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**Executive Summary - Laird Highway  
Interpretive System**

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**Author: Avens Associates Ltd.**

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# Liard Highway Interpretive System

## Deh Cho Visitor Centre Interpretive Plan



Prepared for: Government of, the Northwest Territories  
Economic Development & Tourism



Prepared by: Avens Associates  
Waskasoo Group  
Lombard North Group

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study develops an interpretive system for the Liard Highway and the Deh Cho Visitor Information Centre (at the service centre near Fort Liard) .

The Deh Cho Centre primarily promotes- tourism throughout the Deh Cho region and the Northwest Territories. The centre is not intended as solely a community information kiosk, but a welcome to those visitors arriving to the NWT and an encouragement to visit, and purchase goods and services, at the main destinations available in the region in specific and the NWT in general.

The development of interpretive sites along the highway is meant to enrich the visitor's experience of the Northwest Territories and allow them to more fully participate in the opportunities available here.

This study proceeded in concert with the interpretation concept design studies for the 60th Parallel Visitor Centre and Highway 1, and the Dawson City Visitor Centre and Dempster Highway. The process included site visits in August and September, 1989, three meetings with the other design groups, and a public meeting in January, 1990.

### The Visitors

As the Liard Highway is the newest in the Northwest Territories, relatively few people have travelled it, and there are few details on those who have travelled the Liard. There seems to be a large percentage driving recreational vehicles, and visitors tend to be adults traveling as couples without children.

Though design capacity (number of visitors) at this stage is low, it is assumed there will be tour buses operating on the Liard Highway in future. A 30-visitor minimum capacity should be planned for at sites along the road and space must be provided to park at least one bus at each site as well.

Visitors to any of these sites will be familiar with the Liard Highway (having driven up from BC) or the Mackenzie Highway. As the road is dusty in fine weather and muddy in foul, many visitors will be in the middle of a driving experience they do not consider pleasant. They will welcome the opportunity to take a break from the road and experience more of the area than the dust and mud.

## The Interpretive Perspective

An interpretive site is a big outdoor exhibit which uses the site itself and its features as exhibit objects. At the sites, manufactured objects are generally not used when you can work effectively with what the site has to offer.

It is not effective to interpret everything everywhere for everybody. The very best interpretation at any given site leaves visitors with just one new idea. We hope they will see connections between this new idea and the rest of the world around them.

Giving a "point of view" is an important technique which will assist in making these connections and illustrating ideas. The point of view (or angle, or slant) for interpretation along the Liard Corridor is cultural. The emphasis is that this is a land inhabited for 15,000 years or longer by a succession of peoples who have found ways to come to terms with the environment of the valley based upon the technologies they had available to them.

We would like visitors to see the Liard River Valley through the eyes of the Acho Dene who live here and represent the aboriginal culture of the region. Certain subjects for interpretation will be better suited to a presentation which adopts the viewpoint of early white settlers. This means we maintain our cultural point of view fairly consistently throughout the interpretation along the corridor and at the Visitor Centre.

A series of 23 measurable objectives has been set out in the technical report. These objectives have guided the design process, and will provide a basis for evaluating the success of the proposed orientation and interpretation efforts in the corridor. The objectives will also help the Department of Economic Development and Tourism obtain bench mark data with which to devise interpretation objectives for other centres, other developments and future changes to the Deh Cho Centre and Liard corridor developments. They will indicate if changes are occurring in the knowledge level (cognitive objectives), attitudes/feelings (affective objectives) and behavior (behavioral objectives) of visitors to the region as a result of interpretation development.

## Common Elements Along the Corridor

A series of common designs, layouts or themes has been suggested to give some consistency to the visitors' voyage along the highway. A summary of these elements follows:

