

# Pandemic Impacts on Rural Recreation in Carcross, Yukon



This research was conducted on the traditional territory of the Carcross/Tagish First Nation in the community of Carcross by the World Leisure Centre of Excellence at Vancouver Island University in collaboration with the Recreation & Parks Association of the Yukon over the Summer of 2022.



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## Definitions

**Modified world café** is an approach used to collect data from participants, allowing them to review the answers already provided by others. It typically resembles a series of simultaneous focus groups, each focusing on a different topic. Participants move from table to table until they have addressed all the discussion topics. The approach used in this study included writing several questions on poster boards and inviting drop-in participants to review the previous answers before adding their own.

**Participatory rural appraisal (PAR)** is a research approach that engages residents in the processes used to inform policies, procedures, and programs. It can include several data collection methods but most often includes qualitative approaches that allow community members to share their voices.

**"Recreation** is the experience that results from freely chosen participation in physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance individual and community wellbeing" (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association/Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council, 2015). The research team approached this project with the above perspective on recreation.

Figure 1: Carcross Desert



## Abbreviations

**CRB** – Carcross Recreation Board

**CTFN** – Carcross/Tagish First Nation

**RPAY** – The Recreation & Parks Association of the Yukon

**SARB** – Sport and Recreation Branch

**SKLAC** – South Klondike Local Advisory Committee

**VIU** – Vancouver Island University

**WLCE** – World Leisure Centre of Excellence

**YG** – Yukon Government

Figure 2: Haa Shagoon Hall



## Introduction

This report presents the preliminary findings of the August 2022 community engagement process that focused on recreation as a vehicle for pandemic recovery in Carcross, Yukon. Located on the traditional territory of the Carcross/Tagish First Nation (CTFN), the community of Carcross is approximately a one-hour drive from the capital city of Whitehorse. With an average age of 45 years, the age profile of the 460 Carcross residents matched the general population of the Yukon ([Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2023](#)). In addition, the [2021 Census](#) revealed that of the 229 households in Carcross, approximately 74% were owned by residents living in the community.

This study was conducted as part of a larger project by researchers from the World Leisure Centre of Excellence (WLCE) at Vancouver Island University (VIU) in collaboration with the Recreation & Parks Association of the Yukon (RPAY) with funding from the Government of Yukon (YG). Carcross was included at the request of the YG Sport and Recreation Branch (SARB) to assist with future community recreation planning. As the team had previously received permission to conduct research within CTFN's traditional territory (from Beverly M. Sembsmoen A/Director of Governance), including the community in the schedule was possible. The South Klondike Local Advisory Council (SKLAC) also met with the lead researcher and endorsed the project. Unfortunately, only once they were in the community did researchers discover that the Carcross Recreation Board (CRB) had no prior knowledge of the engagement that was scheduled to take place in their community.

Two distinct but complementary purposes guided this project: (a) to better understand how the pandemic impacted residents of rural communities, how recreation is experienced and delivered in rural communities, and how recreation can be used for pandemic recovery, and (b) to provide insights to the YG Community Services for potential facility development and to the CRB and the SARB as part of a recreation planning process.

## Methods Used

This study used a participatory rural appraisal approach to engage residents and key stakeholders within the community. Prior to entering the community, permission and endorsement of the project were received from the Carcross/Tagish First Nation.

The team collected data on August 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> through three face-to-face interviews with seven residents representing the CRB and CTFN and through conversations with



community members using a modified world café process. Most of the community-level data were collected on August 23<sup>rd</sup> through the modified world café at a community BBQ hosted at Haa Shagoon (CTFN facility). Staff from RPAY and the SARB both attended, as did members of the CRB.

Questions for Carcross were altered slightly to ensure that data for community planning was collected. Specifically, questions regarding the design and programming of a *possible* new recreation facility were included. However, as these were formed at the request of the SARB, the researchers tried to stress that a facility was not guaranteed.

The SKLAC and SARB recruited participants for the BBQ/World Café through posters and social media (Facebook). As the WLCE team stayed in Carcross before data collection, word-of-mouth was also used to promote engagement. This proved very successful as there was a large turnout (determined by local representatives) and rich data was collected.

Detailed researcher notes, interview content, and data from the world café were explored using thematic analysis. The research team organized the preliminary findings into categories aligned with the questions. The final sections present conclusions and considerations from the broader thematic areas that emerged from the data.

