

APPENDIX D - Speakers and Learners: Data Collection on Language, Practice, and Ideology in the Sahtú

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Introduction

This Appendix supplements the thematic timeline presented in the report *From Dene Kedə to Dene Ts'ı̄l̄ı̄* with a more detailed overview of trends in statistics on language use and traditional activities in the Sahtú region throughout time.

Prior to the establishment of organizations like the Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics, some visitors and residents of the North made observations about the proficiency and volume of language speakers. Population estimates from the 19th century (with no guarantee as to accuracy) place the Dene population in the Sahtú region as between 270 to 720, depending on the era, waves of disease, and the method/parameters of the enumerator.¹

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the passing of the Official Languages Act (OKA), language use tracking in the NWT began in earnest. A chart from one of the first Language Commissioner's reports illustrates the changes that were beginning during this time. The first figure shows Sahtú children between five and fourteen years of age, and their abilities to read, write, and speak their Indigenous languages. The second shows Sahtú adults. An abrupt change occurs between the two generations in many communities, as illustrated most clearly in Colville lake, where 100% of Indigenous persons over 15 are able to speak an Aboriginal language, while only a third (33%) of those under 15 are able to do the same. One can see similar trends in Norman Wells, Tulit'a (Fort Norman), and Fort Good Hope.

Figure 1: Aboriginal Language Abilities (Reading, Writing, and Speaking) in the Sahtú, 1991: Over and under age 15.

Source: Office of the Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories [Betty Harnum]. *“Together, we can do it!” 2nd Annual Report for the period April 1, 1993, to March 21, 1994.* Yellowknife, 1994.

NB: Figures with asterisks are drawn from population sizes too small to determine significance.

"Number of Aboriginal People (5 to 14 Years) Speaking, Reading and Writing an Aboriginal Language, NWT 1991"					
	Aboriginal Population	Speak Aboriginal Languages	%	Read Aboriginal Languages	Write Aboriginal Languages
Colville Lake	15	5	33%	xx	xx
Délı̄nɛ	120	115	96%	75	60*
Fort Good Hope	140	30*	21%	xx	xx
Fort Norman	60	20*	33%	15*	10*
Norman Wells	30	xx	xx	xx	xx
"Number of Aboriginal People (15 Years and over) Speaking, Reading and Writing an Aboriginal Language, NWT 1991"					
	Aboriginal Population	Speak Aboriginal Languages	%	Read Aboriginal Languages	Write Aboriginal Languages
Colville Lake	45	45	100%	15	5
Délı̄nɛ	330	325	98%	80	40*
Fort Good Hope	340	230	68%	55*	40*
Fort Norman	225	180	80%	45	35*
Norman Wells	85	35	41%	20	15*

Trend Mapping: 1980s to Present

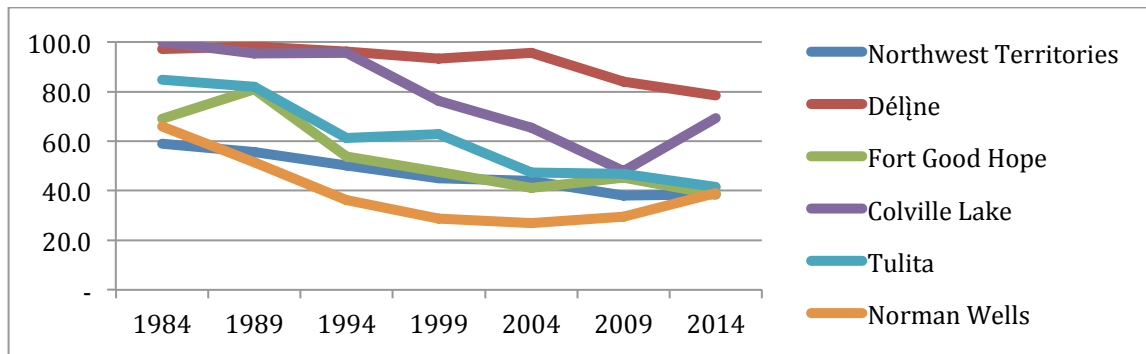
Some of the first (and most consistent) publically available, methodically gathered statistics on language use come out of the GNWT Bureau of Statistics community surveys. The community surveys are done every 2 or 3 years, in between census cycles, and the questions on them have remained constant so as to be comparable throughout time. Only two questions have been added or changed since the first survey (one on berry harvesting, one on arts and crafts). Workers conduct person-to-person interviews in all official languages, done in winter months so that people will be home instead of on the land.ⁱⁱ

