021). Indeed others, like Elder Mary Jane Moses, concurred, pointing out that the park's original intention was to safeguard sacred areas.

Participants, including Kyikavichik, E. Schafer, and McDonald, emphasized the crucial need for deeper community engagement from Parks Canada. They highlighted that communications about land and ecological changes are integral aspects of Parks Canada's role and presence in Old Crow. Others, like William Josie, Brenda Frost, and Peter, underscored the significance of initiatives like Parks Canada's interpretive centre, school visits, and community meetings and events, in fostering stronger connections with the broader community. Additionally, they noted that staff members who extend their efforts to engage with the community beyond their roles at Parks Canada can contribute significantly to building trust. Peter recounted the positive impact of a Parks Canada staffer who frequently played fiddle music for community dances (pers. comm. November 2021). However, achieving this level of engagement, which necessitates regular face-to-face interactions, has been hindered by Parks Canada's organizational structure. Two additional factors further limit consistent interaction with Parks Canada staff in Old Crow: one of the two full-time (0.8 time) community-based positions often requires technically trained personnel from outside the community, and two of the four community-based positions are seasonal. Moses observed reduced communication during the winter months, when seasonal employees work fewer hours, coinciding with a time when crucial communications, such as training opportunities, are most needed (Moses, pers. comm. October 2021). Williams explained, "Parks can go underground when they're beleaguered, when they don't have people in positions and they're trying to re-staff... You just kind of forget they're there" (pers. comm. November 2021). Many participants noted an overall decline in communications and outreach in recent years, which was attributed to COVID-19 restrictions and 2012 federal budget cuts.

> There's no involvement. No highlights of all that has gone on over the years. They used to give updates to the community but ever since I left... I haven't heard of anything given back to the community on what they find.
>
> E. Schafer, pers. comm. November 2021

Numerous participants held a shared view that Parks Canada should prioritize re-establishing clear and regular communication as a means of enhancing relationships and collaboration with community members. As an illustration, some participants recommended that Parks Canada should concentrate on its involvement in the local school. One participant, Josie, emphasized that "we have to make available more info on the Park … we need a better way to tell the story of what's out there in [school] curriculum" (pers. comm. November 2021).

E. Schafer, reflecting on his previous visits to the community's lone school while wearing his Parks Canada uniform, recalled, "they [the children] sat right beside me and they'd want to know if it was really me!" He argued that these kinds of interactions show young people that Parks Canada is dedicated to "protecting your community, protecting your future, or your younger people" (E. Schafer, pers. comm. November 2021).

Dialogic Processes

Participants emphasized that trust and respect between Parks Canada and VGFN have been nurtured through ongoing dialogue, both in formal and informal settings, over time. This close proximity is facilitated by the fact that the North Yukon Renewable Resource Council and Parks Canada offices share the same hallway in the John Tizya building, directly across from the VGG offices. According to Kyikavichik, this arrangement allows for an almost daily understanding of each other's activities: "you almost know what's going on every day, what they're doing" (pers. comm. November 2021).

Parks Canada actively participates in renewable resource council meetings, seeks input from the VGG heritage branch for their projects, and engages in regular consultations with VGG, as noted by Jacqueline Menzies (pers. comm. November 2021). This involvement, at times maybe perceived as extensive, but, as Peter noted, it is done "with the right intention—out of respect" (pers. comm. November 2021). According to McDonald, head of the Vuntut National Park's management team, their approach has always been to put community first. He acknowledged, however, that "Where we [Parks] have fallen short, we've been kind of prodded, you know, in a respectful manner" (pers. comm. November 2021). McDonald also highlighted that disagreements or differing points of view are expressed with due consideration: "It doesn't mean that we always agree on everything. But … when there are disagreements or different points of view, I find these get expressed in a positive and constructive manner." McDonald also noted that these face-to-face interactions, which require Parks Canada's presence in the community, occur just as frequently in casual settings like the co-op or airport, providing spaces for discussions to unfold on their own terms.

