

Technical Review of the
Belarewélé Gots'ę ʔelwé: Déljné Caribou Conservation
A Déljné Got'jné Plan of Action

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Experiencing Caribou

In September 2001, I was with 27 elders, harvesters, and community researchers at ?ewaànit'itì (Courageous Lake), where there is important fall caribou range and water crossings. Our twin otter was loaded with people, gear, tents, and some groceries. As we approached ?ewaànit'u (the place where the sand stretches almost across the lake), where the elders chose to camp, we could see caribou—not thousands, but enough.

We landed and the some harvesters walked towards where they had seen the caribou from the plane. Others set nets for fish while the rest of us set up tents, gathered firewood, and waited for the second plane. The harvesters returned saying they did not see any caribou. The second plane did not arrive as it had become very windy.

The next day the harvesters walked on the tundra again, towards where we had seen the caribou. The rest of us walked with the elders so we could consider the state of the vegetation on which caribou forage, and pick berries. As we walked, we came across the remains of a caribou. The elders were concerned, questioning who had been so disrespectful.

As we returned to camp, we heard that hunters still did not see any caribou. As we sat eating fresh fish and pork chops, the elders told stories of caribou—stories of when caribou did not come and how they returned. Stories about how caribou do not come to those who do not use everything, who abuse caribou, who wear cowhide or boreal caribou clothing when hunting caribou, or who eat store-bought meat demonstrating they do not need caribou.

We heard stories about their dismay at the industrial development happening on prime caribou summer and fall range. We heard how the mines have destroyed caribou water-crossings, causing cows to be tired and stressed. We heard about the potential for calves to be born before cows reach the birthing grounds. We heard how the land has been changing, becoming drier; how there used to be more berries. We heard about what caribou need, how to treat and respect them. We heard their concerns about how their own young people and government decision-makers lack the knowledge to know how to treat and respect caribou; how

their behaviour suggests that they do not understand that caribou provides everything from food to spiritual relations .

Elder Jimmy Martin, the camp leader, listened to everyone. And then he spoke. He told his own stories. He expressed his concerns and then gave direction. He was concerned that I had a cowhide backpack and we had pork chops in the camp. Both indicated to the caribou that we did not need them. He directed me to put my cowhide backpack on the plane when the second flight came in. He wanted my backpack to go back to Yellowknife.

Elder Jimmy Martin gave direction about how to cook and eat the pork chops. He directed other elders to share their stories with young people, regardless of their language skills. He stressed the importance of young people hearing stories and travelling the trails to the places where the stories originate, especially those associated with caribou. He talked about how he and other male and female elders would talk to the Chiefs about more on-the-land programs for young people. He expressed his concerns about recreational hunters, the need to use everything, and problems with industry.

We consumed the pork chops. The next day I sent my cowhide pack back on the plane. The caribou returned, the hunters went on, and everyone felt relieved they would be returning to their communities with caribou meat, hides, marrow, bones, and other resources. Women started drying meat and making blood soup. The elders took us to clean burial sites and to visit places where many people used to live in wall tents during the early winter. We continued to look carefully at the vegetation caribou prefer to forage on.

Introduction

This review was requested by the ʔehdzo Got'ıne Gotsè nákedı (Sahtú Renewable Resources Board) for anthropological analysis of *Délıne Caribou Conservation: A Délıne Got'ıne Plan of Action* (the Délıne Plan).

I consider the Délıne Plan in light of the following:

- Caribou are like relatives to the Sahtù Dene

- Numbers of ʔekwé have been decreasing since 2010.

The story at the start of this analysis tells of a personal experience I had in 2001. I observed first hand when Dene, stewards of the land, expressed their concerns about what had happened to the caribou. In discussing their concerns, they found solutions that brought the caribou back. It may be a smaller occurrence than the one currently taking place among northern caribou. But it tells of how we all live with the environment and influence what happens in places where barren-ground caribou travel.

We need to consider many factors when we talk about managing the relationship between humans and caribou. This relationship is more than hunting for food, for subsistence or recreation. It is more than monitoring caribou movement and counting cows and calves, as is so often proposed in government caribou management plans, such as the current *Proposed Management Plan for the Bluenose-East Barren Ground Caribou Herd*.