The following chart tracks percent of “Aboriginals that Speak an Aboriginal Language” (therefore, not exclusively North Slavey) in each Sahtú community and in the Northwest Territories, and different trends emerge in each. Most of the communities in the Sahtú have many more Indigenous language speakers than the Northwest Territories on average, with the exception of Norman Wells (though this trend has begun to shift). Colville Lake, Fort Good Hope, Tulı́t’a, and to a certain extent Norman Wells show a steep decline in Indigenous language speakers beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the 1990s. Délı̄nɛ begins to see significant decline in the 2000s, with the biggest reduction in language use occurring for people who were 15-24 in

2014. Colville Lake and Norman Wells show an increase in speakers in 2014. Note that due to small population sizes, recent trends will show themselves to be more or less reliable as time passes and more data is collected.

Figure 2: Percent of Aboriginals that Speak an Aboriginal Language in the Sahtú and Northwest Territories, 1984-2014.

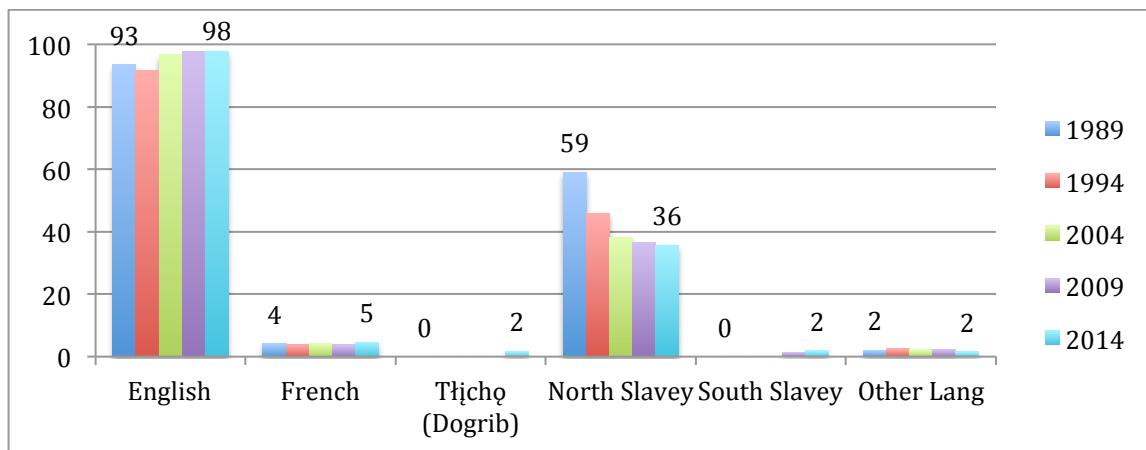
Source: Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics Community Surveys, 1984-2014. Data reformatted.



For an improved understanding of which Indigenous languages Figure 2 represents, we can turn to a second source of data enumerating language use in the Sahtú. Below, Tłı̄chʔ and South Slavey are shown to be growing (very slightly) in use in the region, while “other languages” (which may include Cree and Inuktitut) are spoken but not significantly enough to appear in the public dataset.

Figure 3: Percent of Sahtú adults (persons over 15) who are able to converse in each language present, 1989-2014.

Source: Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics Community Surveys, 1984-2014. Data Reformatted.



A second way of examining this data is to look at the generational breakdown of North Slavey speakers in the Sahtú. At the time of writing, the most current data is from 2014. In each community, a careful viewer can see a generation where the percentage of Dene language speakers drops significantly.

In Colville Lake, the North Slavey speaking population dropped by almost half between the generation of people 65+ and people 44-64. Counting back from 2014, that means the group of people born between **1950** and **1970** already had only half of its people speaking the language. Since then the decline has been more gradual, with another big reduction for those currently ages 0-15. This would mean a second big decline in language speakers between **2000** and **2014**.

