

Public Listening Session
Friday April 29th, 2022
Fort Good Hope Panel Presentation
Speaking notes

How is the health and wellness of caribou?

- Last year we submitted evidence about how caribou are doing.
- We've reviewed that this weekend with Elders and harvesters and what we said last year, holds true for this year.
- We do not have barrenground caribou now in this area.
- Our Elders tell us that it has always been like this. The caribou have cycles and when there are lots of them, then their habitat changes and their numbers go down. But when their numbers go down, then their food can grow back and over time, their numbers come back up again.
- In the 70s, many of our Elders remember when there were lots of barrenground caribou in this area. George and Florence Barnaby lived in Colville Lake in the 70s and there were lots of barrenground caribou.
- Elders also remember times when there were few or no barrenground caribou in this area. During those times, K'asho Got'jñę lived on other Dene béré, and didn't harvest barrenground caribou. This is part of how we have always looked after caribou. When they are plentiful, they are harvested more and we share lots. When there are few, we harvest less, and they have a chance to become plentiful again.
- They come here when there are lots of them but right now we have heard from Déljñę and Colville Lake that they are not around up there either and the harvesters and Elders know that when they are not plentiful, they do not come this way.
- For mountain caribou, we do harvest them from here. But we are not very concerned about them because they do not have the pressure that Ede have as there is relatively little access to the mountains.
- Also, harvesters from here, Norman Wells, and Tulít'a just go up once a year into the mountains to harvest mountain caribou.
- For woodland caribou, we have quite a few around here and harvesters have been harvesting them this winter. We think they may actually be increasing in population in this area.

How are the other animals doing?

- We know that there are a lot of wolves around and there are a lot of muskox
- We do not know of there ever being muskox around here in the past.
- We see lots of wolves. All of our harvesters talk about their trips along the river and into the fish lakes over the winter and last fall and summer. They saw many wolves and a lot of sites where the wolves had killed moose.
- We also have a lot of grizzly bears around, more than we used to.
- We don't see the wolves killing the muskox. We've asked our Elders and some of our Elders have told us that there is something in the hair of the muskox that there is

something in there like sand. When the wolf bites it, he doesn't like it so they leave the muskox alone. We don't see the wolves killing the muskox around here.

- With so many muskox around, we think that's related to why there aren't caribou. The caribou don't like to be where the muskox are because the muskox make too much noise and they eat all of the lichen so that it doesn't come back for a long time, and the muskox smell. The caribou do not like the smell when the muskox pee everywhere.
- We don't know why the muskox have come this way when they never used to.
- John Cotchilly told us, for example, that his Grandmother told him that they don't come this way because there is too much snow and their legs are too short for the deep snow, so they don't come. But we don't know why they are coming now.
- The moose are doing well. They have stronger legs and can go in deeper snow.

What is the relationship between caribou and predators?

- All of the animals are in balance together. There are lots of wolves now, but when they have less prey, they will start to starve and when that happens, they eat each other. The weak wolves are eaten by the stronger ones and that way the pack survives though it gets small and in time, there will be more wolves again once they have more prey. These are the cycles and the balance that the animals have.
- The wolves are important to the health of the caribou herd because they eat the weak and the sickly ones.
- But wolves look after themselves too. If they are starving they will become really serious and they will eat other caribou or the calves.
- The wolf doesn't only eat the caribou. The wolf will eat whatever it can find, it eats the furbearing animals too.
- The wolf will keep at the caribou herd until it is really tired. They are like that.
- But the wolf will never wipe the herd out. A wolf eats just what it needs to survive. It doesn't go out to fully destroy.

What should people do to look after the caribou?

- When some of our Elders and other community members met last year, we talked about this and said that we shouldn't do anything to interfere with the animals.
- We've talked about this some more this week and almost everybody is in agreement that the animals need to be left alone.
- The Elders feel this very strongly and when we speak to younger harvesters, we hear mostly that they agree and know that we need to listen to the wisdom of our Elders.
- This is important for the health and well-being of all living things – not just the animals themselves but people. If we treat the caribou and the other animals – the wolves, or the bears – poorly, then they will know and there will be consequences.