The Délı̄nę Plan proposes a responsible management plan that uses Dene values to guide human behaviour associated with hunting and using all that ʔekwé has to offer, and ‘leaving them alone’ to recover.

Stories and Knowledge

Dene stories contain knowledge—Dene náowérá—of the storyteller. Stories provide information that guide the listener’s behaviour. They tell of human-ʔekwé relations over time; the never ending changes to ʔekwé ecology. Dene stories contain what is known and important for guiding others’ behaviour on the landscape.

People most often share stories when they discuss the land or after they are on the land. When sharing what they experienced, the storyteller is providing important information to guide thinking and find solutions. Stories intertwine with knowledge that comes from the past, allowing harvesters to observe and share what is occurring on the land where ʔekwé travel.

When hunting and using ʔekwé, people tell stories to find guidance or to guide the behaviour of younger people. The stories that the Dene and other indigenous elders tell reach into all aspects of life.

Current stories of ʔekwé show how the problem is with people, not ʔekwé. The consensus is that it is not hunting, but how the people—Dene and non-Dene—treat the ʔekwé. People are responsible to guide and manage their behaviour, to maintain a healthy, productive ʔekwé population. Through stories and activities, women and men of all ages can learn and practice the knowledge of ʔekwé.

Managing and guiding human behaviour and relations with ʔekwé are key components throughout the Délı̄ne Plan.

Migrate to people with whom they have a respectful, reciprocal relationship

Délı̄ne Got'ınę stories guide others to maintain respectful relations with ʔekwé so they survive and continue to migrate towards the people. Elders and harvesters know that population declines are usually related to human ethical transgressions. Not only those who hunt and use caribou, but also those who (want to) use ʔekwé habitat for industrial development and associated infrastructures.

Elders are deeply concerned about the current combined impacts of industrial development and climate change on the ʔekwé range. They are concerned that ʔekwé may not be able to survive the resulting dry and fragmented habitat. To be knowledgeable about ʔekwé, humans—Dene and non-Dene—must have knowledge of what ʔekwé need, and use that knowledge wisely. Elders recognize that often the problem for caribou is human behaviour—whether or not we accept responsibility for habitat destruction and fragmentation. Elders are concerned about human behaviour, as they know humans are responsible for the loss of caribou habitat.

The Délı̄ne Plan is designed to bring hope, while maintaining respectful relations through a ceremonial harvest that incorporates families and communities working together. It emphasizes that strong leadership is needed to ensure that people respect hunting decisions.

The Délı̄ne Got'ı̄ne will remember ʔekwé stories while experiencing, knowing, and living with ʔekwé during a time of change. The Délı̄ne Plan provides a Dene way of renewing spiritual relations with ʔekwé while finding additional avenues to deal with food security and economic impacts that low ʔekwé populations bring to the community.

Through the Délı̄ne Plan, the ideal is, if people can take care of the earth and respect and live with the land, “there’s a good chance ʔekwé can survive a little longer” (Elder Alfred Taniton, 2016:10).

‘Sometimes the ʔekwé do not come’

The Délı̄ne Plan states that the Délı̄ne Got'ı̄ne harvest a wide variety of species—year to year and over time—in response to ʔekwé migration and population fluctuations. They accept that the population fluctuates through time. They accept that respectful practices help ʔekwé migrate to Dene, and that ʔekwé are their ‘own boss’ and they make up their own mind—they migrate where they want. When ʔekwé are in decline, Dene do not usually accept that managing ʔekwé is possible or needed (Abele *et al* 2010).

Rather, Dene elders and harvesters share stories that guide human behaviour in relation to the environment, of which ʔekwé is an integral being with spirit and intent. They share these stories with the intent that appropriate behaviour will follow, and that ʔekwé will notice and their spirit will wish to return.

Stories tell of times when people tried to control all that dwells within the environment, and that these actions usually end in disaster. Sandlos (2003) discusses how government rules and legislation are intended to control and manage the relations between wildlife and indigenous people in the NWT. Dene people remember how these laws caused hardship and starvation. How these laws forced them to assimilate a little more into the dominant society (Nadasdy 2003).

The elders' wisdom and understanding suggest that the most important ‘driver of change’ for ʔekwé and their habitat is human behaviour and

human respect for ʔekwé. Respect includes knowledge of human-animal relations.