## **Preliminary Findings**

WLCE researchers sorted their findings into broad categories aligned with the questions to address the research questions and to meet this project's dual purposes. The following sub-sections summarize what participants told the team about recreation and its delivery, current and future activity participation, the impacts of recreation and tourism, the pandemic impacts, and the role of recreation in recovery. The final section speaks to the role of recreation in pandemic recovery.

### **The Meaning of Recreation**

The residents of Carcross have a broad understanding of recreation that focuses on health and wellbeing, social connection, and time for youth and families, and also as something that results in positive and negative impacts on the land and community.

The negative impacts of recreation were mainly linked to tourism, including perceptions of limited local control, economic benefits only flowing to a few (i.e., businesses in the Carcross Commons), and negative impacts on natural resources and sacred spaces. In

addition, concerns about tourism, overtourism, and lack of local control related to tourism development emerged in several themes.

No specific activities were identified except traditional First Nations dancing and having fun on the land. This suggests that residents focused more on recreation outcomes, including health, social connections, and overall wellbeing.

### **Program Delivery**

Interviews revealed that programs offered or facilitated by the CRB (e.g., swimming, kids club, archery, volleyball, and pickleball) used community facilities like the pool, outdoor rink (paved), and beach volleyball courts. The CRB also had an informal agreement with the local school to use the gymnasium for youth and adult programs when possible. In addition, CTFN created and maintains biking trails and offers cultural programming (e.g., dance and harvesting) that some identified as necessary. However, the modified world café revealed that most recreation activities were self- or family-led.

### **Activity Participation**

Recreation participation in the community was focused on physical activities but only on some organized sports. Responses were sorted into three main categories: (1) outdoor activities (on-the-land); (2) indoor activities, and (3) daily life. While participants were asked to focus on participating in Carcross, several identified activities (or facilities) in Whitehorse. There was a limited reference to traditional sports (volleyball, pickle ball, and hockey) and it was noted that participation in some sports (e.g., hockey) required travelling to Whitehorse.

The participants most commonly identified on-the-land activities as those they participated in regardless of the season. For example, hunting, fishing, and camping were all identified as summer and winter activities, and berry picking/foraging was noted as a summer activity. Other outdoor summer pursuits include hiking, biking, watersports, pickleball, and swimming while winter activities include snowshoeing, skiing, and kick sledding.

Research participants indicated several indoor recreational activities in which they engaged. For example, the two activities identified for the summer were going to the gym and swimming at the pool. In the winter, residents participated in activities at the school (climbing and kids' night), did beading and crafts, and watched movies.

Gardening, berry picking, foraging, harvesting, hunting, fishing, and cutting wood can all be associated with personal/family care and recreational on-the-land activities. The socio-emotional and health benefits of such physical activities are well documented, and their enjoyable nature is evidenced by participants who listed them as “fun activities” and “physically active” pursuits.

Broader definitions of recreation also tend to include mentally engaging or relaxing activities versus only physically active ones. For example, a few study participants indicated they enjoyed sewing, beading, and watching movies. All activities fit within broader definitions and can be used to reduce social isolation and build community.

### **Desired Future Activities**

Despite being intensely focused on physically active recreation, participants identified a strong desire for greater diversity in programming should a new facility be built. Residents identified multi-use spaces suitable for playing board and card games, sewing, crafts, cooking, and art classes. In addition, space for indoor physical activities such as shuffleboard, yoga, weight room/gym, fitness classes, bingo, and martial arts were identified.

### **Potential Community Leadership**

With the addition of questions regarding the new facility, participants were not asked what activities they could lead, coach, or plan in the future. However, during the interviews, it became clear that Carcross is similar to other rural communities and depends on its strong core of volunteers to deliver recreation programming. While instructors and program leaders were occasionally brought in from Whitehorse, locals generally plan and run programs.

### **Existing Facilities and the Desire for a “New” Community Centre**

Carcross has abundant natural recreation spaces with limited local facilities for indoor recreation. The swimming pool was identified as an essential recreation space, but it is only open seasonally, as with most rural communities. Another community space (the curling rink) was identified as a past gathering spot; however, it was in disrepair, deemed unusable, and not worth fixing. As a result, the community needs more social gathering spaces for all ages.



At the request of SARB staff, the research team asked participants two questions about the yet-to-be-approved new recreation centre:

- (a) If Carcross gets a new recreation centre, what should it include?
- (b) If Carcross gets a new recreation centre, what activities would you like to do there?