People have changed, not the animals

- It is the people who have changed, not the animal, so our actions need to be about the people, not the animals.
- It is not right to interfere with the wolves. Everything is in balance in nature. Our grandparents have told us about this and we've known about it since time immemorial.

We have also heard that non-Indigenous scientists have observed this also – for instance, the major negative effects that removing wolves had in Yellowstone Park. This reflects what our Elders have known since time immemorial.

- Our knowledge is different than non-Indigenous peoples'. As long as we have to prove it based on white man's knowledge and values, it will never work. The knowledge that we talk about, it isn't just one person saying it. It comes from ancient stories. It is our culture and it's been passed on to us. What is at the root of these issues is that other people do not understand and appreciate our values and knowledge. This needs to be talked about directly.
- Thomas Manuel, when he was sharing many of these cultural stories over the weekend tried to explain this to us. "This is not my knowledge, not my stories – these have been passed down to us from our grandparents – these are our cultural stories and our cultural knowledge."

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The animals have to be respected

- As Dene people, we know we have to respect animals. This has different meaning to us as it does to non-Indigenous people and it can't be fully understood outside of our culture.
- The animals in our stories that have been passed on to us talked to each other and they talked to people. Some K'ahsho Got'jñę used to be powerful people, who could understand what the animals said.
- These stories demonstrate a totally different way of understanding the world. The people and the animals are not separate. They talk to each other and depend on each other.
- The Elders shared a powerful story in helping us to prepare for this presentation. They explained that long ago, the barrenground caribou wanted to come this way from the barrenlands but the wolf stopped them and wouldn't let them pass. The wolf leader and the caribou leader spoke to each other and the caribou leader explained that the wolf had to let the caribou pass because the people - the K'ahsho Got'jñę – need the caribou, just as the wolf need the caribou to survive. The wolf leader understood this and let the caribou pass. In this way the animals respect each other and understand what they need to survive. Dene people are all equal with the animals in this relationship – we all need each other. Thomas Manuel shared this story.
- The Elders explain that the wolves are quite touchy, so we have to be careful how we treat them; we have to respect them.
- There are many stories about this. All animals are like this. For instance, Thomas Manuel shared a story about a hunter who was out hunting ducks. He saw many coming and said to them, you are going to be here soon, pointing into the boat beside him. When they got close he started shooting, shooting, and nothing. Because he spoke disrespectfully to them.
- The wolves are great hunters, they are very smart. They will approach caribou in a group and some will drive them one direction where the rest of the pack will be waiting for them. They hunt like us, that is how we hunt too.

- The Elders tell us that if we talk about the wolves and if we disrespect them, they will know what we are planning and they will chase the moose all over the place before the hunters go out on the land.

How we should make decisions

- We all want the caribou to be well. But we have different ways of doing things. John Cotchilly said to us on Monday that it is good that government wants to look after the caribou. We are thankful for this. But there is a good way to do things. We have to work together to find the right way.

What should be done?

- We want to express our strong support for the work that has already been done in the Sahtú to write down community plans. We have knowledge from thousands of years and that knowledge guides how we do things and how we are in harmony with the caribou. So we can write it down.
- We haven't worked on a plan yet so that is a next step, we need to write down our knowledge, and how we have always done things.
- We have started to talk about some of the things that will be in our plan.
- For example, we'd like to focus more on education of youth, so they know the good way of harvesting and how to respect the animals.
- We have always respected the caribou and the young people need to know how to look after the caribou too. For instance, we teach them to not harvest the females in the spring and later, to wait to harvest the females and calves until later.
- Also, the caribou always have leaders. So when they are migrating, you have to let them come through first. You have to leave the leaders alone or they won't come. They will turn back or scatter.
- We need to teach the youth our stories. This is how we know our knowledge. Over 100 years ago, when the first priest came, there was caribou all around here; all over. Thomas Manuel told us the story, he thinks it was the brother or the priest or someone hit the caribou and the caribou left. And our people wanted to see if the caribou could come back. There was a medicine man who was well-known for talking to the animals and they asked him, "can you ask the caribou to come back." And the man said "wait until tomorrow, I will let you know." So the next day he told his people that they didn't like when they got hit and that is why they left. And the animals told this person that they won't be back for a long, long time and that is the way it happened.
- Our Elders got all their stories from people who lived with the animals. That is how we know.
- People here also talk about muskox meat. It's tender because the muskox has shorter legs and doesn't move around so much so it's not as tough as caribou and moose.
- But muskox has a different flavour and it can be too strong, especially if it isn't prepared correctly. People here aren't used to eating it and preparing it, so we'd like to bring in teachers from the Eastern Arctic who can teach us this.

