

The world's smallest desert



The Yukon Territory is in the northwest of Canada, neighbouring Alaska. The Carcross Desert, in the Yukon, is often referred to as the world's smallest desert. It covers an area of less than 260 hectares. Though it is commonly referred to as a desert, it is really a series of sand dunes. The sandy area is too humid to be considered a true desert.

The sand was formed during the last ice age, when large glacial lakes deposited silt. When the lakes dried, the dunes were left behind. Today, sand continues to be carried by wind from the nearby Lake Bennett.

Carcross Desert is significantly drier than the surrounding country, receiving less than 500 ml of rain per year. This is because surrounding mountains direct rain away from the area. Extremely strong winds sweep across the dunes. As a result of this climate, several rare species of plant life have evolved in the dry conditions. Baikal sedge exists here and at only four other sites in North America.

While the vegetation in the area locks much of the dune system in place, events such as forest fires could easily destroy the vegetation and return the dunes to an active state.

The sign at Carcross Desert explains the mysteries of the extraordinary place. The sign reads, in part: "Affectionately known as the smallest desert in the world, this area was originally covered by a large glacial lake. As the glaciers retreated, causing lower water levels, sandy lake bottom material was left behind."

Tourist groups also use the area for off-road scenic tours, which are allowed on the fine-grained dunes. Other summer activities include hiking and sand-boarding. In winter, the area is used for cross-country skiing and snowboarding. All activities are causing some habitat destruction. Because of this activity and violent summer storms the dunes become mobile, and the sand loosens and starts to bury small areas.

Carcross Desert environment is not protected by law.

Sources: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carcross_Desert
<http://www.hickerphoto.com/carcross-desert-yukon-19285-pictures.htm>

