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Traditional place names project puts Sahtu history on map

by [Meagan Wohlberg](#)



Photo: Morris Nyelle

The community of Dél?ne, a North Slavey Dene word meaning “where the waters flow,” gets its name from its position at the mouth of the Great Bear River, or Sahtúdé.

For Morris Neyelle, traditional place names aren’t just points on maps – they’re important moments in the history of a people whose language and culture is rooted in the land.

The councillor and history buff from Deline has spent the last several decades advocating for a revived understanding and usage of historical Dene place names, both on maps and in people’s everyday conversations, in the Sahtu region of the Northwest Territories.

He said the names’ meanings hold important lessons about their historical significance, which should be preserved for future generations.

“I always want my kids to understand the history and be proud of who they are,” Neyelle told The Journal. “The names given by our ancestors should be in place rather than the English ones, so that my people can understand where they come from.”

That feat, while certainly challenging, is creeping ever closer to reality now, thanks in part to the work of an Oblate priest whose diaries from 1864 are providing information on traditional place names for a digital mapping project currently underway in the region.

Led by the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board (SRRB) in partnership with the Aurora Research Institute and the Alaska Placenames Documentation Project, researchers are looking to the personal logs of Father Emile Petitot, who took up a post in Fort Good Hope in 1864 at the age of 26, to fill in the missing pieces.

Over his 15 years in the Sahtu, Petitot traveled widely throughout the North, documenting place names and stories in maps and diary entries. His writing, which has seen a surge in popularity in Deline, is now used to

verify numerous oral histories passed on by elders, including family trees and even recorded histories of elders from before Petitot's time.

The map project is simply the latest attempt to realize the dream of documenting people's traditional knowledge in the Sahtu region, according to SRRB executive director Deborah Simmons.

"People have been talking about place names since I starting working (with the board)," she said. "It's very upsetting for people when they look at an official map of the region and want to talk about travel and the history and ecology of areas and instead it's identified by names based on the shallow experience of visitors to the region."

She said Petitot has been a big catalyst in creating a "catalogue of spatial knowledge" for the region, that will include maps that can overlay everything from seismic lines and oil leases to traditional camps and spiritual sites.

Simmons said the maps – along with other documented traditional knowledge – will be important tools for communities to use in making critical decisions on resource development, wildlife harvesting, environmental monitoring and more.

"That's the meaning of co-management: truly creating spaces for Sahtu beneficiaries to provide good inputs into decisions that impact their communities," she said.

And because the information will be owned by the communities themselves, Simmons said it's crucial that Sahtu beneficiaries have an easy-to-use tool to access the map materials without having to hire a GIS technician to walk them through it. They recently partnered with a team from Carleton University, who will be in Tulita this week to talk about customizing a map framework that works for the Sahtu.

While helpful in filling in some of the gaps, combing through Petitot's works has also proved challenging. The priest wrote in French, and many of the Dene words are written as he would have pronounced them, making them difficult to read and sound out. Some of these place names have been saved by translated meanings in brackets that the priest would include, but others continue to evade identification.

The work is complicated further by the loss of many elders who likely would have had important contributions to make to the project.

"Back in the 1960s and '70s, I never thought we would lose the stories from the elders, but today most of the elders are gone and the stories went with them," Neyelle reflected. "We need to do whatever it takes to revive them, to get them back."

Already the Sahtu has done some transitioning back to its original place names, a key milestone being when community members succeeded in reclaiming the original name Deline for their town that was for decades incorrectly referred to as Fort Franklin, based on Sir John Franklin's outpost established there in 1825.

Neyelle believes returning to the original names will become more key as communities successfully negotiate self-government agreements, as Deline did last year. As communities in the Sahtu regain control over their lands and lives, place names will be integral to how they represent themselves as sovereign Dene people.

"Names are important," Neyelle said. "When self-government kicks in, we should name everything in our language."