

Presentation Notes

Dehlá Parties (Ayoni Keh Land Corporation, Behdzi Ahda” First Nation, Colville Lake Renewable Resources Council)

Délinę 2021 ʔelets’ewéhkwe Godi Virtual Public Listening Session

- Dehlá came to this Public Listening Session with our own question. **Why are we here?**
- This is an important question. This is a question that everyone should be asking.
- We are all supposed to be here to talk about how to plan for the future.
- But as Dene people, we already have a plan. It is written into our cultural DNA – the things that make us who we are. Our culture is built around the relationships that we have with the land and the animals.
- We have histories which tell us how our ancient laws were made, and many stories about why it is important to follow our ancient laws
- We learned these laws from our elders, and we have a responsibility to pass them on to our children.
- It’s good that we are coming together to talk about these things – even if we are doing it virtually by computer.
- We want to work together in a good way, and to see all the good work and good words that the Dene people are doing across the Sahtu region to restore our own ways of managing our relationships with wildlife and each other. We all know that working in the Dene way will give us better results. We managed since time immemorial without Canada or the GNWT telling us what to do, and we were better for it.
- But we also need to be very honest about what we see happening.
- It’s very clear to us that not every Party in this Hearing wants to see this process work. There are people listening to me today who think that we are wrong. They don’t believe that community plans are better tools than tags and Total Allowable Harvests. They don’t believe that we can manage our own harvesting. They don’t trust us to uphold our responsibilities or follow our own Dene laws.
- So we are here to say that we strongly support Dene knowledge and Dene laws.

- We are also here to say that people should talk honestly. If other governments and other peoples don't think that we should be allowed to be Dene and follow our own harvesting laws should come right out and say so.
- We know the GNWT doesn't agree -- because so the GNWT Minister has vetoed the Board's decision to replace the tag system with community caribou plans.
- We know the Inuvialuit Game Council doesn't agree -- because they are seeking to intervene in our court case because they want to keep the tag system in place in the Sahtu region.
- So we are now in court, trying to uphold our treaty and our rights to manage harvesting in our own way in our own region.
- Why are we always the ones who have to "prove" something?
- The evidence that supports our approach is already very clear. The Board has already agreed that community-based plans, based on Indigenous knowledge, are the right way to achieve conservation, and that they are more effective than harvest limits.
- So all all of this brings us back to why we are here today.
- We are here because we signed the Sahtu Dene and Metis Land Claim Agreement, a modern-day treaty that also respects Treaty 11. Our Sahtu Land Claim Agreement was supposed to create a co-management system in which each RRC was supposed to work together with the Board and with the government to manage wildlife and promote conservation.
- But we need to be honest. That isn't happening. We are still tied up in a very colonial system where the GNWT has most of the power and most of the resources. When we don't agree with them, they will simply make their own "final decisions".
- None of the RRCs have adequate resources to do their work. The Board doesn't have adequate resources either. The Board is supposed to be 6 members plus a chair, with 6 alternates. Right now, there are only 4 people on the Board, and most of them are alternates.
- We are very frustrated by this situation.
- We also want this process to work and we want the treaty to work.
- Over a number of years, we spent a lot of time with our members, with our elders and harvesters discussing our *Dehla Got'ine Tseduweh ʔade Ah'Ah* to carefully write out

some of our most important ancient oral laws and traditions to provide written directions to our members, and people harvesting on our traditional territory, on how to harvest in a way that continues to uphold our oral laws and traditions.

- We did most of the things that the SRRB now has in their *Hıdó Gogha Seńeǵots'ıńá* – the community conservation planning policy - that we are talking about today.
- We support the SRRB's efforts to work with us to develop and implement *Hıdó Gogha Seńeǵots'ıńá* – community conservation plans.
- We also appreciate that the SRRB recognizes that not every community plan needs to be the same.
- We believe we can find ways to respect local differences between our communities while working together in the region. We believe we can find ways to make sure that everyone is following the local rules when they go into another part of the territory. This is how Dene have always done things.
- What we don't support is the idea that the Minister can simply "vary" the decisions that come out of this process because the GNWT thinks that things should be done in a different way.
- We believe in our treaty rights and we want this hearing process to work, this is why we agreed to participate in this hearing, despite the fact that many of these issues are before the court.
- As Dene, we are once again having to demonstrate that we are reasonable people. We know that the evidence supports the community planning approach. We know that community plans, based on Indigenous knowledge, are a better system for us.
- The treaty says that wildlife management is a shared responsibility. This means that each Party needs to understand their proper role.
- If the GNWT thinks their way is better, they should be able to prove it. We challenge the GNWT to bring forward any evidence in these hearings that can show that the Dene way of managing our relationship with wildlife is not effective, or that the GNWT approach is better at achieving the objectives for wildlife management set out in our treaty.
- People often think that laws, whether they are our *ts'ıduweh ʔeʔá* or the *Wildlife Act* are all about rights. But rights are just part of what *ʔeʔá* are about. Before people tried to tell us what to do, we never had to talk about rights. Our elders never say "you have a right to hunt". That's something which has only happened since the *Wildlife Act* tried to set out a different way to do things. Our people opposed those changes because they

undermined who we are as a people, and the relationships that we maintained within Dene society and with other species. We have a right to be who we are as Indigenous people, and to do things in our way. But beyond that, our ʔeʔá are all about responsibilities.