Participants shared examples of how co-management has fostered a culture of shared learning and trust building through ongoing dialogue. One pivotal example was establishing open communication channels after the park's inception, allowing for a collective understanding of Parks Canada's role in the community. This was particularly crucial in the co-development of the Vuntut National Park's Ecological Monitoring Program, which respects and complements local Indigenous Knowledge. Kyikavichik

recalled, "When [Parks Canada] first started there wasn't that much patrol because they really didn't know what we wanted them to do" (pers. comm. November 2021). Following the 2007–08 International Polar Year, numerous ecological research projects came to the territory. According to McDonald, at the request of VGG and the North Yukon Renewable Resource Council, Parks Canada agreed to continue supporting and leading the permafrost and lake monitoring programs (McDonald, pers. comm. November 2021). McDonald said this aligns with Vuntut National Park's management objective to "design a program that is guided by the land claim and that stays true to the reasons for creating the park in the first place." According to Menzies, this program has demonstrated Parks Canada's ability to actively listen to the VGFN and their profound knowledge of the land (pers. comm. November 2021). Kyikavichik expressed hope that this program has also served to educate Parks Canada about the value of respecting Indigenous Knowledges. He stated that, "maybe the information that they're getting is starting to open their eyes and say, yeah... Indigenous people are correct about some of the changes and what's happening around us" (pers. comm. November 2021).

Furthermore, open dialogue has proven instrumental in resolving conflicts stemming from differing approaches and understandings between VGFN and Parks Canada. In one instance, there was disagreement over youth participation in park excursions due to liability concerns raised by Parks Canada authorities. This was met with strong opposition from the community. Williams recalled this as a pivotable moment when the Parks Canada superintendent had to look beyond the confines of Parks Canada and recognize the importance of intergenerational involvement for VGFN. As Williams put it: "…and that was the end of that. He was educated by the people around the table" (pers. comm. November 2021).

Certain participants emphasized the pressing need for more frequent and purposeful dialogue when it comes to developing collaborative strategies to bolster the community's connection to Crow Flats. Moses advocates for strengthening Parks Canada's relationship with the community; it "could be built up stronger, so we have more young people interested in working for Parks, our own people, on the land as monitors or something out in the park" (pers. comm. October 2021). She voiced a desire for even greater co-operation, suggesting,

> The co-operation has been good, but I'd like to see more… They could make suggestions too; 'Gee, would heritage [branch] be interested in working together, maybe we could have a big camp in Crow Flats in the springtime? Can we both come together and work on this, and get some of our community members out? I'd like to hear that and see that and see the end product too.

Both Moses and Kyikavichik expressed regret that the community's youth have not been participating in Parks Canada's activities on the land, such as patrols, as they once did. Moses also urged her community to take the initiative in engaging with Parks Canada and seeking support for these opportunities, emphasizing, "They know the land … so they're needed out there" (Moses, pers. comm. October 2021). Participants Moses, Sophia Flather, and Kyikavichik underscored the importance of involving various segments of the community, including Elders, youth, and women, at all stages of planning and implementation in these projects.

Principles of Co-management as an Ethical Space of Engagement

Respect for Equal Partnership: Every participant emphasized the importance of treating VGFN as a full and equal partner in co-management, a principle they say has been consistently upheld in various ways throughout the co-management process. Many participants highlighted the pivotal role of the Final Agreement in establishing the foundation for this relationship. As E. Schafer pointed out, "It will work if they follow it. Right in the headlines is your partnership with VGG. You know who to point at right away" (pers. comm. November 2021). However, while the Final Agreement did establish a legal framework for co-management, it did not explicitly define VGG's role in terms of Vuntut National Park's management. This necessitated a process of mutual learning and trust-building between co-managers. As Williams explained, "Parks Canada really had to make sure that they were linking in with VGG. So, you know, early staff started doing that and that continued. So those conduits are there, but it wasn't officially in the land claim" (pers. comm. November 2021). Josie, who is director of natural resources for VGG, concurred that the decision making relationship lacked clarity initially: "You know, we had to rely on each other to manage the park." This involved a process of learning-by-doing that took place "on the ground … by taking Parks Canada staff out there" (pers. comm. November 2021). The eventual development of the first management plan, which included multiple rounds of community workshops, represented a pivotal stage in building relationships and creating a shared vision for the park. This also enhanced VGG's comprehension of how the management of Vuntut National Park aligns with federal policy, according to Josie (pers. comm. November 2021). Demonstrating this respect between partners, Parks Canada has never made a decision concerning the park's management without the consent of VGG, said Kyikavichik, who noted that, otherwise, "it wouldn't go down right" (pers. comm. November 2021).