In **Dél̨ne**, the biggest reduction in language use occurred for people who were 15-24 in 2014; in other words people born between **1990 and 1999**. Since then, there has been another slight drop. In **Tulit'a** the number of language speakers grew by 10% for the youngest generation (those ages 0-15 in 2014).

Figure 5 represents this same data in an alternative way: highlighted in grey you can see the place where speakers halve for each different community. Interestingly, Colville Lake, Norman Wells and Tulit'a all dropped by half in the 1950s and 60s. Fort Good Hope dropped in the 70s and 80s; while Dél̨ne did not drop immensely until the 1990s.

Figure 4: Percentage of Each Age Group with the Ability to Speak North Slavey Well Enough to Carry on a Conversation, 2014.

Source: Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics 2014. Data Reformatted.

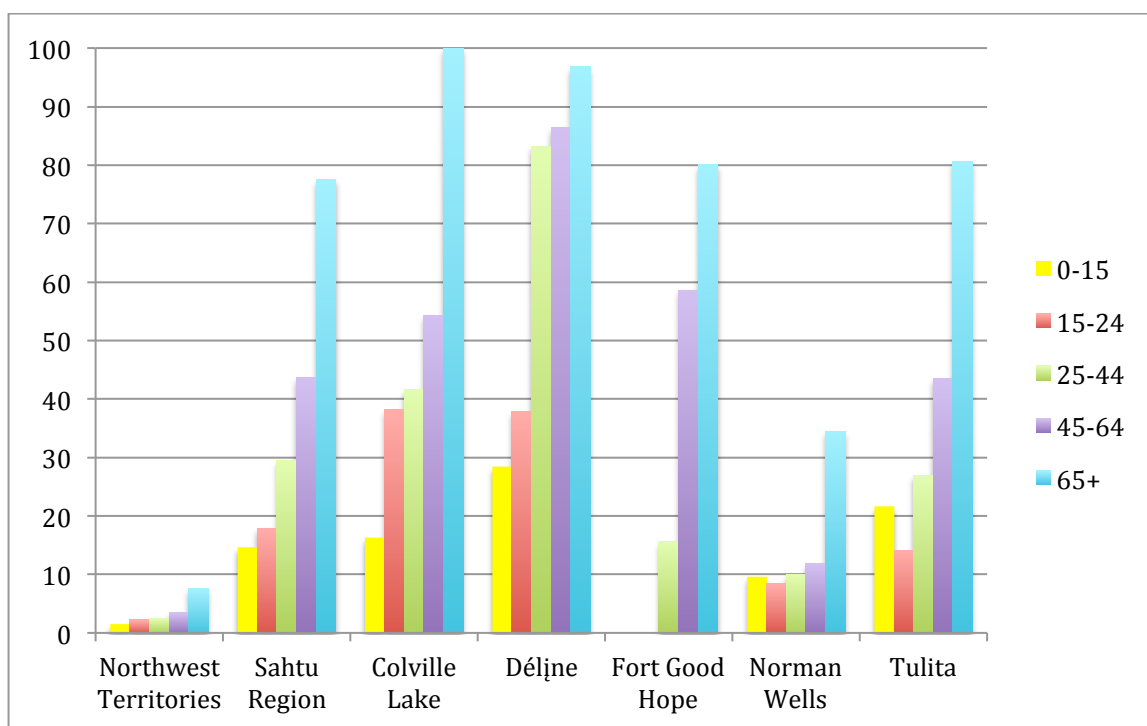


Figure 5: Percentage of Each Age Group with the Ability to Speak North Slavey Well Enough to Carry on a Conversation, 2014.

Source: Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics 2014. Data Reformatted.