The Délı̨nę Plan is designed to work with the GNWT while governing themselves and their relations with ʔekwé.

Predators

Dene stories tell that, like ʔekwé, Dene have relations with wolves and bears; and, like humans, ʔekwé have relations with both. Like Dene, both bears and wolves harvest ʔekwé. Dene people view both animals as having their own spirit and intelligence. Stories tell of bears and wolves as they dwell within the environment along with ʔekwé and Dene. In telling stories, elders guide the listener to understand that people can do little about predators because they need to achieve their own balance within the environment.

The Délı̨nę Plan stresses the importance of good harvesting practices when taking wolves or bears. Like other aspects of the Délı̨nę Plan, elders and scientists will guide the community in this through research, education, advocacy, and communication.

In the last few years, many Sahtú Dene are concerned that people—Dene and non-Dene—are treating the environment as a recreation area rather than a landscape that provides spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical well-being to the people. Recreation hunters often chase ʔekwé on skidoos, causing ʔekwé to be stressed and exhausted. Elders and harvesters are concerned that young people use their fast snow machines to chase ʔekwé. That they treat harvesting and their time on the land like a recreational sport, rather than understanding that all beings are all part of the earth; that they must be guided to respect all that the land that gives us.

Stories guide the listener to think about what happens to ʔekwé if they are stressed and exhausted. Experiencing this shows the reality that meat is of poorer quality and ʔekwé become more susceptible to predators when exhausted and stressed.

The education program in the Délı̄nę Plan ensures that people understand and respect Délı̄nę's self-regulated Ɂekwé harvest limit.

Monitoring; Observing and Experiencing

Sharing observations and experiences through stories is one way of knowing Ɂekwé. When harvesters enjoy being on the land where they undertake a number of tasks. They observe all that is taking place. They think about living with the environment and the Ɂekwé who like humans travel through places.

The harvester's approach is not to 'monitor' one species or one patch of vegetation, as so often a scientist tends to do. Harvesters take in all that occurs, including their own behaviour. If they are able to kill Ɂekwé, they consider and remember if Ɂekwé are skinny or fat, healthy or not. They consider the state of the habitat on which they harvested.

Stewardship and Management

In the story at the start of this analysis, the Dene consider problems and find solutions. The elders and harvesters at the camp wanted to ensure their community had meat, hides, bones, and other resources that Ɂekwé has to offer. The hunters and the women making dry meat and preparing the hides were thinking about the well-being of their communities. In being stewards of the land, responsibility does not end with enhancing the population of Ɂekwé—although it helps. Rather the Dene stewards, managers, and educational guides find solutions that focus on community well-being—culture, language, economics, food security, spiritual well-being.

The Dene stress that Ɂekwé provides all. They know that Ɂekwé and humans both dwell with all that is on the environment. And they know we can only truly understand and know the different ways of respecting and finding harmony if we spend time on the land with elders and hear the stories before, during, and after having an experience on the land.

The Délı̨ne Plan builds on holistic ideals, such as remembering and renewing what being Dene meant to their ancestors; what being Dene means today. Stories provide this information.

The Délı̨ne Plan includes renewing and remembering the importance of sharing with others in Délı̨ne, other communities, and across regions. It provides opportunities for families and communities to spend time on the land in a variety of situations.

- Doing research that includes science and Dene knowledge.
- Working and learning what the land has to offer.
- Guiding families to work together in knowing ɂekwé, while respecting the elders' words. "When people talk about ɂekwé too much, it's not good."

It is said that when ɂekwé move away, they want to be left alone. We need to give them a rest for as long as it takes them to recover. Dene stories tell that when the populations return, ɂekwé will make a thundering sound.

The Délı̨ne Plan works from the knowledge that all women and men, including youth, need to learn and practice respectful attitudes and behaviours. Elders teach respectful practices in combination with stories that provide the Dene perspective. For example, guiding listeners to understand fully what it means to respect ɂekwé.

Stories (oral narratives) are not part of public government offices and processes. But without stories, the values, knowledge, and practices are absent from the processes that directly affect Dene people. Land claims agreements—government-to-government relationships—and the bodies that are part of those agreements have largely failed to realize the potential of describing and implementing management processes from a true Dene perspective.