Participants provided a wish list of recreation spaces with specific types of facilities (curling rink, indoor skating/hockey rink, and indoor playground) to multi-use facility features. Responses to both questions revealed a desire for diverse community spaces, including meeting rooms, a library, space for elders and youth to gather socially, and multipurpose rooms for dances, dinners, and family gatherings. Given the current lack of such spaces and the impacts of the pandemic on participants, these social spaces may be the most important.

### **COVID Impacts**

A few participants indicated that the pandemic and associated health restrictions did not significantly impact their lives. However, most identified its profound impact on their social-emotional wellbeing and overall mental health. Social isolation resulting from the ceasing of recreation and cultural gatherings was identified as the cause of poor mental health, disengaged youth, and increased substance abuse.

Financial impacts, loss of relationships, ongoing stress, and general exhaustion (mental, physical, and spiritual) were identified as pandemic impacts still being felt in August 2022. Unlike some communities in this project, community divisions related to vaccine mandates were not recognized as an issue in Carcross.

Some participants also noted that the reduction in tourists (international and regional) was a side benefit of the pandemic. These observations were predominantly linked to a decrease in tour buses (i.e., the number of buses and visitors) and the availability of local spaces for locals (e.g., beaches, the desert, and trails).

### **COVID Recovery**

Like many rural Yukon communities, Carcross is blessed with abundant outdoor recreation spaces important to residents before, during, and after the pandemic. As the Yukon emerges from the pandemic, these spaces will be of greater importance socially and economically. However, this project's preliminary results suggest that greater local

involvement and voice in the planning, promotion, and management of Carcross as a tourism destination and playground for Whitehorse is required.

Strong responses to the possibility of a new facility showed a deep local desire for social gathering spaces that allow Elders and older adults to connect and recreate, provide a safe and substance-free space for youth, and facilitate community members coming together. These spaces and associated activities have been shown to help overcome social isolation and mental health challenges while building social cohesion and capital.

### **Future of Recreation – Infrastructure**

The residents of Carcross want a new multi-purpose indoor facility; however, discussions with CRB members revealed minimal funds to operate existing facilities. Required chemicals and energy costs associated with the pool were identified as very expensive, and only funds for capital upgrades are available from YG. This significantly strains the volunteer board and its ability to manage and maintain facilities effectively.

The community of Carcross needs a multi-use and multi-generational gathering space that is accessible and welcome to all. Strong consideration must be given to the design and inclusion of spaces that may promote social inclusion more than physical activity. Additionally, alternative solutions to building facilities that are costly to operate and maintain should be considered for sports participation (e.g., dedicated bus service to the CGC in Whitehorse).

### **Conclusions**

Carcross is an outdoor playground that provides landscapes and natural resources for incredible opportunities for physically active recreation. The importance of these spaces and access to them was highlighted during the early days of the pandemic when non-residents were asked to stay away. The closing of the American border, limited cross-border domestic travel, and reductions in travel within the Yukon also reminded Carcross residents and CTFN land stewards (e.g., Natural Resources monitors and trail builders) what it was like to have greater access to local spaces. As tourism returns, monitoring its impact on local spaces and residents' ability to use and enjoy them is essential.

Social isolation resulting in substance abuse and reduced mental health was the most profound negative impact of the pandemic. Recreation, in all its forms, has been shown to help build social connections, social capital, and greater resilience; however, having a

space to gather is an essential part of this process. The CTFN has a beautiful space that was used for the World Café that holds the potential to be used for other large community gatherings. However, it is not an adequate replacement for a multi-use recreation centre. It is also an essential space for CTFN programs and events and may not be widely available.

## **Considerations**

The research team recognizes that: (a) this report is based on a community snapshot, (b) data collection was limited to those residents who attended the world café and were interviewed in August 2022, and (c) the timing of the research (end of the tourism season) can impact on perspectives on tourism. Therefore, the following are offered as considerations for future recreation planning in Carcross.

1. Efforts to (re)build community cohesion and reduce social isolation should be prioritized. This will likely require collaboration between the CRB and CTFN to access space.
2. Celebrate the work of volunteers in the community and look for ways to build additional capacity to deliver programs.
3. Construction of any new recreation facilities needs to include a fully developed and costed operations and maintenance plan as part of the feasibility study.
4. Construction of new recreation facilities should be multi-use, accessible, and include social gathering spaces suitable for different age groups.
5. Explore the creation of a local Tourism Advisory Board or engage the SKLAC in providing a voice to Tourism Yukon on promoting and developing tourism in Carcross.
6. Explore ways for the local community to receive more significant economic benefits from tourism while improving infrastructure to reduce ecological and social impacts (e.g., better waste management and monitoring carrying capacity/crowding).

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