	0-15	15-24	25-44	45-64	65+
Northwest Territories	2	2	2	3	8
Sahtu Region	15	18	30	44	78
Colville Lake	16	38	42	54	100
Dél̨ne	28	38	83	86	97
Fort Good Hope	nd	nd	16	59	80
Norman Wells	10	8	10	12	34
Tulita	22	14	27	44	81
Born between years:	2000-14	1990-99	1970-89	1950-69	xx-1949

Statistics Canada data from the years 1980 to today also exists, but with some caveats around how each language was and is counted (for example, census data did not always distinguish between North and South Slaveyⁱⁱⁱ). Nevertheless, Statistics Canada’s collection of data on Mother Tongue and language used in the home allowed for the comparative measurement of “language shift” (what percentage of people are using a different language than their mother tongue in their homes).^{iv} Language shift for Slavey was lower than Gwich’in, Cree and many other Official Languages in the 1980s and 1990s.^v In 1996, when North Slavey was added to the census as a separate language, language shift (or home-language to mother-tongue ratio) was 59%.^{vi}

Importantly, the Canadian Census added the question on “Ability to Converse” in 1991. This allowed Statistics Canada to measure second language learning, as opposed to Mother Tongue. The Statistics Canada 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey was a landmark study that collected data on ability to converse by degrees, frequency of exposure, and many other items;^{vii} however, the data specifically for North Slavey was not publically available.

Redefining Measurements for Language Use

In conjunction with a number of critiques of the use of “number of speakers” as a measurement for language vitality, NWT organizations have increasingly been attempting to understand language use and literacy in multiple ways, using consultation and community engagement as a basis for developing new frameworks. For example, even though the NWT has historically had very high rates of “functional illiteracy,” (less than a grade nine education)^{viii} this figure has also failed to represent literacies other than “school literacy.” The NWT Literacy Council posited a model for Aboriginal literacies in 2002; wherein literacy could refer to the skillful use of oral or written Indigenous language to foreground relationships, connections, and traditional knowledge.^{ix} This kind of thinking is intended to help policy makers and educators promote language communities’ work, create language materials that are also “culturally literate” (i.e., not boilerplate translations), and promote oral traditions as well as written learning.^x

Language Attitudes and Ideologies

While the reasons for language shift and learning are complex and involve all of the factors discussed in this report, ideas about language use and usefulness have a powerful impact on individual decisions whether or not to learn or teach a language. Indeed, in addition to the contextual conditions described in each section so far, some records exist about parental, youth, and community ideas about language learning. In the evaluation of the NWT-wide language nest program, researchers commented that parental concerns about bilingualism (e.g., being worried that “children would not learn either language well enough”^{xi}) impacted their support for the nests.

In a workshop from 2010 that brought delegates together to help plan the NWT Languages Strategy, North Slavey participants identified several ideological challenges that were impacting language health. These included the value placed on English by parents; dominant language communications, technology, and media; the legacy of Residential Schools; purism and the challenge of different dialects; and finally, the difficulty of collaborating effectively across numerous organizations and people.^{xii} A Sahtú Language Planning record from the same year records participants’ referred name for each dialect (Dene in general, with the terms Sahtúot’ine, K’ashogot’ine, and Shútáot’ine to be used when appropriate)^{xiii} and a call for increased efforts to create an effectively bilingual region, where Dene language could be used daily with English taught alongside it for the sake of practicality. They identified several challenges to this vision, including young people being afraid to speak the language for fear of being laughed at. In addition, delegates felt that changing lifestyles impacted people’s respect for Dene language, but

that many still connected it with pride and identity.^{xiv} These observations have been seconded by researchers in the region, such as graduate students who develop a rapport with young Sahtú residents and note the same fear of being teased in public if they attempt to use the language.^{xv}

With regard to pride and identity, the NWT bureau of statistics also measures how strong or weak a person’s “sense of belonging in their community” is. Here the general population is compared to just those who can speak North Slavey well enough to carry on a conversation (compared across different regions and communities). While the difference is not huge, and everyone in the Sahtú seems to have a strong sense of belonging, one can see that overall, more Dene Language speakers feel that they have a strong connection to their home than the general population.

Figure 6: Percentage of adults (persons 15 and over) who have a strong or weak sense of belonging in their community. “All people” and “Dene Language Speakers” compared 2014.

Source: NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2014. Data Reformatted.