Dene stories tell of changes that impact ɂekwé, of which humans are a part. During research on climate change and health across the Canadian north, indigenous people identified many, varied threats that currently have negative impacts on ɂekwé.

Most of these changes are credited to the dominant society—to their lack of knowledge and inability to strive for balance in the environment where animals and humans live. These changes account for habitat destruction and fragmentation, resulting from things such as pollution, industrial development, and climate change (especially increased wildfires and dryness). The threats are complex and difficult to predict. And we expect many, such as climate change, to increase in the future.

The Délı̄nę Plan builds on the Bluenose Caribou Management Plan *Taking Care of Caribou*. Participating wildlife management authorities approved this plan in November 2014. Together the regional groups who harvest the Bluenose caribou populations are committed to achieving the following.

While the immediate need for the plan was in response to reported declines in the herds, the intent is for the plan to address caribou management and stewardship over the long term. The ultimate goal is to ensure that there are caribou today and for future generations. The management goals are to maintain herds within the known natural range of variation, conserve and manage caribou habitat, and ensure that harvesting is respectful and sustainable.

This type of current management plan typically ignores the impacts of development on ʔekwé and their habitat, other than birthing grounds. Management actions focus more on restricting harvesting. I have heard Dene say that given the historic context of such restrictions, they are afraid to go on the land because wildlife officers are watching constantly. They do not want to be charged but they do not want their children to lose their cultural values either.

The Sacred Relationship

Most of the literature about the Dene relationship with ʔekwé discusses how people live with and depend on caribou as a source of food and livelihood. And this is true to a significant. Also significant to the Dene perspective and to people's behaviour towards 'caring for' ʔekwé is the knowledge of being relatives and having a sacred, reciprocal relationship.

The Dene have relations with all that is part of the land, not just caribou. Dene often say that the land is like their mother and father because it provides everything. Humans and caribou occupy the same landscape, the same space. Although they use different trails and places when travelling between the tundra and boreal forest, their trails and places converge creating stories of significance. Humans and caribou mutually dwell within the environment. Each performs activities that change the landscape and that may or may not influence the behaviour of the other.

The Dene perspective is common among hunter-gatherers and known in the anthropological literature as the dwelling perspective (Ingold 2000). This perspective does not separate culture and biology, or humans and animals as the Western perspective does.

The dwelling perspective acknowledges that all beings—human or other-than-human—dwell with all that is part of the land/environment. It is more than an ecological relationship. It is about being like a relative with spiritual connections. This perspective encourages being knowledgeable and flexible rather than controlling and inflexible.

The dwelling perspective is fundamental to managing ʔekwé from a Dene perspective. Yet it does not fit into the biological framework of distribution, habitat, biology and behaviour, population estimates, threats and limiting factors, and positive influences. Knowledge about the social-cultural value and significance of barren-ground caribou to the well-being of humans (and vice-versa) are ignored. As Nadasdy (2003) states, First Nations in Canada must become bureaucratized to ensure their role in discussions about their future in relation to the environment.

Managing people not caribou—the importance of being knowledgeable

Humans and caribou share space. In doing so, their spirits mingle and influence the behaviour of ʔekwé. We could focus just on caribou habitat as an indicator of their state of being. But equally important is human behaviour. And human behaviour often depends on knowledge.

Discussing ʔekwé as One Herd not Three Herds

Traditional knowledge of herd size is not well-documented (Parlee *et al* 2013). The Sahtú Dene consider ʔekwé as one caribou herd that uses three different birthing grounds (Bayha 2012). Conversely, GNWT biologists identify three different herds in the same region that the Sahtu Dene harvest: Bluenose West, Bluenose East, and Cape Bathurst.

The Délı̨ne Plan incorporates the Sahtú Dene way of understanding ʔekwé as one herd that occupies difference spaces as they travel through the landscape. It also acknowledges how the GNWT has set limits for each of the three herds.

Collaring ʔekwé

Current Dene discussions and stories emphasize leaving the ʔekwé alone, to stop speaking (negatively) about them. What does it mean to “leave them alone”?

Human behaviour is key to the success of ʔekwé. Elders do not see all the biologists’ and policy makers’ discussions as being respectful or helpful to healthy ʔekwé populations.

