



From state-initiated to Indigenous-driven infrastructure: The Inuvialuit and Canada's first highway to the Arctic Ocean

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ABSTRACT

Between 2010 and 2050, the world's combined road and rail network will grow an estimated 60%. National governments are building many of these roads, which are often perceived as disenfranchising Indigenous communities. Yet in the Canadian Arctic's Mackenzie Delta, a joint venture between two Indigenous-owned construction and transportation companies built the first public highway in North America to the Arctic Ocean, which opened in November 2017. This research, based on qualitative fieldwork in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region where the highway was constructed, challenges ideas that roads are invariably top-down initiatives which negatively impact Indigenous peoples and their lands. Inuvialuit community leaders lobbied for this road project and succeeded in winning CAD \$299 million in government funding to construct the Inuvik-Tuktoyaktuk Highway. They leveraged opportunities afforded by land claims treaties and shifting geopolitics in the warming Arctic, which turned their region into a frontier of renewed national and global interest, to accumulate funding. Strategically, they discursively rescaled a road they sought to promote economic development and improve local mobility between two communities into a highway of national importance. This study thus extends work on tribal capitalism to explore the place-based dynamics of Indigenous political economies. It unpacks the scale-oriented strategies Indigenous peoples use to advocate for new roads and increased connectivity, finding that these discourses and practices can complement the state's promotion of nation-building and market capitalism in frontier spaces. This research also suggests that more attention is required to the circumstances in which Indigenous peoples initiate or become partners in infrastructure development rather than examining only instances of resistance.

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1. Introduction

On a clear autumn day in 2017 – the year of Canada's 150th anniversary – the country's first highway to the Arctic Ocean opened. The Governments of Canada and the Northwest Territories spent CAD \$299 million to fund the construction of a 137-kilometer public, all-weather road across the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR) that will link the inland town of Inuvik (pop. 3140) with the coastal hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk (pop. 898), on the Beaufort Sea in the Arctic Ocean (Fig. 1). The two-lane gravel road, officially named the Inuvik-Tuktoyaktuk Highway (ITH), will extend the Dempster Highway, which previously terminated in Inuvik. The ITH will also replace an ice road built every winter between the two communities and allow year-round transport across the tundra rather than only seasonal overland access via the frozen Mackenzie River, lengthy summertime boat or barge

sailings, and expensive flights. Many locals hope the permanent highway will lower the high cost of living and promote development in a region whose economy and population are declining.

From 1974 to 2017, each year as the days grew shorter and the rivers began to freeze up, an ice road was built between Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk (Fig. 2). In recent decades, two private Inuvialuit-owned construction and transportation companies built it with funding from territorial government contracts: Northwind Industries Ltd, formed in 1997, oversaw the section out of Inuvik, while Tuktoyaktuk-based E. Gruben's Transport (EGT) Ltd., with its roots going back to the 1950s, managed the section from the north. Building the ice road involved waiting until the river sufficiently froze to remove snow, choose an alignment, and erect road signs. Once open, the ice road allowed goods and heavy cargo to be trucked to Tuktoyaktuk at much lower rates compared to flying. Bootleg also flowed north this time of year to the hamlet, where the sale of alcohol is restricted. Yet the ephemeral connection only lasted from approximately late November to April each year, a

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Fig. 1. Map of the Inuvialuit Settlement Region and key locations mentioned within the text in the context of the North American Arctic frontier.



Fig. 2. The Inuvik-Tuktoyaktuk ice road along the frozen Mackenzie River in its final season, March 2017.

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