	Very/Somewhat Strong		Very/Somewhat Weak	
	% of all people	% of Dene Keda Speakers	% of all people	% of Dene Keda Speakers
Northwest Territories	78	87	13	8
Sahtu Region	86	90	10	6
Colville Lake	88	93	0	0
Déljine	93	94	4	0
Fort Good Hope	72	74	17	15
Norman Wells	82	89	15	0
Tulita	97	97	0	0

Traditional Activities Through Time

In addition to valuable questions about language and ideology, the Bureau of Statistics began asking questions about harvesting: hunting and trapping (in 1989), hunting and fishing (in 1999), and consumption of traditional foods (also in 1999).

The snapshot in Figure 7 shows traditional activities as they stood in 2014, and is followed by a presentation of the same data throughout time. It is important to note that all of these numbers rely on individuals self-reporting in community surveys.

Figure 7: Traditional activities by percentage of households that practice them, Sahtú and GNWT, 2014.

Source: NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2014. Data Reformatted.

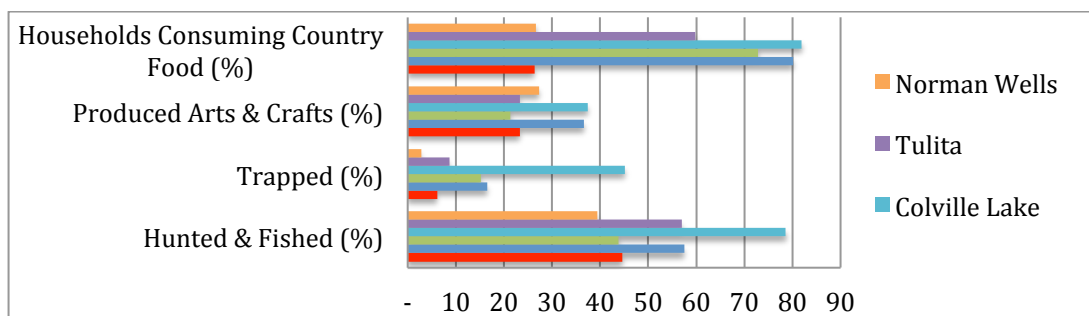


Figure 8: Traditional activities by percentage of households that practice them, Sahtú and GNWT, 2014.

Source: Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics, 1989-2014. Data Reformatted.

