

# Wildlife Management Decision-Making from the Ground Up

Notes on the Northern Tutchone May Gathering May 23-25, 2012

Pelly Crossing, YT

by Walter Bayha with DL Simmons



This is a huge annual gathering of Northern Tutchone peoples of the Selkirk First Nation (Pelly Crossing), Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation (Carmacks), and Nacho Nyak Dun First Nation (Mayo). For the last twelve years this gathering has provided a forum for First Nations harvesters to make decisions on salmon, moose, caribou and sheep harvests, and other issues affecting wildlife. Children, young adults, elders, teenagers and guests from all over the area come together and make consensus decisions. This year was the biggest meeting ever, with 86 elders registered and at least as many more younger people.

The territory is subdivided into blocks for sheep, moose and caribou harvests. In each block, a threshold has been established of animals that can be supported by the land. At the annual meeting the individual members report on harvests, and any information that can be helpful for this process to make decisions. Only one trusted government biologist is invited to be present at the Gathering.

Lots of hunting stories are told. Everyone seems to have a good handle on who is hunting where, what and how many. Although each First Nation is responsible for providing results of a quantitative harvest study, the stories give everyone a more traditional means of information sharing. Laughter seems to be a regular outcome of each story. There is discussion of all the factors that may be affecting wildlife populations.

Consensus is sought on the harvest levels or other measures needed to maintain healthy populations. Key decisions are written as



First Nation Harvest Study Report



L-R: Map of Management Blocks, and Yukon Wildlife Biologist listens to harvesters.

resolutions and passed on to the three First Nations for action. In one case at this year's meeting, there was consensus that there should be a voluntary stop to harvesting in an area that people felt was being over-harvested.

All of the information provided at the forum is confidential and only used as data for decisions. The person entrusted with this information is the Yukon Government biologist, who the communities had originally interviewed and supported for the position. Information from resident hunters, outfitters and FN are gathered updated and safeguarded till the gathering of following year. The information does not go to the governments, whether First Nation, Federal or Territorial.

A facilitator is contracted to set up, coordinate and run the Gathering. The three day agenda included performances by the Spirit Dancers, jigging, ædzi, traditional fashion show, door prizes, grouse dancing, moose calls, raven calls, handkerchief dance, welcome and farewell songs. At times elders would spontaneously make a contribution, like a song or demonstration of different types of birch bark baskets.

Food preparation, cooking and serving by all the young folks seem to work very well since everyone serves themselves except for elders and guests. In between the meals a cart rolls around with fresh moose, porcupine, salmon and beaver refreshments. Desserts and refreshments are also passed around regularly.

My interests in First Nation history kept me busy with as many elders as I could talk to. The Northern Tutchone language is part of the Athapaskan language family, and the elders could pick up about ten percent of what I was saying in my Sahtúgot'ıne language. I could understand about the same and more if they wrote it. Other than the elders, very few could speak their language. I could tell from the stories that much has been lost through history....from the gold rush of the late 1800s, to the present day gold rush.



Selkirk First Nation Councillor Roger Alfred tells a story



Spirit Dancers



Mapping Relationships on Google Earth

We learned that there is a strong relationship with people in the Sahtú Region, especially Fort Good Hope and Tulit'a. An effort is being made with Fort Good Hope to renew the traditional trail across the mountains through the Mountain River valley. Many elders wanted to know about people from our areas that have family ties and whether certain person still alive. Traditional names were not written on the maps for the forum nor spoken very often, but the excitement to use traditional terms was very evident.

All of the First Nation leaders are welcome to attend. Some of them did attend, which

was certainly appreciated by everyone. Two proposed mining projects were brought up: a road through sensitive caribou habitat to the Casino gold-copper-molybdenum mine, and development around the headwaters of the Peel River. The First Nations wanted the Peel watershed protected through a land use plan that they've contributed to and support, with 80% protection. This is the same Peel River that empties into the Dehcho in the Northwest Territories, so it is an issue that indirectly affects us in the Sahtú. The discussions on these two issues were followed by resolutions that were approved by consensus.



Impromptu Birch Basket Demonstration



Pelee River Presentation - First Nation Outfitter Jimmy Johnny and Nacho Nyak Dun First Nation Councillor



Walter impresses in Grouse Dance Competition!