

Key Environmental and Societal Issues Relevant to Oil and Gas Development in the North

Bonnie Gray Wallace
Wolfwillow Inc.
bgraywallace@shaw.ca

Since the earliest days of Arctic exploration, the physical environment has played a significant role in the progress of northern development. Initially, survival was the challenge as unknown areas were opened up and frontiers of knowledge were pushed outward. In the 'roads to resources' days of the 50s, 60s and early 70s, the challenge was still there, but we *knew* 'modern technology' could and would overcome the physical environment to our collective benefit. It is only with the events of the mid-late 1970s, specifically the Berger Inquiry, that environmental protection and aboriginal rights became linked and became part of the conversation about how Canada would access and utilize its northern resources. Today, the consideration of environmental and social matters in economic decision-making is legislated, and in many areas aboriginal landowners control how the land is developed. However, the range of factors that influence whether a project will go forward *successfully* continues to change.

The influence of the environment is multi-faceted – access and accessibility, safety, project design, timing, costs – are all affected profoundly by the environment and the steps required to protect it. These issues are compounded today by climate change, aboriginal land claim settlements, security, and sustainability. Resource extraction projects have come and gone, Canada has built more Arctic paper pipelines than any other country, and we continue to struggle to exercise sovereignty over the Far North, which we see as an integral part of our Canadian identity. This presentation will examine the current environmental and societal context of oil and gas development in the Canadian North and look to the future and what that may bring.

The context has much to do with risk tolerance (or aversion), the perceived costs and benefits of a project, and the ability of those affected to influence decision-makers. Science plays an important supporting role, but the manner in which participants view risk to their interests and their ability to make their concerns heard effectively largely defines their support or opposition to proposed projects. The manner in which proponents address those risks determines their ultimate success in achieving project approvals and a viable 'social licence to operate' in partnership with those affected by their project.