Fundamental to this form of respect is recognition of VGFN's jurisdiction, which is vital for ethical engagement as it acknowledges its rights and responsibilities regarding access to, and continued use of, the Crow Flats. This respect is rooted in the provisions of the Final Agreement. During land claims negotiations in the 1980s, when federal negotiators introduced national park legislation in response to increased community demands for Category A land protection (which includes surface and mineral rights, in

contrast to Category B protection, where the First Nation retains surface rights only), the concept of a national park was met with resistance from the community:

> We really didn't know what it meant at the time. But you know, we talked about it and the Elders asked all their questions: 'Can we still go in there and hunt? Can we still go in there and trap?'
>
> Kyikavichik, pers. comm. November 2021

Through ongoing discussions, VGFN successfully negotiated an agreement that aligned with their community's envisioned relationship with the state. As Kyikavichik remarked, "Canada listened" (pers. comm. November 2021), and VGFN was content with the resulting agreement. E. Schafer explained the significance: "The Elders, that no longer exists with us, they wanted to protect the Crow Flats because Crow Flats is one of the main sources of harvesting, you know?" (pers. comm. November 2021). Kyikavichik echoed this sentiment and explained that "Parks was supportive of our people at that time. It's not to tell us that we can't do these things. More or less, it was protection of this very important area for life. So, we're happy with that" (pers. comm. November 2021). Moses added that "Some VGFN families still visit camps that are in the park in the spring—they just use it as they've always used it" (pers. comm. October 2021). This mutual respect is further exemplified by Kyikavichik's viewpoint that the Parks Canada uniform not only signifies protection and enforcement, but also grants wearers the right to travel within the Park, ensuring that they are aware of all activities taking place (pers. comm. November 2021).

However, both community members and Parks Canada staff identified a greater need for candid discussion regarding the changes required to address Parks Canada's colonial legacy. Menzies noted that this legacy underlies tensions related to shared decision-making within the community (Menzies, pers. comm. November 2021). As Peter noted, while each park is allowed to forge its own relationships, "at the same time, the national body still has an overarching bureaucratic framework" (pers. comm. November 2021). Similarly, Flather expressed concern about Parks Canada's presence on VGFN homeland and its implications for reconciliation. She articulated that "These parks become part of the Canadian identity... so, when you start claiming things as Canadian, it takes away from Indigenous people" (pers. comm. March 2022). While Flather acknowledges the value of protection, particularly in light of ongoing oil and gas exploration in the region, she also remarked:

> There's a lot of strings attached and there's a lot of rules there for us to get protections. So, I don't see it at all as reconciliation... if they wanted reconciliation, they would just put that land in our name again and then see how they could help out.
>
> pers. comm. March 2022

Other participants were keenly aware of the practical and immediate consequences stemming from these power dynamics. For instance, the responsibilities of Vuntut National Park management towards the federal agency requires local park managers to adhere to top-down directives or policies, which can sometimes clash with mutually respectful practices. Alterations in policy to Parks Canada's management planning process after budget cuts in 2012 effectively eliminated the tangible workplan component of the management plan. Williams underscored the difficulty of having this critical component removed, as the community and partners now need to develop their own workplan using their own resources (pers. comm. November 2021). Furthermore, the top-down approach of Parks Canada policy introduces bureaucratic hurdles into community operations. As Menzies pointed out, referencing past disputes regarding regulations around firearm use during Parks Canada field visits and the rights of VGFN citizens to harvest within park boundaries, the policy framework and conservation approach of Parks Canada, tailored for southern parks, often overlook or complicate the unique requirements of remote northern national parks. Menzies noted that this southern bias calls for a re-evaluation and adaptation: "You figure out your own way of doing it, because it doesn't work here" (pers. comm. November 2021).

Respect for Indigenous Knowledges: The second foundational principle for community engagement was respect for Indigenous ways of knowing. Central to this has been the joint excursions onto the land, which bring together VGFN and Parks Canada practices of stewardship, while involving all segments of the community, from youth to Elders. Both Flather and Moses concurred on the significance of these visits, viewing them as a crucial service provided by Parks Canada that not only reinforces Vuntut Gwitchin cultural values, but also fosters respect across different knowledge systems. Flather emphasized that the true value of these park visits lies in "having people out there more, which is really good monitoring" (pers. comm. March 2022). She further noted, "I don't like to call it science because science misses a lot of stuff—but I like that kind of monitoring where you're keeping cultural skills going and keeping people trapping" (pers. comm. March 2022).