### ***Orientation Sign Module***

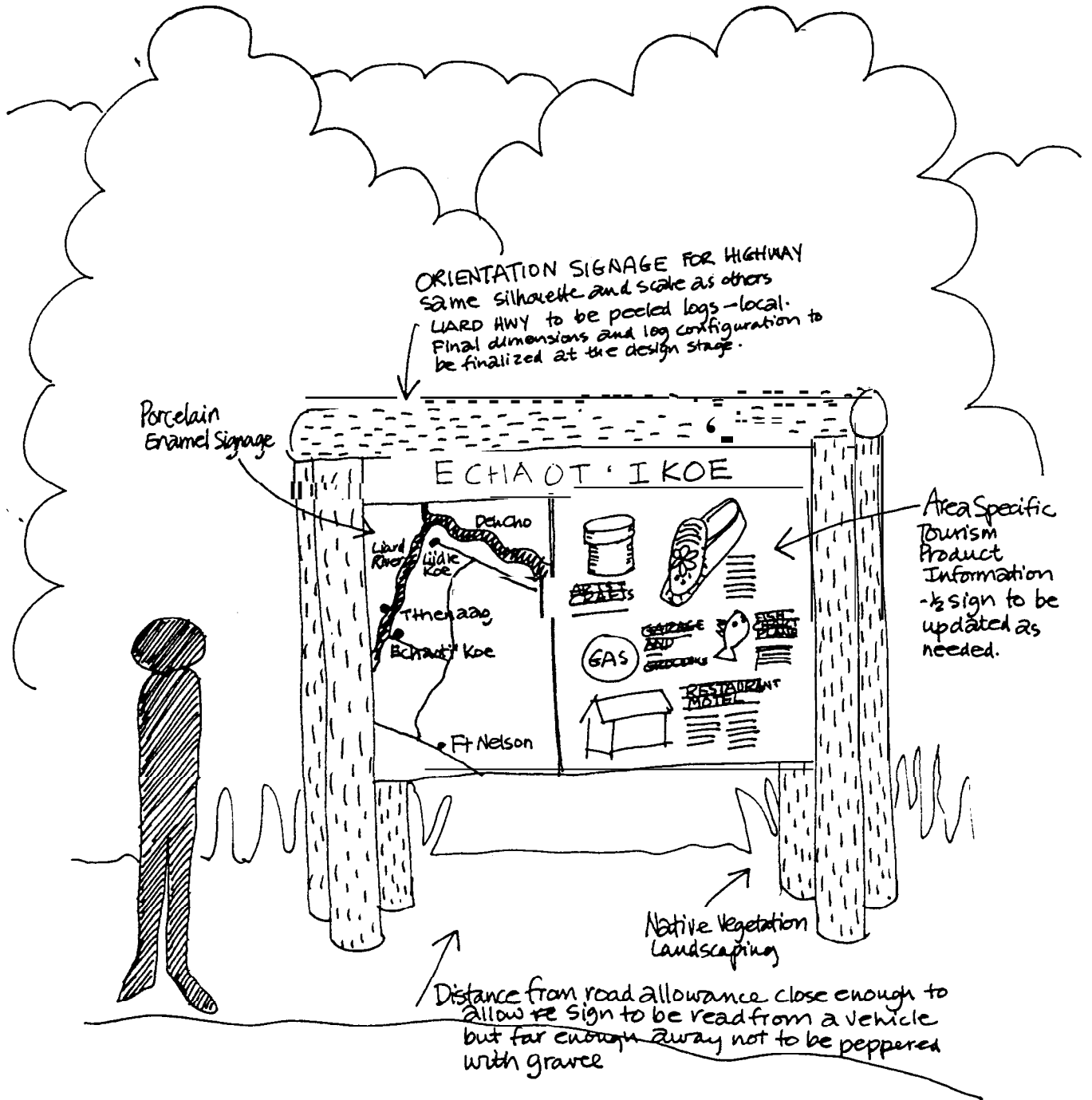
- to be used at Visitor Centre and orientation/interpretive sites throughout southern highway system
- common dimensions
- peeled log mounting
- common colours and typeface
- layout - front is regional orientation
  - back is site specific
- porcelain enamel for sign face
- use of Slavey and English (Liard)
- use of Acho Dene and early settlers' viewpoint (Liard)

### ***Site Development***

- common services and activities
  - each site to have minimum of outhouse, garbage container, parking area, orientation module and some minor recreational activity (climbing tower, short trail for interpretation, etc.)
- common furnishings
  - peeled log tables (GNWT standard)
  - peeled log outhouses (GNWT standard)
- common approach signage
  - Territorial standard as developed in 60th Parallel study
- common site signage
  - use of orientation modules
  - use of similar interpretive signs (see below)
- clearing to open up site on opposite side of road wherever appropriate

