

Staying Strong

Sahtú Youth and Elders Building Healthy Communities in
the Face of Climate Change

Volume I: Final Report



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Executive Summary

The Tulít'a Dene and Métis are resilient people who have always had to adapt to a challenging climate and waves of significant social, cultural, economic and other changes over the past two centuries. In the past fifty years, the northern Northwest Territories (NWT) has been warming a rate much greater than the global average. In the Sahtú Region, mean annual temperatures are expected to rise significantly into the future. Already, the impacts of climate change have been seen to affect travel out on the land, as well as wildlife and associated harvesting practices and food security. Together with the environmental and socio-economic changes that oil and gas activity in the region may bring, the pace and scale of the changes facing Tulít'a may be stretching local adaptive capacities.

This project involved youth, elders and other community members in Tulít'a and the Sahtú in research on issues related to community health and climate change. As the future leaders of their communities and those who will be most affected by climate change in the decades ahead, the project gave youth a solid foundation in both traditional knowledge and climate science, expanded their creative abilities to communicate and solve problems, and connected them with other motivated youth, knowledgeable elders and resource people from across the North.

The project explored the following questions from a community perspective:

- What can we learn from other Sahtú communities that have investigated the health risks associated with climate change?
- What can we learn from the knowledge of elders/harvesters (women and men) as well as the knowledge of western scientists that will help us protect our health amidst a rapidly changing climate?
- What specific adaptation strategies and actions should our community adopt to protect our health from climate change-related impacts?
- How can we creatively communicate our adaptation ideas to the rest of the community and to others outside the community, so people will listen and support our efforts?

To do so, a modified collaborative and cross-cultural methodology, including an Action Research influence, was utilized for the workshops and focus groups. It is hoped that the involvement of youth throughout the research process might, in some small ways, support future Dene and Métis leadership and self-governance in the region. Under the methodological approach, a range of activities were undertaken for this project, including focus groups, on-the-land trips, presentations, workshops, as well as skill-building and communications work with youth participants.

options in the community of Tulít'a. However, rather than focusing exclusively on climate change, it was found that participants more often situated climatic changes within a broader discussion of ecological, social and cultural changes being experienced in Tulít'a and the Sahtú – including the resource exploration activity taking place in the region.

An emphasis was also placed on traditional knowledge in the discussion of climate change impacts and adaptation measures in Tulít'a and the Sahtú. Stories and observations of climatic and other environmental changes told here included predictions of warming temperatures, and experiences with permafrost degradation, changing wildlife patterns, and new challenges in travelling out on the land. A central theme that was raised repeatedly by participating elders and youth as both a source of community vulnerability and potential resilience was Dene language, identity, traditional knowledge, stories and way of life, including the land upon which many of these things are based.

A significant breakthrough of this project, therefore, was the facilitation of the transmission of Traditional and other forms of knowledge not only from elders to youth, but from youth to elders also. On-the-land and language and cultural revitalization programming have been strongly identified as means of protecting the health of Tulít'a and other Sahtú communities from the impacts of climate and environmental change. As well, further efforts to support the agency and self-determination of Sahtú communities, including greater information and consultation on resource development projects, and improved access to healthcare, is warranted.

An outgrowth of the *Staying Strong* project is a regional youth initiative for 2014-2015 sponsored by Health Canada to develop specific adaptation strategies and actions that Sahtú communities, entitled *Establishing a Sahtú Youth Network for a Regional Action Plan on the Health Impacts of Climate Change*.