Several participants proposed that stewardship roles for community members serve as a key mechanism for cultivating respect across knowledge systems and offering a generative potential for cross-cultural engagement. These roles include positions like the First Nation liaison officer or VGFN park wardens. A competent liaison officer, aware of safety concerns in the bush, plays a pivotal role in facilitating land-based trips and creates significant opportunities for community engagement (Flather, pers. comm. March 2022). Reflecting on how wardens help bridge the knowledge systems of Parks Canada and Vuntut Gwitchin, Moses explained, "they already have their traditional knowledge. They came with their traditional knowledge of the land, and Parks Canada trained them on

specifics on what they had to do in the Park." Peter recalled numerous instances of cross-cultural learning experiences during his past employment at Parks Canada. Numerous collaborative projects afforded him the opportunity to view both VGFN and Parks Canada perspectives, allowing him "to step outside of the Parks [Canada] world" (pers. comm. November 2021). Furthermore, he noted that "Parks has the power and the resources to give people opportunities to get their foot in the door and get some background experience." Various VGFN community members who initially worked with Parks Canada as summer students through VGG or held positions in the park as resource management technicians and First Nation liaison officers have gone on to forge successful careers in both First Nation and Crown government contexts.

However, efforts toward achieving an equitable balance between the knowledge systems of VGFN and Parks Canada through co-management have encountered challenges. Under Vuntut National Park management's fragmented organizational structure, Parks Canada's operations in the community are effectively limited to ecological monitoring, with inconsistent employment of VGFN members (Peter, pers. comm. November 2021). Other challenges are more circumstantial; former Vuntut National Park employees Menzies and Peter lamented a lack of compatibility with Parks Canada's bureaucratic systems, which rely on reliable internet, something not yet available in Old Crow.

A significant issue raised by several participants regarding respect for Indigenous Knowledges is Parks Canada's narrow focus, or tunnel vision, around the park itself as the primary site for community engagement. As Peter explained, "The park, being at the northern extent of the Crow Flats, is not visited very frequently anymore… so, the relevance is kind of going away" (pers. comm. November 2021). In addition to acknowledging the cost of park visits, Peter suggested that a focus on the park can lose sight of the bigger picture: "the real meaning [of Vuntut National Park], it's in Old Crow." Instead of attending so much to the park itself, he suggested, Parks Canada "can do something more affordably with less resources in the community that's promoting Vuntut Gwitchin culture," engaging a broader audience (pers. comm. November 2021). E. Schafer also proposed that "Parks should work with the community and children again. Sewing, beading, crafting… lots to do." This could be facilitated through established channels. For instance, Parks Canada funded the VGG's heritage branch for a major multi-year oral history project from 1999 to 2004, which involved taking Elders out on the land for interviews (Williams, pers. comm. November 2021). Williams noted that this aspect of the Final Agreement has been upheld over time, despite reduced financial contributions. "Parks Canada goes through the same process that any researcher would go through to access oral history. And they've also been really supportive of helping the community to document and to have that information" (Williams, pers. comm. November

2021). Liaison officer Frost envisions more frequent community gatherings celebrating Vuntut Gwitchin culture, such as Caribou Days, fostering cross-cultural understanding and contributing to relationship building (pers. comm. November 2021).

While bridging knowledge systems was a focus of interviews, participants also highlighted the benefits of dividing roles in service of building respect between knowledge systems and creating an adaptive co-management arrangement. Notably, several participants viewed Parks Canada's Ecological Monitoring Program, as enhancing the community's ability to adapt to climate change. In the words of Colton Schafer: "Parks Canada and Vuntut National Park—it's their job to monitor the park, the land, and see the changes … climate change has a big impact on our community and our land because we're so up North" (pers. comm. November 2021). This is somewhat challenged by Parks Canada's siloed approach to ecological monitoring, which has resulted in limited ability for Vuntut National Park management to adapt to community priorities, such as recent interest in salmon monitoring, which requires monitoring outside of park boundaries (Menzies, pers. comm. November 2022). However, Josie, while recognizing the limitations of their bureaucratic approach, believes Parks Canada is well positioned to provide the community with valuable information about environmental change. Similarly, as Kyikavichik explains, Vuntut Gwitchin spend a lot of time on the land in the wintertime and spring, but Parks Canada is able to complement Vuntut Gwitchin knowledge by being on the land during other times, such as summer. "That's a benefit to us. They bring good, first-hand information … It's helped me to be confident that if anything changes, somebody is going to know, quickly" (Kyikavichik, pers. comm. November 2021). Furthermore, Parks Canada gives the community access to other government partnerships, networks, and agencies to pursue responses to such changes (Josie, pers. comm. November 2021).