### ***Interpretive Signage***

- common colours (use of one of the colour families from the orientation modules)
- common typeface when appropriate (not necessarily the same as orientation module)
- similar mounting (use of logs) if appropriate
- use of Acho Dene and early settlers' viewpoint
- shapes, sizes, placement and media may differ considerably from site to site
- use of 'host approach' if appropriate



ORIENTATION SIGNAGE



## The Sites

There are few roadside recreational opportunities outside of Blackstone Territorial Park for visitors to stop for along the route. In this contract, five sites along the highway were to be used as examples of how an interpretive system could function. The sites were:

- The Liard/Alaska Highways Junction
- Muskeg River
- Nahanni Butte Winter Road
- Bison Viewing/Airstrip Viewpoint
- Liard/Mackenzie Highways Junction

Each of the sites offers a similar opportunity to see the region from a different point of view than through the side window or over the steering wheel and the dashboard. We believe visitors will respond very well to these opportunities to take a brief respite from their driving even if they have definite destinations in mind for that day. Making visitors aware of these opportunities and demonstrating that they are worth taking advantage of is therefore an important goal for orientation and interpretation media along the route.

### ***The Liard/Alaska Highways Junction***

The purpose of the development at the Liard/Alaska Junction is:

- to orient visitors to the Liard Highway
- to attract visitors up the Liard Highway
- to introduce the point of view adopted by interpretation in the corridor
- to establish common design elements of interpretive development along the corridor, particularly orientation module design and linking elements of other media design

Two orientation modules would be used at this site, and services provided include picnic tables, outhouses and garbage collection.

## **Muskeg River**

The Muskeg River site is to:

- to orient visitors to the section of the corridor in the vicinity of the viewpoint
- to provide a suitable recreational activity for highway tourists
- to establish and develop among visitors the idea that habitation of the Liard Valley is ancient by any culture's standards

The proposed interpretive development would be a short (500 - 1,000 metre) "We Need a Moose Anthropological Nature Trail". The trail will try to build an empathy between visitors and the ancient people of this valley by bringing home the realities of the relationship between the early peoples and the moose. The trail will give visitors the opportunity to learn what archaeology, anthropology and wildlife biology have uncovered about life in the valley and what modern native people and specialists suppose life may have been like here 10,000 years ago. All this is against a backdrop which has changed little in the intervening millennia.

Site development would include parking, outhouses, picnic tables, and garbage collection.