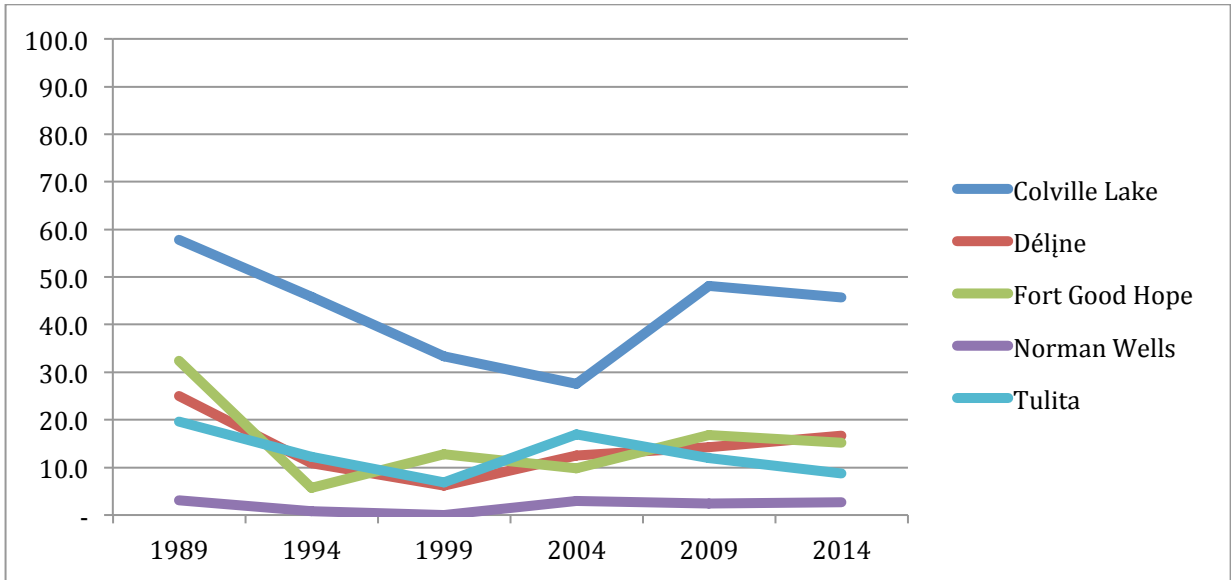


Figure 9: Traditional activities by percentage of households that practice them, Sahtú and GNWT, 2014.

Source: Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics, 1999-2014. Data Reformatted.

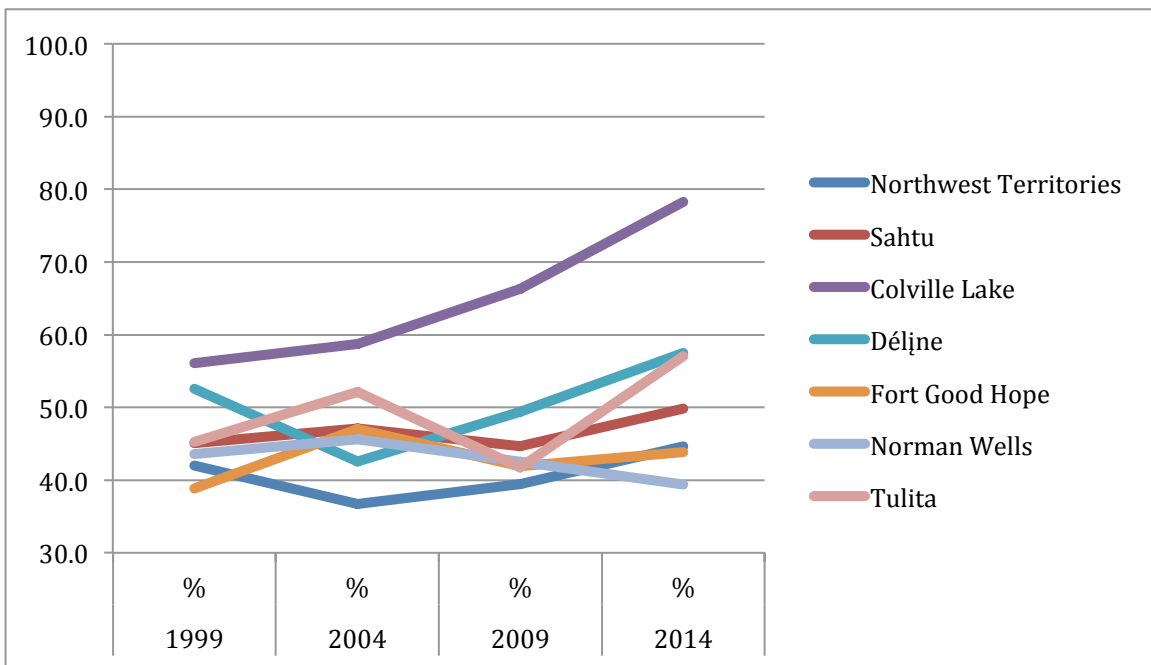
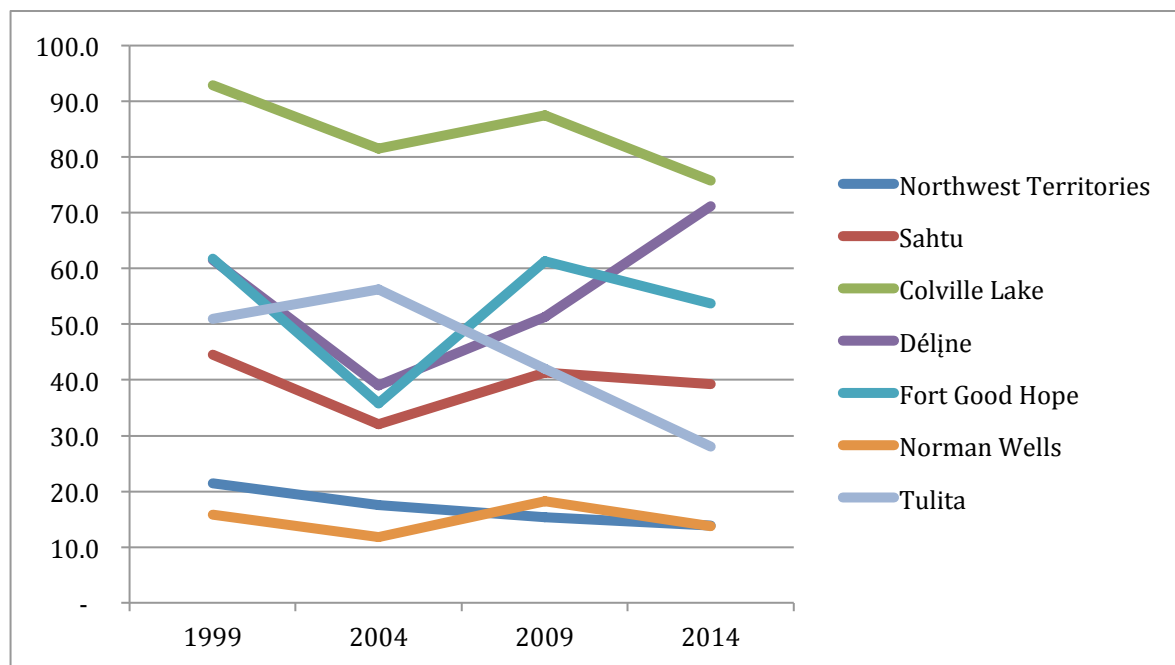