People-land Relationships: Participant perspectives underscore the central importance of nurturing and deepening the community's relationship with the land. Peter expressed concerns about the growing disconnect between his people and the land, worrying that solely "talking about how things used to be" could reduce the Crow Flats to an abstract concept. "I think the most meaningful thing is getting people out to the park" (pers. comm. November 2021).

Across the board, participants noted the ongoing cultural shift in the community and the unprecedented rates of ecological and geomorphological change. These factors have led to reduced interaction with the park and the Crow Flats, prompting concerns among many in the community about their youth's connection to land. The community collaborates with various organizations and researchers to oversee and monitor the Porcupine Caribou herd, which has been arriving later each year, as well as changes to fish populations in the rivers, and landslide events on

the increasingly drier Crow River, all of which restricts access to the Crow Flats and the Park (The Firelight Group and Vuntut Gwitchin Government, 2018). E. Schafer emphasizes that the well-being of his community is intrinsically linked to the land:

> People—you know, when I say people, I include myself because we're all in the same boat together—are having tough time with each other. But how are you going to fix that? The well-being is where you've got to start from. From out there on the land.
>
> pers. comm. November 2021

Having people on the land is not only vital for community well-being, but also fulfills important responsibilities to the land itself. According to Moses, "Most people have said that Crow Flats are really lonesome right now. Because it doesn't see people, people don't go out much. They need to bring it back to life again, just by their presence out there" (pers. comm. October 2021). Collaborative projects that encourage people to be on the land can have far-reaching benefits that go beyond park management. "I feel that our engagement with that area has gone down… but that's not necessarily because of parks. It's because of a lot of different things. But Parks could definitely help in that area" (Flather, pers. comm. March 2022). According to Peter, Parks Canada can play a significant role in supporting this re-connection:

> By getting people to the park, you're rebuilding their connection with the land and rebuilding Parks Canada's connection with the community and breaking down those systems that were in place to break people's connections with culture and language.
>
> pers. comm. November 2021

Kyikavichik also views the park as a place for education and healing from the impacts of colonialism on his community. He emphasizes that while he can share stories of what took place, it is in the Crow Flats "where you can heal… Nobody can't touch you. If you're Vuntut Gwitchin nobody can tell you anything, you just go there and you stay there. It's your right. Nobody can take it away from you" (pers. comm. November 2021).

While there are practical barriers to park visits, such as expenses for helicopter fuel, past superintendents have demonstrated adaptability to community values. Flather sees Parks Canada's bureaucratic procedures as a significant restriction to VGFN's ability to practice their culture in Vuntut National Park. For instance, harvesting during Parks Canada–supported excursions is only permitted in emergencies, which conflicts with VGFN rights in the park (S. Flather, pers. comm. March 2022). Other participants noted similar incompatibilities arising from bureaucratic obstacles, such as Parks Canada's reluctance to involve youth in a park excursion due to liability concerns or conflicting regulations regarding VGFN's firearm usage

during Park visits. Drawing on personal experience, Peter believes that "Parks [Canada] can have a big impact on people's lives if they're taking the lead and getting people out on the land, but there are often more roadblocks in place than there is support" (pers. comm. November 2021). Due to these shortcomings, Flather suggested that community members prefer to engage in Crow Flats visits through their own government, allowing them to operate without the same restrictions; "they don't have to go by the same rules … and they're able to do things that they've been able to do their whole life" (pers. comm. March 2022). Consequently, some participants proposed that other governance structures created under the Final Agreement, such as the Vuntut Gwitchin heritage branch, have taken precedence over the roles that Parks Canada might have otherwise assumed. "[Vuntut Gwitchin] employs a lot more people, has a way bigger budget, and has way more projects going on … projects that people can actually participate in" (Peter, pers. comm. November 2021). In essence, there appears to be a diminishing expectation regarding the extent to which Parks Canada should involve itself in supporting the strengthening of community relationships with the land.

DISCUSSION

Examining co-management through the lens of an ethical space framework offers an alternative perspective to the conventional critiques of co-management. By exploring participant perspectives on engagement rooted in dialogic processes and community-based principles of co-management, we identified factors that either facilitate or hinder the governance dynamics of co-management in northern national parks.