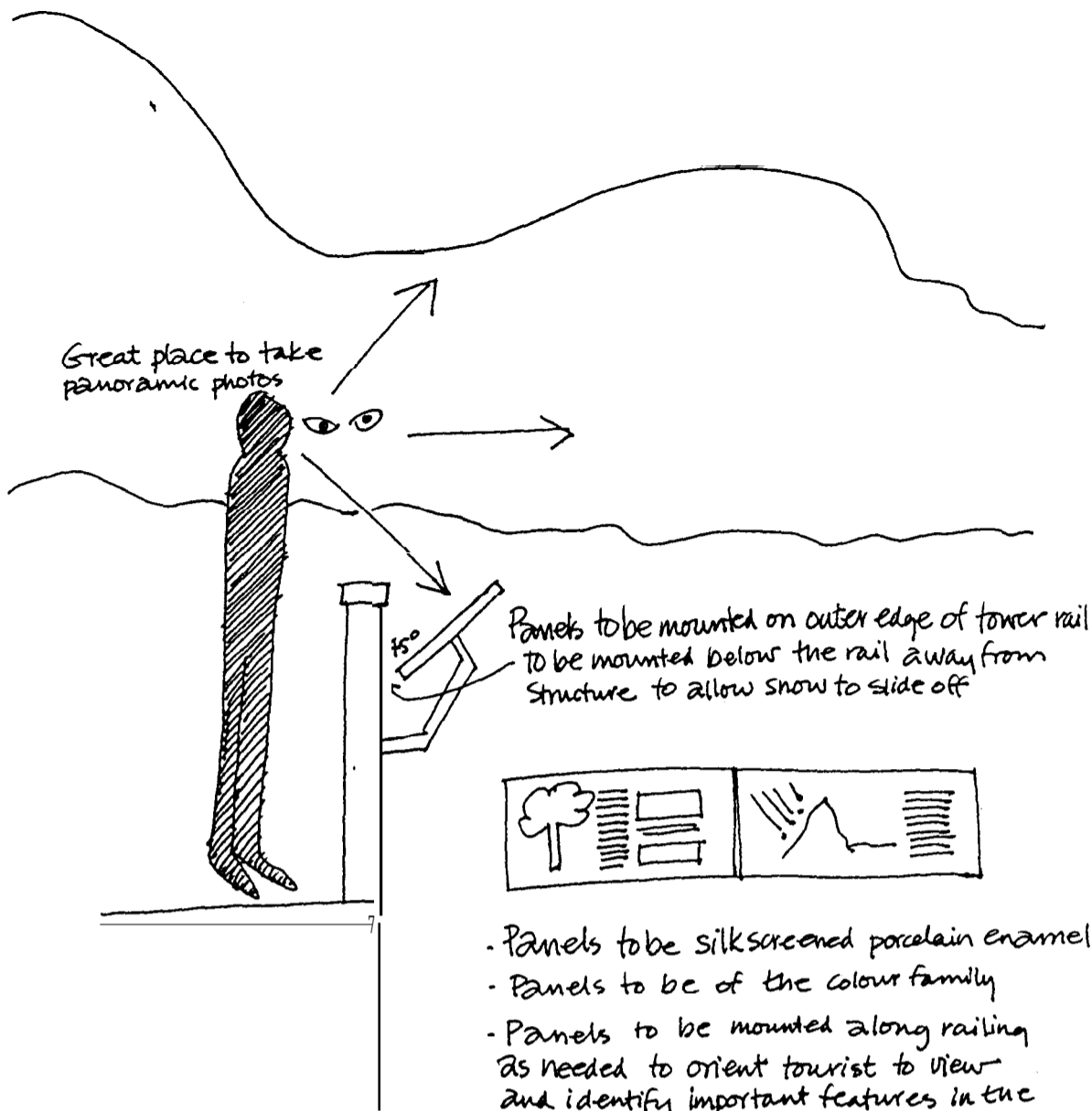
### **Bison Viewing/Airstrip Viewpoint**

The Bison Viewing/Airstrip Viewpoint was chosen to take advantage of the elevation and location of site to give travelers an uncommonly good view of the Liard Valley. The suggested interpretive messages are:

- geomorphology of Liard Valley
- ecosystems of Liard Valley
- geographic features of interest seen from viewpoint
- history of the Liard Valley
- tourism opportunities in the Liard Valley

A viewing tower is proposed at the site. Panels mounted at the top of the tower or viewing platform will point out features of the view and explain their significance. Visitors might find the messages of the impressions of the land and the features presented more interesting coming from the people of the region themselves (the host approach). Photographs will show aspects of these features which cannot be seen from the tower. This is a good place to depict wildlife viewing opportunities in the company of a guide, canoeing, hiking, climbing, fishing, hunting and the other activities important to the economy of the region.





### TOWER PANELS



### **Nahanni Butte Winter Road**

Though this site may not ultimately be developed (depending on negotiations with the trappers having cabins nearby, the Nahanni Butte Winter Road site is an example of developing a rest stop between Fort Liard and Mackenzie Junction. Site development would improve site conditions which are deteriorating through use, and help visitors learn something of the society of the valley today. It is an example of not disguising things visitors might find unpleasant, but attempting to put them in context. We don't deny it's a long walk from Nahanni Butte to the Liard Highway in winter to sit with a small fire by the side of the road to wait for a lift. We want to show that walk from the perspective of the walker, not of someone who has just arrived at this pull off in a motor home.

Site development would include minimal parking, outhouses, and a picnic table.