Figure 10: Traditional activities by percentage of households that practice them, Sahtú and GNWT, 2014.

Source: Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics, 1999-2014. Data Reformatted.



Endnotes

ⁱ Morris, Miggs. *Great Bear Lake Indians: A Historical Demography and Human Ecology*. Master's Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1972, p. 84-5.

ⁱⁱ Personal correspondence, NWT Bureau of Statistics, February 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of the Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories [Betty Harnum]. *First Annual Report of the Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories for the Year 1992-1993*. Yellowknife NT, 1993, p. 14.

^{iv} Office of the Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories 1993.

^v Office of the Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories 1993, p. 21.

^{vi} Crosscurrent Associates. *Languages of the Land: A Resource Manual for Aboriginal Language Activists*. Yellowknife: NWT Literacy Council, 1999, p. 20

^{vii} Langlois, Stéphanie and Annie Turner. "Aboriginal Languages and Selected Vitality Indicators in 2011." *Statistics Canada* Catalogue no. 89-655 (2014).

^{viii} Fogwill, Lynn. "Chapter 16: Literacy: A Critical Element in the Survival of Aboriginal Languages." In *Alpha 94: Literacy and Cultural Development Strategies in Rural Areas*, edited by Jean-Paul Hautecouer. 229-248. Toronto: Culture Concepts Publishers, 1994, p. 234.

^{ix} Northwest Territories Literacy Council. *Multiple Literacies: Improving our support for Aboriginal literacy in the NWT*. Yellowknife, March 2002, p. 33

^x Northwest Territories Literacy Council 2002.

^{xi} Hume, Sharon, Deborah Rutman, and Carol Hubberstey. *Language Nest Evaluation Report*. Department of Education, Culture and Employment: Yellowknife, 2006.

^{xii} Government of the Northwest Territories. *Northwest Territories Aboriginal Languages Plan: A Shared Responsibility*. Yellowknife, 2010.

^{xiii} Crosscurrent Associates. *Sahtú Kó Káyurı̄la Denewá Kedá Dágúʔé Gogha ʔeratł'é. Sahtú Region Dene Language Planning Report*. Délı̄ne: Sahtú Secretariat Incorporated Délı̄ne, 2000.

^{xiv} Crosscurrent Associates 2000.

^{xv} For example, Gordon, Sarah. *Cultural Vitality as Social Strength in Délı̄ne, Northwest Territories, Canada*. Doctoral Thesis, Indiana University, 2014.