

## BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

# Artifacts unearthed at Casino 13,000 years old

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While preparing to eventually extract minerals from the ground, crews at a Yukon mine site came across something with a different sort of value.

Archeologists working at the proposed Casino Mine property northwest of Whitehorse have found artifacts that are somewhere between 13,000 and 14,000 years old.

That makes the site one of the oldest to be unearthed in the Yukon and one of only a few that date back to the ice age.

And so far only about one per cent of the identified area has been explored.

Located about 250 metres back from the Yukon River near Britannia Creek, the remnants of old tools and bone were found along what would have been the riverbank thousands of years ago, said Yukon archeologist Ruth Gotthardt.

"This is the pioneering population, moving into the western hemisphere," she said. "Though they didn't know it at the time."

As part of Casino's \$2.5-billion project to extract copper, gold and molybdenum from the ground, the company is required to do a heritage inventory of anything historically significant in the area.

The Britannia Creek site was first flagged by an Edmonton company in 2009. But it wasn't until late last year, when the radiocarbon dating came back on a small piece of bone, that the company realized just how old its find was.

"The fact that it had dateable bone in there is what made it such a godsend, because we could actually date the site," Gotthardt said.

It's not clear what type of animal bone it is. Gotthardt said it's from some sort of ungulate, like caribou.

During the last ice age the water level of the oceans was lower. That created what's known as the Bering land bridge and allowed people to walk their way from Siberia to the Yukon.

Yukon paleontologist Grant Zazula said there have been multiple



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**Artifacts discovered at the Casino mine site northwest of Whitehorse are at least 13,000 years old, making the find one of the oldest in the territory.**

historic sites this old found in Alaska.

"These represent the first people that crossed the Bering land bridge from Siberia into North America," he said.

"They migrated from Siberia into Alaska and then made their way into the Yukon."

While Alaska's sites are well known, evidence from this era in the Yukon is pretty thin, Zazula said.

The oldest finds, like this one, represent a time when ancient animals like woolly mammoths still roamed the earth.

"There's a lot of these ancient animals and that's a time where they are starting to go extinct," Zazula said.

"So finding archeological sites with bones of some of these ice-age animals could help us understand how people were living back then. But also potentially their involvement in the extinction of some of these animals."

The Casino site is the first intact Beringian era find on the upper Yukon River drainage above the Tanana

River.

Few other sites of this age have been found. Evidence at the Little John site in Beaver Creek dates to about the same time period.

An unnamed site just past the White River near the Alaska Highway had 10,000-year-old artifacts.

In Old Crow, at the Blue Fish Caves, the age of artifacts is sometimes debated. The oldest estimate is 24,000 years while more recent artifacts have been dated to 13,000 years.

It's not just ice age-era bone that has history buffs excited about the new discovery.

It turns out people used that site for thousands of years.

"You've got your big river flowing by which is a big attraction not only for fish but animals in that neck of the woods too," Gotthardt said.

Altogether, three distinct layers were found.

The top layer is about 100 years old, followed by layers of 5,000-year-old artifacts.

The oldest layer contains mostly chips and flakes of stone tools, along with the all-important bone. More easily identifiable things have been

found in the younger layers closer to the surface.

"They're finding certain tools – there's an arrowhead, some scrapers, some micro-blades," said Tr'ondek Hwech'in heritage officer Lee Whalen.

"So we are seeing different tools for different processes. Whether that's hide scraping, food processing or habitation."

The find is within overlapping traditional territories of the Selkirk and Tr'ondek Hwech'in First Nations.

"You see some of these tools and they're still being used. Hide scrapers, fleshers and things like that," Whalen said.

"We're finding hide fleshers that could be thousands of years old that look like the ones that were found right pre-gold rush."

Finding ancient artifacts in the Yukon doesn't always require a lot of digging.

About 5,000 years of human history can be packed into about 20 centimetres of soil.

"Our archeology is very accessible," Gotthardt said with a laugh. "It's very typical of the North, we have very poor soil development here. We

have long cold winters and not a lot of biomass broken down by worms and insects."

Everyone agrees there is still a lot of work to be done.

The site is estimated to be about 1,375 square metres.

So far only about one per cent of the area has been looked at.

"There is really good potential that there could be more sites of the same age," Zazula said.

Archeologists will likely be spending time there in the future to continue the hunt, Gotthardt said.

"There will be more. It's a matter of looking. That's an area, where the Casino mine is, that we just haven't done that much work."

She pointed out that the mine site itself has no road access.

"When development comes, it opens up for the archeology too," she said.

The entire area has been cordoned off and is now protected under the Yukon's Historic Resources Act.

Mining company president Paul West-Sells said the area isn't being touched.

West-Sells said the protected area doesn't hamper the proposed mining project.

"That isn't where the mine is located. That isn't where the main access road is located. It's an area that goes down from the mine to where we'll be getting water," he said.

"So you make some mitigations. If we have to move a road a few meters to the left or right, that's what we would do to avoid the area."

The Casino open-pit mine is by far the largest project ever considered by the Yukon Environmental and Socio-Economic Assessment Board.

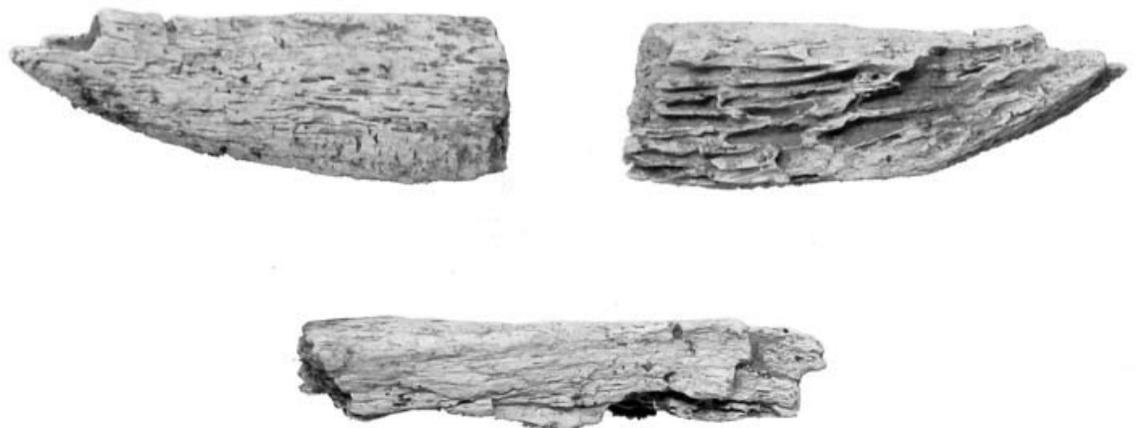
If it's approved, the plan is for Casino to produce 120,000 tonnes per day over a 22-year mine life.

Whalen said finds like the one at Casino can go beyond scientific research and be a way for people to connect with their history.

"It allows people to reflect on their connection with the place and this longstanding relationship with an area where people are still living, and have lived for thousands and thousands of years," he said.

"It's quite incredible."

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Left, a stone tool found at the Casino site. The most interesting thing about the artifacts is the presence of microblades. Top, a bone fragment found at the site.

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