### **The Mackenzie/Liard Junction**

The purpose of this site is:

- to orient visitors to the Liard Highway
- to attract visitors up the Liard Highway
- to attract visitors to Fort Simpson
- to attract visitors farther along the Mackenzie Highway
- to introduce the point of view adopted by interpretation in the corridor
- to establish common design elements of interpretive development along the corridor, particularly orientation module design and linking elements of other media design

The concept for interpretation at this site is virtually the same as it is for the Liard and Alaska Highways Junction Site except we can't promote the experience of driving down the Liard Highway at the expense of tourism development in Fort Simpson. Therefore, this orientation site should promote travel to both areas, especially if it is possible to steer tourists toward Fort Simpson who have just come up the Liard from Fort Nelson and might be planning to head east right away.

Development at the site includes two orientation modules, parking, picnic tables, garbage collection, toilets and short loop trail.

# Fort Liard Visitor Centre

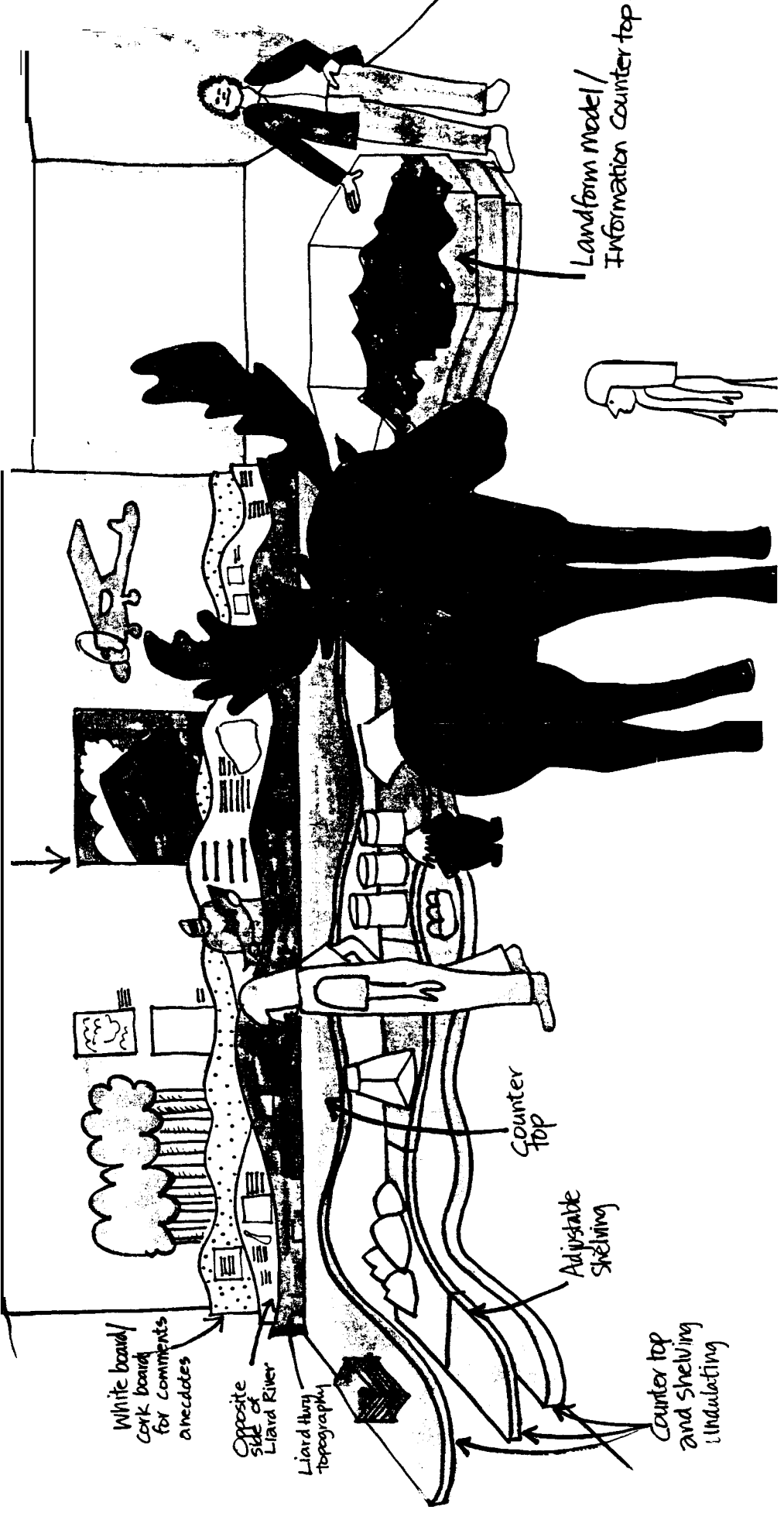
Exhibit Wall



"STORY LINE"  
BC. BORDER

Fort Liard

Large wall mounted images



White board/  
cork board  
for comments  
anecdotes

Opposite  
side of  
Liard River

Liard thru  
topography

Counter  
top

Adjustable  
shelving

Counter top  
and shelving  
illuminating

Landform model/  
Information counter top.