Comments at meetings suggest a number of activities that show ignorance of ʔekwé and inability to show proper respect towards beings that share the earth. The one I hear most is “do not put collars on caribou”. Decision-makers feeling it is okay to use collars because they are following ‘best-practises’. From a Dene perspective, the best practice is to leave the collars off. They see collars as harmful, like putting a collar on a relative and letting them walk around with it. The decision-makers in the dominant society ignore this as just a ‘belief’. They continue to make decisions based on their own beliefs that wildlife / caribou are not persons, and that persons do not have ‘real’ relations with caribou.

Elders are concerned about a similar lack of knowledge of those who make decisions about industrial developments and wildlife management processes.

Co-management

In Canada, co-management is intended to provide Indigenous people with a voice—to improve their position by giving them a role and a say in managing resources. But to do this, the Dene learned new ways of governing themselves. They have become bureaucracies. This is evident when we compare caribou conservation plan from Dèḻṉę and the *Proposed Management Plan for the Bluenose-East Barren Ground Caribou Herd* from the GNWT. The Dèḻṉę Plan focuses on managing people in relation to ʔekw̱é. The ENR proposal focuses on harvest management, predator control and monitoring.

Dene people tend to see problems and discuss issues associated with ‘appropriate’ behaviour through time; and continue to discuss until they reach a solution that often requires creating new rules and new process as is reflected in the Dèḻṉę Plan.

Benefits of Dèḻṉę Plan

Several factors make the Dèḻṉę Plan beneficial and workable. The working group took time to consider many variables. They built those variables into the plan from start to finish. They considered what worked and what didn’t work through time, current factors and key issues that impact caribou, community relations, and how youth learn. They incorporated awards for those that follow Dene values and laws; for guiding and teaching; for families, individuals, young people, and elders.

The Dèḻṉę Plan outlines how elders are involved each step of the way as important teachers of the Dene perspective, who share their knowledge through stories and by providing advice. The Dèḻṉę Plan also considers the current situation for youth, who are graduating from school, and for ʔekw̱é, who want to be left alone to recuperate. The Dèḻṉę Plan recognizes the focus must be on Dene ways and values, but recognizes that youth now also learn western ways from many sources—people, media, etc.

Consultation

Consultation for the Délı̨nę Plan took many different forms. Elders participated at every stage of the process.

The Délı̨nę working group considered what had worked and what didn't work through time—from the earliest information encapsulated in stories to current key issues. First, they consulted their oldest stories to think about how their ancestors lived with caribou and the environment. It was during this time that ʔekwé and dı̨ga (wolf) renewed their relationship. Next, they considered stories that come from the past and from academic literature (Sandlos 2003) to think about what had taken place soon after the British and Canadian governments started controlling wildlife. Finally, they considered the period of land claims agreements and the coming of self-government for the Délı̨nę Got'ine. This period includes working with various forms of management plans, including co-management processes such as ACCWM, Species at Risk, and Bluenose Caribou Management Plans. This has put the Sahtu Dene generally and the Délı̨nę Got'ine more specifically to work, to mentor the importance of learning and communicating across cultures.

During consultation, the Délı̨nę working group considered many community discussions that took place throughout the Sahtú Region.

- Discussions about the Bluenose Caribou Management Plan, about how they could work together as stewards of the ʔekwé.
- Discussions about the Bluenose West herd at the 2007 Bluenose West ʔekwé management hearing convened by ʔehdzo Got'ı̨nę Gotsé Nákedı̨.
- The ʔedkwé ghq Łánats'edà—A Gathering for the Caribou held at Délı̨nę the last week of January 2015.
- Leadership stewardship meeting at Colville Lake on mid-April 2015.

The working group trained leaders from their community to work with the *Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation Approach*. Community members continue to benefit from the mentorship of Stuart Cowell who works with indigenous people in Australia. They were key to adapting the *Open Standards* to fit Délı̨nę's needs.

Conclusions

Based on my understanding of the Dene perspective, the Délı̄nę Plan is a responsible community management plan. It supports community members to renew and remember caribou during times when ʔekwé numbers are low.

