

# Pandemic Impacts on Rural Recreation in Tagish, Yukon



This research was conducted on the traditional territory of the Carcross/Tagish First Nation in the community of Tagish 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

**Community Hall** is the name of the facility located in Tagish and includes the library facilities. This building is owned by Yukon Government and managed by the Tagish Community Association for the local community.

**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.

**Ball Field** refers to the large, cleared field adjacent to the Community Hall.

**Weekenders** is the name used for the cottagers that travel from Whitehorse on weekends/holidays.

**“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.

## **Abbreviations**

**CTFN** – Carcross/Tagish First Nation

**RCMP** – Royal Canadian Mounted Police

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

**SARB** – Sport and Recreation Branch

**TCA** – Tagish Community Association

**TCC** – Tagish Community Centre

**VIU** – Vancouver Island University

**WLCE** – World Leisure Centre of Excellence

**YG** – Yukon Government

## 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 the community of Tagish, Yukon. Located on the traditional territory of the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, the community of Tagish has approximately 310 residents who are older on average (55 years) than the general population of the Yukon (40 years). The [2021 Census](#) revealed that of the 413 households in Tagish, approximately 60% are second homes or cottages owned by non-permanent residents.

This study was conducted 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 financial support from Government of Yukon (YG). The WLCE team was supported by the Tagish Recreation Coordinator who provided space for the team at the monthly pancake breakfast as the site for community engagement. These preliminary findings are being shared with the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, the Tagish Community Association (TCA), RPAY and YG Sport and Recreation Branch.

This project was guided by two distinct but complementary purposes: (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 TCA as part of their 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 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> through face-to-face interviews with two community members and the recreation director and through conversations with community members at a modified world café process. Most of the community-level data were collected on August 21<sup>st</sup> through the world café at the community pancake breakfast that is typically held on the third Sunday of each month.

Recruitment of residents to the pancake breakfast/world café was done through social media notices and posting the information on the Community Centre sign (Figure 1)

and the facility's outdoor chalkboard. Organizers told us that the pancake breakfast was well attended (56 people); however, approximately 10 to 15 people were visitors or *Weekenders*.

Detailed researcher notes, interview content, and data from the world café were explored using thematic analysis. The preliminary findings are organized in categories that aligned with the questions asked. The final section, conclusions and considerations, are focused on broader thematic areas that emerged from the data.

Figure 1: Tagish Community Centre Road Sign & World Café Set-Up



## Preliminary Findings

To address the research questions, and to meet the dual purposes of this project, the data were sorted into broad categories that align with the questions asked. The following sub-sections provide summaries of what participants told the team about recreation and its delivery, current and future participation in recreation, the importance of the Community Centre (TCC) to Tagish, the impact of the pandemic on the community, and the role of recreation in recovery. The final section speaks to the existing facilities in the community, their current state of repair, and the role that they play in the future health and wellbeing of residents and the community.

## **The Meaning of Recreation**

When residents were asked about the meaning of recreation, results indicated that there is a broad understanding of recreation, focused mostly on the outcomes rather than activities. Fun, health, and wellbeing were mentioned as key aspects of recreation. Several respondents pointed out the importance of recreation for socializing, using it as a space to spend time with family and to meet people.

Participants in the research did not include sports, sports participation, or common forms of physical activity when speaking about the meaning of recreation. The only activities mentioned were related to nature-based activities; specifically, those related to fishing and wildlife. That was mirrored in responses to other questions, highlighting the importance of the outdoors and land-based activities for community members.

## **Program Delivery**

Delivery of recreation programming was greatly impacted by the pandemic as the TCC remained closed until spring 2022. It was noted that earlier attempts to open the TCC were very divisive due to pandemic-related public health mandates. It was clear that there were strong opinions about COVID-19 vaccines and the vaccine passport within the TCA and the community. This ultimately led to the decision to keep the TCC closed until vaccine passport rules were lifted by the Yukon Government.

The results suggest that youth were the focus of pre-pandemic programming and there were concerns that youth will continue to be the focus post-pandemic. A review of 2021 census results for Tagish showed that the community's population is older on average than the rest of the Yukon (55.0 years:39.9 years) and that 72% of the population is 35 years old or older (35.5% are 65+ years old).