## The Centre

The visitor centre is an opportunity for road-weary visitors to get their first comprehensive overview of the region the road travels through and the many things there are to see and do in the area of which they have been unaware.

The purpose of the development of the centre is to:

- stimulate visitation to Liard Corridor
- contribute to economic growth of the region particularly in tourism and crafts
- create a strong Economic Development and Tourism presence on the Liard Highway.

The messages at the centre include:

- things to see and do in corridor
- peoples of the Northwest Territories
- the world of the Acho Dene - contemporary life
- the world of the Acho Dene - traditional life
- availability of goods and services to purchase

The enclosed visitor services space within the visitor centre is only 70 m<sup>2</sup>, though the footprint of the building is at least three times that size. This will make it a truly imposing structure, particularly to visitors who have driven for more than two hours to reach the site from Forts Nelson or Simpson. The architecture will clearly provide the lure necessary to bring visitors in from the highway.

The centre is right in the heart of the land of the Acho Dene and media used on site reflect that fact in their use of native graphic themes and artwork. An orientation module in front of the building adjacent to the parking area shows things to see and do along the segment of the highway on either side of the centre and directs visitors to services and facilities. As the centre will not be open year-round nor 24-hours daily in summer, the orientation panel will also tell how to get emergency help and information.

The presentation area under the extended roof of the building may house displays about how people interact with the land in the various areas of the Northwest Territories, emphasizing modern residents' ancient roots in the landscape.

Behind the building in an area landscaped for relaxation, a series of interpretive panels shaped like Dene drums will reveal some of the legends of the Acho Dene which emphasize the relationship between the people and the land. Legends on the drums will be told by Dene elders and illustrated by Dene children.

Inside the building, the exhibit and lounge area provides orientation to the **Liard** Corridor and interpretation about the natural and human history of the region. A 10 m<sup>2</sup> staff area has been provided at one side of the public space. Staffing of the **centre** is important to the exhibits and the welcoming nature of the building.

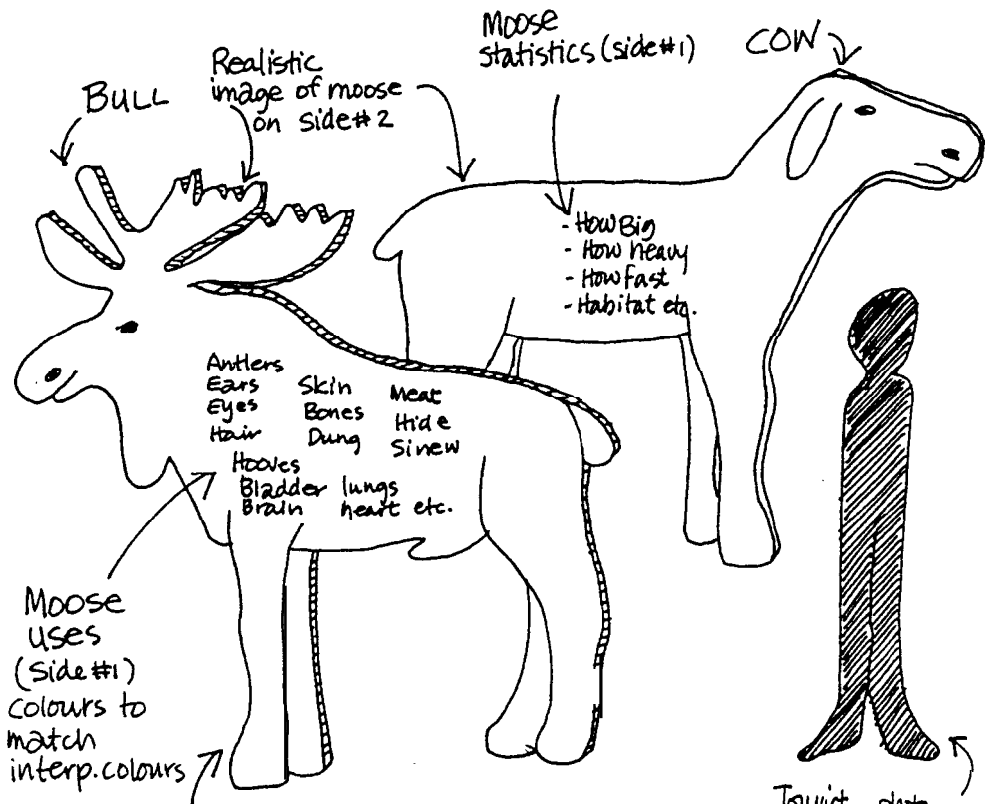
The major exhibit piece in the public space is a replica of the highway mounted on a shelf running along two walls of the rectangular room. This highway on a shelf allows visitors to walk from Fort Nelson to Fort Simpson along the **Liard** Highway, seeing and interacting with features and attractions along the way. On the shelf will be materials representing the landscapes the highway travels through. On the wall above the shelf, display surfaces will be mounted in at least three layers, representing the layered effect of the views from the highway where you see brush first, young poplars behind them, the mature mixed spruce and poplar forest behind that and, in many places, the mountains in the distance beyond. Mounted on these layers will be displays large and small representing the tourism opportunities and major features of the region.