The community of Délı̄nę takes their self-governing role seriously. The Délı̄nę Plan will enhance Dene governance and more likely ensure the ʔekwé are cared for. The community of Délı̄nę knows it is not about managing ʔekwé but about guiding people to follow ʔekwé ʔeʔa (caribou laws) in taking action. And they carefully consider a number of factors.

This is a 10-year plan. Money is often a deterrent to innovative ideas that build on cultural values. This proposal outlines in detail how much each action will cost, and the costs are generally low and realistic.

The Délı̄nę Plan considers ʔekwé as one herd. This allows people to work more closely with other Sahtu communities and other regions that harvest from the ʔekwé herd, rather than that splitting the focus. And with closer working relationships, it is possible the Délı̄nę Plan will help solve some of the communication and governance issues that arise with so many different legislated organizations associated with the *Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement*.

Finally, this approach is more likely to have positive effects on what co-management means. This stewardship approach allows people to experience co-management more from a Dene perspective. It brings more Dene people into the discussion while using ʔekwé ʔeʔa (caribou laws).

The Délı̄nę Plan considers the importance of recognizing the Dene as their own boss, that it is important to follow Dene ʔeʔa, (Dene laws). People are more likely to trust the process, and have open and honest discussions about when the process needs to change. People are more likely to make it their own, through their language of land and concepts of place, and ensure leaders are chosen that are knowledgeable about the topic.

The Délı̄nę Plan recognizes the need for a cultural shift to deal with changes in ʔekwé populations and to maintain good relations with other

communities and regions. There is a process and forum for Dene to report problems, and then discuss how to solve those problems. It is less likely that problems will be solved from the top down. Elders will participate at every stage of the process.

The Délı̨nę working group took the time to gather information and consult with members of other Sahtu communities. In taking their time, they developed an efficient work plan. For example:

- A detailed outline of a harvest policy, based on Dene and ʔekwé ʔeʔa (Dene and caribou laws).
- A ʔekwé code linked to land claims, Dene ideals, history, and current observations. The code includes: definitions and interpretations, vision and objectives, ceremonial harvest, Dene Ts'ı̨lı award program, harvest methods, season and monitoring, and enforcement
- Collecting and monitoring harvesting information in conjunction with ENR, GNWT based on a set of questions. These are:
 - How will people monitor the harvest?
 - What happens if hunters don't report their harvest?
 - Who is responsible to monitor the harvest?
 - How do you plan to communicate with the public?
 - When the harvest reaches 100 and 150 caribou harvested, what happens to close down the hunt?
 - How do you plan to minimize the harvest of tsída?
 - How do you plan to deal with the funding?
 - Are visitors allowed to harvest?
 - What process and body will authorize Délı̨nę Got'ı̨nę to harvest?
 - How do you plan to organize health sample kits?

The plan ties together the idea of healthy land, healthy people, and healthy ʔekwé. And ongoing health depends on enhancing knowledge through research, education, advocacy and communication, and Dene sharing stories on the land—to understand what is really happening to ʔekwé and

their habitat. The plan recognizes the importance of having many types of knowledge and the different ways that people learn.

Recommendations

This technical review has two recommendations. The first is important to strengthen the Délı̨nę Plan in guiding humans to conserve ʔekwé. The second is important to communicate the plan to other Sahtú communities and other Dene regions.

1. Stories are key to guiding, remembering, and informing people about respectful and knowledgeable behaviour with ʔekwé. Rushforth (1994), who worked in Colville Lake, was among the first to discuss the importance of stories to communicate knowledge and the levels and depth of knowledge. The Délı̨nę Plan has many good education programs to help community members be good stewards. Yet there importance is referred to fewer than five times. The plan does mention there are a series of keystone stories that can be included in the plan to make it more meaningful.

I recommend that the Délı̨nę Plan develop ways to continuously ‘tell/share’ (not document) stories, so that people – especially young people – have ongoing access to the language used in stories and new and relevant land-based knowledge. Education between elders/harvesters and youth is key to maintaining human-animal relations.

2. The process and content of the Délı̨nę Plan is a refreshing new approach to using indigenous perspectives and knowledge in co-management discussions and decisions. Many people within and outside the Sahtú Region depend on ʔekwé and should be involved.

I recommend that a knowledgeable person travel to other Dene communities to explain the plan and answer questions. This requires funding to pay for travel, salary, and any needed resources to communicate the plan effectively.

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