## **Activity Participation**

Recreation participation in the community included several things that were sorted into three main categories: (1) outdoor activities (on-the-land); (2) indoor activities, and (3) diverse daily life. These activities were all found to have physical and/or mental benefits and, for some, social benefits as recreation was a space for connecting with family and friends.

Those (children and adults) who attended the pancake breakfast did not mention organized sport as part of how they engage in recreation. However, during interviews, participants stated that most sport programming was targeted at youth or young adults.

On-the-land activities were most commonly identified by participants and found to have the same benefits as sport and physically active recreation. Activities identified included horseback riding, snowmobiling, boating, dog activities (agility), gardening, running, hiking, quadding, fishing, snowshoeing, and skiing.

Indoor activities that research participants identified included reading, writing, watching movies, dancing, playing board games/video games, and crafts (painting, crochet). Although not all these activities offer the same benefits as sport, all foster mental wellbeing and some benefit physical health.

When asked about their physical activity, a diverse set of activities (weightlifting, hiking, mountain biking, dancing, walking, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, swimming, and walking) were mentioned. Residents noted how daily life in a rural community provided opportunities to be active with woodcutting, gardening, and housework contributing to overall health and wellbeing.

### **Desired Future Activities**

When asked the types of recreation programs and services they would like to see in the future, participants indicated the need for more scheduled activities and expanded operating hours for the TCC. Social events, such as the pancake breakfast, were perceived to be vital for all community members. Other interests included reading (better access to more books through an expanded library) as well as learning more about the Carcross-Tagish First Nation.

Conversations about facilities and maintaining community recreation infrastructure focused on ways to improve or possibly replace the TCC (e.g., adding windows for natural light, adding showers), expanding and maintaining trail systems (summer and winter), and enhancing outdoor spaces. Some participants noted that the addition of a concrete surface and roof to the outdoor rink could provide a multi-use community recreation space, while others suggested that an outdoor gathering space (large gazebo/picnic structure) could provide a somewhat weather-protected outdoor space that may not have been impacted by the vaccine mandate.

The expansion of on-the-land activities was also mentioned, with participants expressing an interest in better access to kayaking, to planned and maintained multi-purpose trails, and to dedicated ski tracks. Adult women in particular noted their



preference to expand trail systems to allow for dedicated and tracked trails in the winter and trails for non-motorized activities in the summer.

Figure 2: RPAY Welcome Table at the Tagish Community Centre



Figure 3: WLCE and RPAY staff with the Tagish Pancake Breakfast Team



## **Potential Community Leadership**

When asked about their willingness to engage with community members and organize recreational activities, respondents indicated the possibility of volunteering to offer activities such as cooking lessons, arts and crafts, as well as some outdoor activities such as skiing and dog training.

The general age of residents, the transient nature of many local property owners, and the lack of employment in the community were identified as barriers to engaging more community members in developing and leading programs. Some participants indicated that, although they would like to, they do not have free time to organize anything for the community.

## **Importance of the Community Centre**

The TCC was identified as the central gathering spot for the community and as such, it was viewed as being extremely important. Several residents and members of the TCA noted that the current building does not currently meet the needs of residents for recreation. The TCC is a modified Quonset Hut with no windows, an extremely small kitchen, and limited options for diverse programs. While the importance of the facility to the community was evident, participants also had several recommendations on how to improve the facilities.

While a few participants voiced the desire for a new facility, others noted additions or renovations that they would like made to the existing facility. Several people commented that windows would make the space more inviting and that expanding the library (an add-on portion of the building) would allow for more books. It was observed that the addition of washrooms, showers, and laundry facilities, accessible from the outside, would benefit local residents who live off the grid. Although covered outdoor spaces were seen as an opportunity to increase recreation programs, kitchen renovations and expansion were identified as a priority by TCA members and staff.

## **COVID Impacts**

Research participants indicated that COVID affected their ability to gather socially in the Community Centre for activities such as the monthly pancake breakfast and yoga classes. Limited social interaction was linked to negative mental health outcomes for many residents; however, some people indicated that they were used to being isolated as it was one of the reasons they enjoyed living in Tagish. People mentioned that, with

the lockdowns and mandates in place, they had more free time to just relax and engage in outdoor activities.