Beneath the shelf will be compartments displaying a range of the birch baskets and boxes the **Liard** area is famous for. In these boxes will be objects, artifacts, materials and publications relating to the displays which can be seen on the wall above the shelf.

A relief model of the region forms a portion of the counter in front of the visitor services staff office to be used by staff in orientating visitors to the region.

The balance of the room is occupied by a small lounge area which is provided with a wood **stove**, sturdy furniture and a work table which people can stand or sit at while they work with the materials from the boxes in the display, often assisted by the visitor services staff. There is a video monitor and video cassette player in the lounge which can be used by visitors to see productions about the features of the region, the Northwest Territories and tourism operators in the area.

The visitor **centre** will be a warm, relaxing place which will come as a pleasant and welcome surprise to travelers on the highway who may have expected a tourist facility designed to get people in and back out on the road in a hurry. Everything about the **Deh Cho Centre** suggests the very opposite - that people should slow down, take a second look at the **Liard** corridor and see what the land around them really is.



Silkscreened image 2 sides  
2-D. cut out - 1" plywood

Animals to be movable

1. Take advantage of preferred locations.
2. To be put into storage when centre closed to reduce vandalism.

Tourist photo opportunity, with a moose  
- realization of size

### Peoples of the North exhibit

The Moose relates to Dene culture best.

Other animals such as Caribou Seal, Polar Bear could be treated in a similar manner to represent other groups.

### "BUTCHER" MOOSE



## Tie-ins with Other Corridors and Projects

The preliminary interpretive planning for the corridors and related sites are:

Liard Corridor	the world of the <b>Acho Dene</b> (a cultural interpretation of the boreal forest)
Highway 1 60th Parallel Hay River	down north - the waterfall route the regions of the NWT modern water transportation in the north
Highway 5	the Wood Buffalo Route - the boreal forest (a natural interpretation of the boreal forest)
Fort Smith	river transportation and the CANOL project
Fitzgerald Highway 6	river transportation the great Slave Route - an interpretation of the meeting of two cultures in the north
Fort Resolution	the 19th Century in the north

Subject matter for interpretation will unavoidably overlap between regions and corridors but that we will take quite different points of view toward it in each region. By using the world of the **Acho Dene** theme, we will ensure the subjects we deal with along the **Liard Corridor** are presented in a different light than they will be in other areas.

While creating the different points of view, there is still a strong need to tie orientation media together throughout the southern route system. The common orientation module, depicting a portion of highway on one face and the local visiting area on the reverse, should be installed at visitor centres, major pull-offs and highway junctions. The dimensions and design for these panels will remain the same throughout the system but colours and graphic style will change according to graphic standards adopted for each route. Road users will soon learn what these modules are and look for them at major sites to help them learn about what to experience in the local area and what to expect to see on adjacent stretches of highway.