The findings suggest that adopting an ethical space lens serves as a valuable tool for bolstering existing co-management relationships by establishing clear expectations for how engagement should be conducted. However, it's important to recognize that this study may not fully capture the practical applications of ethical space that Nikolakis and Hotte (2021) describe as an ongoing process. Ethical space is not an automatic occurrence, but rather requires, "a conscious decision to move into this space; to be open to learning new knowledge systems of knowing, being, seeing and doing" (Laurila, 2019:94). According to Blackfoot Elder and former Chief of Piikuni First Nation, Reg Crowshoe, the decision to embrace ethical space necessitates the active participation of all parties.

Notwithstanding the importance of intent, there is merit in subjecting existing co-management arrangements to an ethical space perspective. While ethical space may not have directly guided the management of Vuntut National Park, the results indicate that Parks Canada and VGFN have already attained, and have further potential to achieve, a high level of governance vitality through a problem-solving process that incorporates many of the same principles

and processes, both existing and desired, as those found in ethical space literature (Borrini-Feyerabend and Hill, 2015). It is worth noting that while ethical space doesn't necessitate a formalized co-management arrangement, such an agreement can establish the expectations for engaging ethical space (Littlechild and Sutherland, 2021). Conversely, the study underscores the risk of co-management perpetuating colonial relationships and disparities in the absence of a guiding framework for respectful engagement. As socio-ecological systems are in a perpetual state of flux, conservation strategies must be adaptable (Gavin et al., 2018). "The learning-by-doing that is necessary for adaptive governance will require developing indicators and an appropriate evidence base" (Gavin et al., 2018:8). As such, we hope that our study offers insights into social and organizational indicators for a specific park, thereby contributing to our understanding of how ethical space can be applied in the context of remote northern national parks, where relationships between co-managers and the community are inherently transitory. For example, a crucial factor for building relationships in the co-management of Vuntut National Park is Parks Canada's active presence and consistent face-to-face interactions in the community, which is constrained by various factors, including the organizational structure and funding limitations of the national park.

Our ethical space lens also provided a deeper understanding of the evolving localized processes and engagement principles at work over time in the relationship between Parks Canada and VGFN. For instance, the emphasis placed by VGFN participants on Parks Canada's community engagement practices aligns with previous research by Jacobson et al. (2016), in which they argued that a mature and successful co-management arrangement for northern national parks needs robust community involvement and ultimately, a shift in management focus from the park towards the community. Given that deep community engagement isn't explicitly outlined in the Final Agreement and is not readily apparent in existing management practices, this may suggest a persistent misunderstanding, by both parties, regarding the role of co-management between VGFN and Parks Canada. This issue has been previously highlighted in research on northern national parks (Fenge, 1993). According to the model presented in Zurba et al. (2012), the ongoing process responsible for cultivating and nurturing relationships through co-management may encounter obstacles due to the limited community engagement. This limitation could be attributable to Vuntut National Park's organizational structure and challenges in employee retention. Recent co-management agreements have incorporated contributions and support for capacity-building to sustain robust community engagement and leadership, as exemplified by the Indigenous Guardian programs (Ndahecho Gondié Gháádé, 2022).

The Final Agreement has served as a crucial framework for the ongoing protection of Vuntut National Park and provides the legal framework for its co-operative management. It has tasked VGFN and Parks Canada with collaboratively establishing a mutually satisfactory decision making relationship. Participants' feedback indicates that a genuine sharing of de facto decision making authority been realized in practice along with a community sense of ownership over Vuntut National Park. This contrasts sharply with the limitation on authority often seen in some co-management arrangements where Indigenous peoples are frequently confined to advisory roles (Nadasdy, 2005; Sandlos, 2014). This reinforces Nesbitt's (2016) argument that advisory co-management boards under land claims do not preclude the potential for consensus-based decision-making that recognizes and values Indigenous governance and legal systems. For instance, the community-initiated Ecological Monitoring Program presents a stark departure from earlier instances of co-management in the north, where Canada frequently made unilateral decisions (Rodon, 1998). Another finding diverging from previous studies on northern co-management boards is the significant representation of women currently engaged in Vuntut National Park management (Staples, 2014). While this incidental finding is of interest, a more comprehensive research effort is needed to make culturally appropriate conclusions regarding gender and protected-area management in Old Crow. Conversely, the findings also suggest that successful and equitable co-management arrangements may not always appear entirely symmetrical between First Nations and Parks Canada in day-to-day operations; one party may be better suited and interested in fulfilling specific roles and responsibilities (George et al., 2004; Ross et al., 2009). Indeed, the co-management relationship is partly characterized by strategic exchange, as evidenced by VGFN's having gained ecological monitoring capacity, and by joint organization, which is reflected in the joint decision making arrangement regarding Vuntut National Park (Carlsson and Berkes, 2005).

