

Apart from early explorers, fortune seekers, and missionaries, non-Indigenous people did not make their way into the North in any numbers until the early to mid-1900s. Even then, this was a transient population engaged in government services, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, military activities, and resource exploration and extraction. Today, more and more people are making the North their permanent home. The majority of these residents live in the larger administrative centres such as Whitehorse, Yellowknife, Kuujuaq, Iqaluit, and Inuvik.

The Physical Geography: A Vast and Diverse Region

The Canadian North is characterized by a diversity of physical landscapes, climates, and ecosystems. Daytime temperatures can fall well below minus 50 degrees Celsius in the winter, whereas in the summer, some areas can reach temperatures in excess of 30 degrees Celsius. There is abundant freshwater. The tundra, subarctic forests, coastal plains, mountains, and Arctic seas support a rich variety of wildlife. Wildlife and plants are equally varied from tiny summer flowers to the grandeur of migrating caribou herds and thousands of Canada geese. Certain species, especially birds and some marine mammals, migrate long distances and link the Arctic with temperate, tropical, and even Antarctic regions. The Arctic is a breeding ground for millions of migratory birds. It is a region of global importance.

Wind patterns and water currents create a wide range of climatic and ecological conditions for varied animal and plant species, making the North an early warning system for the rest of the planet. Once viewed as pristine, the North now suffers from the effects of air- and water-borne pollutants and global warming. Ozone depletion subjects northern ecosystems to high levels of ultraviolet radiation, with as yet unknown consequences. The effects from military activities, industrial developments, and human communities, particularly from waste disposal, have caused site-specific disruptions. Given the fragility of its ecosystems, the North is slow to recover from the impacts of human activity. Thus, there is a requirement for coordinated processes that will balance conservation and development needs.

The Economy: Optimism and Opportunity

Sustainable development in the Canadian Arctic faces unique challenges and difficulties: remote access to primary markets, limited transportation infrastructure, high transportation and communication costs, lack of capital, high energy costs, and a small population with