We propose that signs marking political and geographical places and features (identification signs, not directional signs) be produced bilingually in English and **Slavey** for the **Liard** corridor. This standard will be carried onto all media used along the **Liard Highway**. On highway maps, relief models, audio tapes, everywhere places and features are identified, English and **Slavey** names will be shown. The use of another aboriginal language may be used in a similar manner elsewhere along the highway system.

## costs

Following is a summary of cost by site type and interpretation/site development. Costs are listed for each site separately in the technical report.

### *Development Costs*

Site	Design	Construction	Total
Liard/Alaska Jut.	\$ 2,500	\$ 21,000	\$ 23,500
Muskeg Creek	6,000	60,000	66,000
Bison/Airstrip Vpt.	6,000	34,000	40,000
Nahanni Butte Winter Road	2,000	14,000	16,000
Liard/Mackenzie Junction	2,000	14,000	16,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$18,500</b>	<b>\$143,000</b>	<b>\$161,500</b>

### *Interpretation Costs*

Site	Design	Fabric'n,	Installa'n	Total
Visitor Centre	\$48,250	<b>\$222,500</b>		\$270,750
Orientation Sites	\$10,000	\$12,000	\$ 8,000	\$30,000
Interp. Sites	\$52,000	\$34,000	\$19,000	\$105,000
Total	\$110,250	\$295,500		\$405,750

The total design and construction budget (site development and interpretation) , is estimated at \$567,250, if all sites were designed and constructed together.



## Operations

The highway sites should be open and functioning to the tourists throughout the tourism season, at a high level of service yet at a reasonable price. The maintenance of washrooms, safety cabins and garbage services should continue throughout the year at the highway sites.

The Visitor Centre will be leased from the Development Corporation on a long term lease. Responsibilities of the Development Corporation in taking care of the building should include:

- opening/closing of the centre for the tourist season (includes any seasonal repairs (windows, etc.), opening water lines, spring cleaning, checking electrical system, etc.).

- repairs to the building (roof, windows, floors, etc.) .

- repairs to the exhibits, if caused by the development corporation while doing their work (e.g., damaged during opening/closing) or through vandalism in the off season

The government would be responsible for repairs to and upgrading of exhibits (e.g., general wear and tear, loss through stealing by visitors, updating material, etc.) .

Centre personnel could be hired either as staff members or on contract. In either case, the centre should be open for service from 8:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m. daily. Personnel will be very important to the success of the centre. Visitors, have travelled a long way in the confines of their vehicles, will want contact with another human being. And this will be an exotic human being to them - a Northerner. Centre personnel must be friendly, willing to assist, and answer the same (perhaps foolish) questions again and again.

In order to get skilled personnel, it is suggested that eligible applicants must pass a competency test. It should involve both an oral (interview type) and written test. Emphasis needs to be on oral skills, as writing skills will be less important. Past work experience and references would form an important part of interviewing to hire centre personnel, whether by contract or staff.

An important aspect of centre personnel will be keeping qualified people. Contracts should be renewable, or staff should be hired as permanent seasonal, not as casuals. Training or site familiarization will be required each season for centre personnel. Personnel should go, with staff from 60th parallel and other visitor centres on the Mackenzie Highway system, along Highways #1, 2, 5, and 7. Highways 3, 4 and 6 are optional for staff from this centre, depending on budget. Also, centre personnel should travel down to Fort Nelson at the beginning of the season. This will give staff a first hand knowledge of what they are telling tourists about. A special part of the training will have to include operating the computer system, as this will be a unique programme. This could be done by contract or by government staff, though co-ordinating training through staff may be more readily achieved.

Preferably, the centre personnel will be qualified individuals from Fort Liard. However, if no, or not enough, qualified people from Fort Liard are found, then the government will either have to hire qualified people from outside the community, or train the Fort Liard residents. Either way, extra time will be needed in the hiring process, to allow for a lengthy hiring process and training. It should be noted that residents of the NWT should be hired, not outside people. One of the first questions travelers will likely ask is "Do you live in the NWT". They want Northerners.