The case study also underscores, however, that while power-sharing in co-management may undergo transformation (Carlsson and Berkes, 2005), it seldom extends to the realm of joint policy-making (Pinkerton, 2019). Addressing bureaucratic and structural impediments to the attainment of full and equal partnerships is imperative to fortifying VGFN's connections to the park. Otherwise these factors might inadvertently deter VGFN from engaging with Parks Canada. Essentially, Parks Canada must enact policies that align with the specific realities of northern Indigenous contexts and meet the expectations of their Indigenous partners. This should, at a minimum, encompass a genuine respect for Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, which could be manifested through actions like adapting regulations and budgets to support Elder–youth initiatives and amending policy to fully acknowledge harvesting rights during Parks Canada field visits (e.g., the use of firearms). Moreover, the findings point to a stagnation in Parks Canada's policy approaches to the management of northern national parks.

A report from 2001 highlighted challenges related to the advancement of co-operative management in the context of northern national park management (Canada, 2001). These challenges primarily revolved around issues of funding, capacity constraints, and a lack of recognition among Parks Canada appointees that Indigenous partners considered themselves as full and equal participants in the decision making process (Government of Canada, 2001). Although this study and others (White, 2020) suggest that power-sharing issues may be partially mitigated in established co-management relationships, there hasn't been a corresponding adjustment of legislative powers, while significant constraints on funding and capacity persist, as previously noted (Sandlos, 2014).

Regarding respect for Indigenous Knowledges, the study uncovers an intriguing insight concerning the potential of bridging actors (i.e., community employees) in fostering trust between the community and Parks Canada. Research suggests that the presence of bridging actors "helps overcome scepticisms, builds credibility, and develops shared understanding among heterogeneous actor groups" (Lakshmisha and Thiel, 2022:16). This recognition of bridging actors also underscores the importance of adopting a two-eyed seeing approach to national park co-management (Bartlett et al., 2012). However, in the absence of community engagement, the findings showed that Parks Canada has a tendency to default to a predominantly Western scientific approach to ecological monitoring overseen by distant managers residing outside the community. This approach fails to align, at least on the surface, with the principles of ethical space, which should ensure that "one knowledge system does not subsume the other" or embrace two-eyed seeing (Nikolakis and Hotte, 2021:4). The disengagement of the community from Parks Canada as a result of this tendency could potentially have far-reaching impacts on the equilibrium of co-management, which could, in turn, undermine Parks Canada's overarching commitment to stewardship practices rooted in shared knowledge systems.

Recurring themes in the interviews underscored VGFN's community-first perspective. As noted by Jacobson et al. (2016:17), who investigated a similar co-management arrangement for Auyuittuq National Park with Pangnirtumiut, VGFN contemplates "how the park might contribute to their community, rather than how they might contribute to the park." The pronounced emphasis on fortifying the community's connections to the Crow Flats underscores the significance of a cultural values–based approach, as described by Dietsch et al. (2021), which acknowledges inherent jurisdiction and Indigenous rights in collaborative conservation endeavours. Engaging with the cultural values and relationships of the community to land can enhance resonance and relevance of conservation within the community (Infield et al., 2018). However, conservation agencies, including Parks Canada, frequently grapple with insufficient funding and capacity to undertake extensive engagement and to sustain communications with community members (Infield et al., 2018). The fact that ecological monitoring has become the primary raison d'être for Parks Canada's presence in the community suggests that community engagement and relationship building may hold a lower priority for Parks Canada than its national mandate to maintain ecological integrity. As Mortimer-Sandilands (2009) argued, the concept of ecological integrity has its roots in a nationalist rhetoric that attempts to unify national parks by rendering consistent the rationale for their existence. By extension, we would argue, this rhetoric may downplay the distinct goals of Indigenous communities involved in park management. However, it is challenging to ascertain whether the adaptation seen in Vuntut National Park stems from joint decision-making under limited resources, or signifies a broader failure at various levels within Parks Canada to acknowledge the significance of relationship building in establishing sustainable and equitable co-management arrangements.