- People aren't eating it a lot now but it's because they have options. In the past, the Elders tell us that if there had been muskox like that around here, they would have been really happy. They would have eaten them.
- We also think that one of the best things we can do is be on the land. If people are on the land with the caribou then it helps keep the balance. It's like the wolf being out there. If there are more people it might keep more of the wolves away. So one of the problems is that people aren't on the land with the caribou as much as they used to be.
- We've talked together about how we need to look after their trails. If they come one way from the barrenland, we have to look after those trails. We need to make sure that the oil and gas companies know this and that the trails are protected. Land Use Planning is important for this.
- We also need to make and enforce rules to leave the caribou alone, like not having too many choppers and making sure that if there are helicopters, that they fly high.

What should not be done

- Our Elders tell us about how dependent they once were on harvested animals. They are still very important for us. But in the past, there were no stores. The animals were the only thing that our Elders and their parents and ancestors could eat.
- But when the whiteman came – our Elders still remember their parents talking about this – the whiteman trapped and harvested without limits until there were no animals. And then they made laws to limit what we could harvest.
- It was a crime beyond crime. Our Elders' parents were all under quota and they were starving. They could only take so much. Even until the 1980s, we could not harvest ducks in the spring. This is part of the story of how our culture has eroded and our relatives were starving. Our Elders' parents tell us that they had to harvest to survive but they had to do it in secret. You couldn't even leave a feather on the ground or you would get charged because they would know that you'd harvested a duck. You couldn't shoot beaver, you had to trap it and you were only allowed 15. When women heard a plane, they would run in the bush with their beaver pelt to hide it or you would get charged. It was ugly. Our Elders parents had to go to court to defend themselves against eating to survive.
- We can't talk about the wolves and can't make a bounty to kill them.
- It's for all these reasons that we've talked about – that the wolves have to be respected and ecology needs to be kept in balance. But there are also no barrenground caribou here, so the wolves around here aren't eating barrenground caribou, they are eating moose. So it's also ineffective.
- We also have to stop collaring caribou. Once we collar them, then the choppers come to follow them and they are harassed and people know where they are. Next they will start zoning them and then the caribou will never be left alone, they will always be bothered.

What we are already doing

- We haven't put a plan on paper yet, but it doesn't mean that our community doesn't have a plan. We talk all the time, and we have a shared vision for the future.
- We are already working on many initiatives to support this plan for the future.