- As Dene, we know that it is not right to interfere with things that are not ours. We know that there will be significant ecological, social and economic consequences if we do not maintain these relationships. We believe that we should let things be, and that humans do not understand enough about how things work to presume to try to interfere. Instead, our responsibility is to maintain good relationships with each other and with the land and the animals.
- In contrast, the Western science approach to wildlife management is fundamentally different. From the very beginning of our relationship with government wildlife managers, we have seen that they have always tried to interfere with the natural order.
- As Dene, we see ourselves as part of the natural environment - we don't see ourselves as an 'invasive species'. But we have learned that Western cultures look at the world in a different way. Western cultures believe that people are separate and apart from the rest of nature, and that is right for people to try to change it. This is the first and most fundamental conflict between the Dene concept of conservation and that of modern, Western conservation institutions like the GNWT.
- This is what we see happening here. GNWT wants to change us to fit their theories about how nature works. They believe that is their job to try to manage Dene, and that it is their job to manage wildlife. We know that is a misguided approach. The GNWT is not the boss of us, the land or the animals.
- Every species has a role. Every species has something to teach us. It does not matter whether those animals are the hunters (like wolves) or the hunted (like caribou), they all have a role to play and their own knowledge of how to live on the land, just as we do. If we watch and observe carefully, they will teach us something about how they live, but we should never assume that we know more about being wolves than wolves do, or about caribou than the caribou do. Our ts'jduweh ʔeʔá require us to respect the roles that other animals play, and the knowledge that they have, and to do our part to maintain the relationships we have with them.
- We know what Western wildlife management is like – we know what it is like to be managed - because that is exactly what the government wildlife managers have tried to do to us. We know that nothing in Western wildlife management is about respect, relationships or reciprocity between species – it is all about trying to control what happens.

- This conflict is always present in the co-management relationship. The GNWT Minister thinks that he can make decisions about the relationships between people, wolves and caribou. He says that interfering in those relationships is based on science. But our knowledge tells us that when Dene people are on the land, we need to respect the balance that already exists. We see no need for killing wolves or blaming wolves for being who they are – it makes no sense to us for people to try to interfere in the relationship that the wolves have with the caribou.
- But if there is anything we have learned, it is that the Minister won't accept any of the answers that he gets from us, or from the Board, unless he already agrees with them. It is like we are all back in school, being asked to answer questions on a test that is all about what other people think or do, not what Dene think or do. When we give the Minister our answers, the Minister is going to say that we are wrong.
- This is because this is still a colonial system. We need to change that.
- We will keep attending these hearings even if we are only repeating what we have already said, because we know our answers are correct. They are based on our ancient knowledge and teachings, and the evidence that is all around us when we are on the land.
- The Minister often says that his decisions are based on scientific knowledge. We do not think that is true.
- We have no problem with science. Dene have always been scientists. We have been careful observers for many thousands of years. When we say that Western science that the government relies on is inaccurate and incomplete, it is because it often conflicts with what we know based on the thousands of years of knowledge that our people have from being on the land and in a relationship with other animals.
- We also know that what the consequences are when science is wrong. For us, the difference between knowing the truth and being wrong can be a matter of survival. For GNWT, it just means that the staff will write a report about it.
- It doesn't need to be this way.
- Imagine if the GNWT stopped fighting us on these issues.
- Imagine if the Renewable Resources Councils within the Sahtu had the **resources to fulfill our own responsibilities. Imagine if our authority to manage harvesting was respected.**

- Imagine if the GNWT worked with us to address what we all understand to be some of the things that are negatively affecting the wildlife – things like mineral exploration on the calving grounds and other industrial activities.
- But right now everything is out of balance.
- The GNWT takes most of the resources for itself. They have staff and resources, while our RRCs do not. They say they have the authority to enforce the law, and they say that we do not. Even when we agree on what needs to be done, there's still not enough support for Indigenous people to fully participate.
- So this takes us back to where we started – and our question about why we are here.
- We are here because this process is broken. We would like to fix it.
- We would like GNWT to start treating us like partners, instead of like problems. This means working with us in this process to try to achieve consensus on the best approach. It means recognizing who we are, respecting what we know, and working with our Indigenous laws and traditions so that we can all achieve our common goals.
- We would like the SRRB to examine the impact of industry on caribou and the caribou range, especially the sensitive calving grounds. There are a lot of questions
- The current focus on regulations and enforcement under the Wildlife Act to manage Indigenous harvesting--a sustainable activity that has occurred for thousands of years--is disproportionate to the impact of such activities on wildlife.
- Dehla believe that the main focus of wildlife management interventions on Indigenous harvesting is discriminatory while failing to address the significant threats to caribou resulting from industrial development and mineral exploration.
- Article 2 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that Indigenous peoples and individuals are free and equal to all other peoples and individuals and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular that based on their indigenous origin or identity
- The over-examination of Indigenous harvesters and the under-examination of industrial activities must be addressed and we urge the SRRB to convene the next hearing with a focus on questions about industry
- Mahsi.