The most significant and commonly spoken-about impacts were related to the divisiveness of the pandemic-related public health measures. Several participants spoke about the separation between those who were vaccinated and those who were not. These divides were even more pronounced when Yukon Government required vaccine passports for indoor activities; a requirement that ultimately led to the decision to keep the TCC closed until the mandates were lifted.

### **COVID Recovery**

Preliminary analysis of the data revealed that the TCC is a central gathering space for residents, weekenders, and visitors. It was also determined that the monthly pancake breakfast was a beloved and vital, community-building event that should continue. Gatherings that bring residents together around meals were identified as a way to meet the social and nutritional needs of older adults within the community.

Building community unity and offering programs for those who live in the community (more adults and older adults than children) will be necessary for overall health and wellbeing. Due to the community's remoteness and its aging population, additional community services (e.g., transportation) may be beneficial.

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

The community of Tagish has a single, indoor public gathering space, the TCC. However, due to deep community divisions over vaccines, the TCA decided keep this facility closed until all residents could use it. In preparation for future public health emergencies, and to expand recreation offerings in the community, investments in outdoor facilities, such as improvements to the existing outdoor rink and constructing a picnic shelter, should be considered.

The importance of hunting and fishing (on-the-land activities) was highlighted by several participants. The Tagish River bridge spans the river that connects Marsh Lake and Tagish Lake. This structure was identified as a gathering spot for fishing. While there was no indication of the need for additional infrastructure, concerns were raised about the number of boats and the speed at which they travel through the river. Specifically, it was suggested that improved signage and enforcement of speed limits are needed for safety and to reduce erosion and damage to local wharfs.

## Conclusions

Tagish is similar to many rural communities with a small population and limited facilities. However, what sets Tagish apart is the abundance of outdoor opportunities and its proximity to Whitehorse. These two aspects combine to make Tagish a desirable community to live off the grid and to have a weekend cottage (i.e., a second home). The 2021 census revealed that 60% of homes in Tagish are owned by individuals who do not reside in the community; this impacts the services offered in the community.

The population of Tagish is older on average than other Yukon communities and the few children that live in Tagish spend a lot of their time in Carcross for school. Despite this, the majority of recreation programming and the focus of many study participants was on offering services for youth. Programming for adults, particularly those who were retired and live full-time in Tagish, currently seems limited to community pancake breakfasts and some coffee chats (pre-pandemic activity).

The pandemic had a significant impact on the community cohesion of Tagish. Strong divisions emerged around the issue of getting vaccinated and these divisions were magnified when vaccine passports were mandated. One potential solution for the future would be the creation of outdoor spaces, particularly covered outdoor spaces, which proved to be essential across Canada throughout the pandemic. Another option is to engage the whole community in planning that reimagines what recreation could look like in Tagish.

## Considerations

The research team recognizes that this report is based upon a snapshot of the community and that data collection was limited to those residents and weekenders who attended the pancake breakfast and were interviewed in August 2022. The following are offered for consideration for future recreation planning in Tagish.

1. Efforts to (re)build community cohesion and connections should be prioritized. This will take time and energy as strong reactions to public health measures created significant division within the community.
2. The construction of outdoor recreation spaces will not only expand opportunities for recreation and physical activity but could also provide safe gathering spaces for future public health events. Moreover, outdoor spaces provide opportunities

for recreation that is spontaneous and/or resident led versus programs that require staffing and TCA resources.

3. Renovations and/or improvements to the TCC kitchen should be prioritized. The community pancake breakfast was identified as the single most important activity offered. However, the ability of staff and volunteers appears hampered by not having a commercial kitchen. Renovations could encourage the growth of food-based events that build community.
4. A recreation needs assessment targeting adult and older adult residents should be conducted to determine potential programs and strategies for encouraging participation (e.g., transportation) within the community.
5. The need for community showers and laundry services due to many homes being unserved (water and electricity) was noted. Any renovations to the TCC or construction of new facilities should consider including these spaces.
6. Community-level planning should take into consideration the impacts of so many properties being owned by people outside the community.

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