



NUNATSIAVUT, OUR BEAUTIFUL LAND: LEARNING ABOUT THE LABRADOR INUIT LAND CLAIMS AGREEMENT

By Geoff Buchanan, NTRU

Based on a seminar by and interview with Steven Michelin, Conservation Officer, Fire Suppression and Management, Department of Natural Resources, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. Some additional material has been sourced from the Nunatsiavut Government website <http://www.nunatsiavut.com/>.

Steven Michelin is an Inuit man with fire in his blood. A member of the Labrador Inuit, he currently works as a Conservation Officer specialising in fire suppression and management with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador's Department of Natural Resources. 'My father was a firefighter so I've kind of followed in my father's footsteps'. Steven grew up in North West River in the central part of Labrador, Canada. 'It's a very outdoors oriented place. A lot of people still live off the land, partially. Of course that's always something I loved to do – hunting, fishing, stuff like that'. He always wanted a job in the outdoors and completed studies in forestry and silviculture before moving into a position in fire management in 2006.

When Steven visited AIATSIS in late October 2013, bush fires were burning across the state of New South Wales. Back home the forest fire season had just ended. As Steven described them, the forests of Labrador sounded very

different to those in Australia. 'We're in boreal forest, so we're probably 75 per cent black spruce, and a bit of birch, poplars. A lot of the ground vegetation is mosses, so that's a lot of what we have to deal with. With a lot of the caribou lichens they're very prone to ignition, especially from lightning. The majority of our fires within Labrador are lightning caused. Lichen is actually quite a lot like paper when it dries, it's very crumbly and it burns like paper—it's easy to ignite and burns through the forest'.

But Steven wasn't visiting AIATSIS to talk solely about fire management. Presenting a seminar titled 'Nunatsiavut and the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement' in the Mabo Room at AIATSIS, his main topic was Inuit self-government within the Labrador Inuit Settlement Area. In Inuttitit, Nunatsiavut means 'Our Beautiful Land'. 'The Settlement Area totals approximately 72,500 square kilometres of land in northern Labrador, including 15,800 square kilometres of Inuit-owned land and an adjacent ocean zone of 48,690 square kilometres'. In addition, Steven noted, 'the Torngat Mountains National Park Reserve was established within the Settlement Area, consisting of approximately 9,600 square kilometres'.

Steven spoke of how the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement 'was the realisation of the goals set by

our elders three decades earlier'. He spoke of a 28 year long journey that commenced in 1977 when the Labrador Inuit Association filed a statement of claim with the Government of Canada. On 1 December 2005, the Agreement and the Labrador Inuit Constitution came into effect. 'The Agreement is basically a contract between the Inuit of Labrador, the Government of Canada and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador'.

The Labrador Inuit created their own constitution which established the Nunatsiavut Government as the primary regional Inuit government along with five Inuit community governments: Rigolet, Makkovik, Postville, Hopedale and Nain. The Nunatsiavut Government may make laws to govern Inuit residents of Labrador Inuit lands and the Inuit communities for matters such as education, health, child and family services, and income support. It also has jurisdiction over its internal affairs, Inuit language and culture, and the management of Inuit rights and benefits under the Agreement. It may also establish a justice system for the administration of Inuit laws.

The Agreement includes important economic elements, with the Government of Canada to transfer \$140 million to the Labrador Inuit over 15 years and provide an implementation fund of \$156 million. The Nunatsiavut

Government is entitled to receive 25 per cent of provincial government revenues from subsurface resources in Labrador Inuit Lands, while in the rest of the Settlement Area it receives 50 per cent of the first \$2 million and five per cent of any additional provincial revenues from subsurface resources. It also receives five per cent of provincial revenues from subsurface resources in the Voisey's Bay area—an area with a pre-existing nickel mining project that may be selected as Labrador Inuit Lands or part of the Settlement Area after the project's closure.

Labrador Inuit have the right to harvest wildlife and plants, fish and marine mammals for Inuit food, social and ceremonial purposes throughout the settlement area. The Agreement establishes co-management arrangements for both wildlife and fisheries in the Settlement Area, while Labrador Inuit have greater control within the Labrador Inuit Lands. Under the Agreement, developers are responsible for compensating Inuit for any damage to or loss of wildlife, fish, wildlife or fish habitat, or harvesting activities suffered as a result of their projects.

Inuit are guaranteed a percentage of new or additional commercial fishing licences in the ocean zone under the Agreement. Steven mentioned the case of the Torngat Fish Producers, 'an Aboriginal-owned organisation, owned by the 500 Inuit members of the cooperative who export a variety of fish throughout the world'. In relation to freshwater, Labrador Inuit have the right to personal and domestic use throughout the Settlement Area. Compensation agreements must be negotiated with the Nunatsiavut Government where developers propose to use water in a way that may affect water quantity, quality or rate of flow on or adjacent to Labrador Inuit Lands. In addition, the issuing of water use permits to new developers by the provincial government needs to be approved by the Nunatsiavut Government.

While comprehensive, one thing the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement does not explicitly cover is fire management. Steven noted that as the Inuit communities tend to be located further to the north and on the coast, forest fires are less of an issue there. That said, fires still occur on Inuit land. 'Recently we had one small fire within Rigolet, which is one of the communities within Nunatsiavut. We went and did

our normal job. [The community] came back to me to see what they could do to prevent something like that happening again'.

While the Nunatsiavut Government doesn't currently have capacity to undertake fire management, it's staff do work alongside Steven's team if a forest fire does break out. 'They have their own conservation officers, they've been trained to be able to assist us in forest fire fighting, but basically they have no equipment'. But Steven advised us that the Nunatsiavut Government is set to acquire some impressive fire management equipment soon. 'Universal Helicopters Newfoundland Limited (UHNL) is being sold to the Nunatsiavut Group of Companies, the business arm of the Nunatsiavut Government, in partnership with Tasiujatsoak Trust and CAPE Fund. UHNL has continuously provided contract services for the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador including a seasonal contract with my own Department for fire surveillance and suppression'.

A scene from the near future presents itself of Steven Michelin seated in one of these Inuit-owned helicopters flying over the beautiful land of his ancestors as he continues to follow in his father's firefighting footsteps.



Opposite page: Aerial view of a fire in the boreal forest landscape.

Above: Steven Michelin presenting 'Nunatsiavut and the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement' at the AIATSIS Seminar Series in October 2013.