

Watching over the land



photos courtesy of Jean Pofus

Lawrence Jackson, left, Charles Oudzi, John Tobac, Natanda Oudzi, instructors Adam Bathe and Genevieve Cote, Daniel Masuzumi and Louise Yukon are all smiles as they prepare to board a twin otter to Drum Lake in the Mackenzie Mountains on March 13. The group, along with Dion Lennie, Joanne Krutko, Kristen Yakeleya, Peter Silastiak Jr., and Tulita elder William Horassi are participating in a community-based environmental monitoring course until March 29.



John Tobac, left, and instructor Genevieve Cote show off a caribou scat sample collected as part of the Sahtu Environmental Monitoring program at Drum Lake.



Caribou scat samples allow researchers to keep track of the animals' overall health. Here, Charles Oudzi collects a sample on Drum Lake.

New program empowers Sahtu residents to monitor their environment themselves

by Laura Busch
Northern News Services
Sahtu

A new on-the-land program underway in the Sahtu aims to equip residents with the skills they need to monitor the region's changing environment themselves.

Twelve successful applicants enrolled in the Sahtu Environmental Monitoring Program were dropped off by a twin otter at Drum Lake in the Mackenzie Mountains March 13, along with instructors Adam Bathe and Genevieve Cote and elder William Horassi. There, they are learning about the regulatory regime, how environmental monitoring works within that system, and the nuts and bolts of how to collect wildlife and environmental samples to gauge cumulative impacts of development on the Sahtu region.

The program is part of an ongoing push to get away from the polarized debate surrounding development in the region and empower community members to take an active role in maintaining the health

of their land, said Deborah Simmons, the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board (SRRB) executive director.

"Community people are often the best people to be monitors because they're not parachuting in and parachuting out, they're in it for the long haul," she said.

This shift was partly inspired by a recent knowledge exchange with Chief Sharleen Gale and lands and resources director Lana Lowe of the Fort Nelson First Nation in northeast British Columbia, who toured the Sahtu earlier this month to share their experiences with hydraulic fracturing, commonly known as fracking, on their traditional territory.

In a way, their message was a wake up call, said Simmons. Northeastern B.C. is home to a significant amount of shale gas development, and as fracking is taking place on Crown land – not on treaty land – the First Nation's fight for control over what is happening on their territory is more complex and in some ways more difficult than that in the Sahtu.

"I think people also were

challenged by the Fort Nelson First Nation people, who made it quite clear that people of the Sahtu region have a huge advantage in that they have their land claim, renewable resources boards at the regional level, and many other tools at their disposal," she said.

The Sahtu Environmental Monitoring Program will run until March 29, but Simmons said the students and instructors are already buzzing about how needed they think this program is in the region.

"It's the best group of students I've ever had," instructor Adam Bathe said during a recent check-in via satellite phone. "They don't want to stop learning at the end of the day. Every monitoring course should be done this way."

Holding the program out on the land avoids distractions and allows students to fully immerse themselves in what they're doing, said Simmons.

"When the instructors have to tell participants to stop doing their work and go outside and play, essentially, that says something," she said.

While the SRRB is host-

ing the program, the GNWT Departments of Industry, Tourism and Investment and Education, Culture and Employment, as well as Aurora College, are acting as sponsors.

The program boasts the first Sahtu-specific environmental monitoring curriculum, which was developed through Aurora College.

To qualify, participants had to demonstrate an interest in field work and have at least a Grade 8 education.

The curriculum blends scientific with traditional knowledge, the latter provided by participants and Horassi, who is an experienced harvester.

"For some of them, this is the first time they've ever skinned a caribou," said Simmons.

Once they finish the on-the-land course, participants can go on to earn an environmental monitoring certificate by completing work hours and passing a written test, much like with any other trade ticket.

Who will employ community-based environmental monitors has yet to be determined, but a forum has been created

by members of the individual renewable resources boards, community organizations and other groups to help iron out the logistics, said Simmons, adding that many of the skills taught are transferable and increase the person's "general employability." The main goal

is to have employed community-based environmental monitors gathering information throughout the region.

"For better or for worse, we need to have people out there who can document what they are monitoring," said Simmons.

NOTICE TO THE PUBLIC

Notice that the
**HERITAGE CENTRE SOCIETY WAS DISSOLVED
FEBRUARY 15, 2014.**

The mandate and all assets and liabilities have been transferred to the
Fort Simpson Historical Society.

Vendors or agents who had business with the Heritage Centre Society can contact the:

Fort Simpson Historical Society
Box 59, Fort Simpson, NT X0E 0N0
Phone: 867.695.3005 or 867.695.2990

THE BOARD OF FORT SIMPSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY WOULD LIKE TO THANK AND ENCOURAGE THE PUBLIC TO CONTINUE SUPPORTING THE HERITAGE CENTRE BUILDING PROJECT.