Indeed, while adaptive co-management is generally viewed as a positive progression, this study reveals that certain aspects of the co-management arrangement, notably Parks Canada's governance framework and Vuntut National Park's bureaucratic management structure, have triggered a negative shift in interrelationships, especially regarding community interaction. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that the dynamics between individual parks and their respective field units may pose challenges similar to those arising from tensions between local and national levels within national park management structures when engaging Indigenous communities (Carter, 2010; Thomlinson and Crouch, 2012; Johnston and Mason, 2020). Future studies examining the impact of the park–field unit dynamic on community-based relationships would benefit from more extensive engagement with senior management, which was a notable gap in this study. Another potential explanation for this disconnect may lie in VGFN's active involvement in other co-management arrangements. This includes the Porcupine Caribou Management Board, which deals with critical issues related to the future management of the caribou herd in light of significant changes in its migratory patterns (Porcupine Caribou Management Board, 2022). The noted decline in community expectations for Parks Canada, an institution whose co-management institutions were not originally intended for crisis resolution, unlike others (Notzke, 1995), could imply that engaging with Parks Canada holds a lower priority for a community grappling with complex socio-environmental challenges, such as those addressed by the Porcupine Caribou Management Board.

CONCLUSION

As Indigenous thought leaders and scholars have asserted, ethical space represents just one stride towards the re-Indigenization of biodiversity conservation, offering the promise of "meaningful reconciliation

and reestablishment of reciprocal relationships with 'all our relations', M'sɨt No'kmaq" (M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., 2021:860). While the VGFN Final Agreement may reflect historical understandings of Indigenous rights, examining Indigenous-state relationships through the lens of ethical space unveils the potential for co-management arrangements to move beyond patriarchal, Eurocentric approaches. This study suggests that claims-based co-management agreements, both old and new, may furnish a solid foundation for ethical space engagement as a process, under the right conditions. In the words of Mi'kmaq Elder Albert A. Marshall, applying ethical space in research offers an opportunity to contemplate "how we got here, but what's missing, and what needs to be included if everyone will be moving in the future" (M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., 2021).

The transient nature of relationships between co-managers and the community, as observed in this study, fundamentally challenges the notion of co-management as an ethical space of engagement conducive to reconciliation. This transience underscores the need for dynamic and continuous engagement, as emphasized by Danika Littlechild (CRP et al., 2020). Revisiting the definition of reconciliation proposed by Littlechild et al. (2021) our findings suggest that while claims-based co-management may provide a solid foundation for renewing relationships in established national parks through the formulation of governance and management approaches rooted in community-based principles, attaining ethical space within the framework of co-management, conducive to Indigenous–state reconciliation, will ultimately require a new approach from Parks Canada (Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018; Laurila, 2019).

What we've learned through the ethical space lens is that the introduction of claims-based co-management has indeed shifted the power dynamic in national park governance and secured greater protection of Indigenous homelands. However, supporting the process of reconciliation through co-management of protected areas is untenable unless the Government of Canada makes substantial amendments to underlying legislature and policy. These changes should relinquish power and allow Indigenous peoples to make decisions and engage in conservation on their own terms, while respecting their rights to self-determination. Likewise, the effective implementation of ethical space across the national park system will ultimately demand systemic institutional and policy changes at various levels. This entails a reevaluation of national park governance to genuinely accomodate Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being, which have historically been side-lined by current systems and structures (Littlechild and Sutherland, 2021:5).

The Vuntut National Park story illustrates changes need to facilitate deep community engagement and contribute to the strengthening and rebalancing of human-nature relationships across existing national parks. This transformation necessitates a radical shift in how Parks Canada understands its responsibilities towards, and relationships with, Indigenous peoples. While all national parks would likely benefit from such a re-imagining, claims-based national park co-management agreements can play a uniquely important role in sustaining the vitality of Indigenous stewardship, particularly in northern region facing escalating impacts from climate change (Berkes and Armitage, 2011; Infield et al., 2018). They may serve as one pathway in "recognizing settler responsibilities to honour Indigenous ways of being and to restore reciprocal relations between people and the land" (M'sit No'kmaq et al., 2021:860).

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