- Government needs to understand this – we are doing many positive things to look after the land, the animals, our culture, our language. These things are much more impactful and more positive than killing wolves or having tags.
- We've made an agreement with government to establish Ts'udá Njłjné Tuyeta Protected Area. We are still working on the management plan, and negotiating this, but we've already started to implement our plans.
- For instance, we have four guardians and an Executive Director who works with them. They work closely with many people to develop partnerships and help with studies and monitoring.
- They are focusing on research and monitoring to understand how things are changing with climate change.
- At the Deshįta Got'jneę (the RRC) we hold five or six on the land camps each year. We focus on having youth and Elders involved in these to help support building intergenerational relationships and supporting youth to learn about their culture, language and spirituality.
- We also have people in the community each year who organize a moose-hide camp so that those traditions and skills continue and so that young people learn how to prepare moose hides.
- We have lots of on-the-land initiatives with youth. We organize these through wellness programs and through the initiatives related to Ts'udá Njłjné Tuyeta
- We have programs to help people who need housing or a sober place to live, and people in the community work to make sure that on the land and culture programs are all encompassed in those housing initiatives.
- It is really important that families are together on the land. Families are well when they do this. When you are a family on the land together, you wake up and you make a plan for the day. Everybody comes together at the end of the day and we have supper together.
- These things happen because of our hard work. We work hard to scrape together funds to make them happen.
- The RRC, for instance, has no funding beyond what it takes to keep the office open, and even that funding is new.
- Before we couldn't have any staff. Now we can have one administrator and myself as the President. But I have to work to write proposals and seek grants to hold the 5 or 6 camps we have each year. We want to make a community conservation plan but we don't have funds to do that. The K'asho Foundation helps with camps, and we help them with initiatives also.
- The RRC is majorly underfunded, and funding now has to make up for years of even worse funding when we couldn't build our capacity, policies and procedures.
- We cannot fulfill our mandate in the Sahtú Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement with the amount of funding we receive.
- It says in the Claim, in chapter 13, that an RRC "manages the local exercise of participants' harvesting rights." The RRC's mandate is to "encourage and promote local involvement in conservation, harvesting studies, research and wildlife management in the community." Since K'ahsho Gotjneę people traditionally live throughout our K'ashsho

region, that is a huge responsibility over a huge area, and we are not resourced to do this.

Reconciliation

- It's important that all of this conversation is seen as an act of reconciliation.
- Dene need to be in lead of how these things go forward because this authority has been taken away from us for so long. This is part of reconciliation.
- We still live to our traditional values.
- How do we keep our identify if we give up a little piece of it here and there? The way ENR treats us erodes who we are, a piece at a time.
- We are trying to focus on undoing a lot of the damage that has been done. If I go to you and I take your child away, then you will feel lost because there is no way to carry on your family. Our focus is carrying on the way that we live and the values that we have.
- Our Elders don't want to pass away not knowing that their values mean something.
- So traditionally, we have to listen to the Elders. We need to lead our community plans so that we can carry on our values and heal. We can't be controlled by people at desks in Yellowknife who don't understand our way of being and our land.
- We are not asking government to do anything that they aren't already legally obligated to do. We all signed the Sahtu Land Claim Agreement. It says very clearly in the first chapter that one of the objectives of the claim is to "recognize and encourage the way of life of the Sahtu Dene and Metis which is based on the cultural and economic relationship between them and the land."
- Another objective is to "encourage the self-sufficiency of the Sahtu Dene and Metis and to enhance their ability to participate fully in all aspects of the economy." It's important that government understands that Dene béré is an important part of our economy, even if it doesn't involve cash – it's about sharing and harvesting.
- Dene food sustains us and our culture.
- Some of the other objectives stated clearly in chapter 1 of the claim is about Sahtú Dene and Metis people taking part in decision-making about harvesting rights and concerning the use, management and conservation of land, water and resources. But if we are going to participate through processes like this, and then ENR is going to do what they want to do even though what they are doing is in opposition to a consensus that we have across the region, then that is not really participation. It is just pretend.
- Chapter 13 of the claim talks about wildlife harvesting and management. It describes the role of the SRRB and the RRCs. And one of the objectives stated in this chapter is to respect the harvesting and wildlife management customs and practices of the participants and provide for their ongoing needs for wildlife. This language is echoed in the *Wildlife Act*, which states that the GNWT must recognize and value "traditional Aboriginal values and practices in relation to harvesting and conservation of wildlife."
- We also wrote in our written "response to questions" that our right to exercise our own conservation practices is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Canada has adopted and this GNWT government has committed to implementing in its mandate.

- If government continues with tags and continues with wolf culls in the face of all this evidence about how it conflicts with our harvesting and wildlife management customs, then government is failing to live up to the commitments that they made when they signed the Agreement.
- These are the big commitments in the Claim. These are the ones that should guide us. Government is ignoring these big picture commitments, the core objectives, and instead holding on to tiny details about how to do things that were written 30 years ago and that don't make sense anymore because we've learned better ways of living together.
- This is about respecting our knowledge, our values and our culture. It's about upholding commitments that Government has made to us.
- It's about respect; it's about reconciliation.