

The Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve

Background

For many years Délı̄ne has been advocating careful stewardship of Great Bear Lake and its watershed. Délı̄ne's efforts have resulted in the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (1993), the Great Bear Lake Watershed Management Plan (2005), the Sahtu Land Use Plan (2013) and the Déline Final Self-Government Agreement (2014). These agreements now provide the context for sound stewardship of the lake and its watershed. Délı̄ne's priorities are keeping the land and the community healthy, maintaining ecological and cultural integrity and having a significant role in deciding what activities are permitted within the lake and its watershed. Délı̄ne wants and needs economic development but it wants that development to be responsible, to take place in the context of sound environmental stewardship, and it wants to ensure that it has a leading role in decisions that affect them.

After many discussions within the community, Délı̄ne elders and leaders decided to pursue international biosphere reserve designation for the lake and that portion of its watershed within the Délı̄ne district. They've chosen to call the area the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve.

Délı̄ne recognizes that the designation is honorary and non-regulatory and is seeking the designation for several reasons:

- First, it affirms the importance of the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (1993), the Great Bear Lake Watershed Management Plan (2005), the Sahtu Land Use Plan (2013) and the Déline Final Self-Government Agreement (2014) as providing the context for sustainable development;
- Second, biosphere reserve status would facilitate implementation of the various plans set out in the Great Bear Lake Watershed Management Plan. These include research and monitoring programs, education and capacity building programs, and cultural and tourism plans. Linking with Destination Délı̄ne, international recognition of the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve would attract considerable attention and resources to the community. It would result in important economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits to Délı̄ne, to the NWT, to Canada and to the world.
- Third, it facilitates Délı̄ne taking a more coordinated and integrated approach to stewardship. Through the working of the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve Committee, communication among agencies has become more efficient and effective.

Biosphere Reserves

A biosphere reserve is an area that has been designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to demonstrate innovative approaches to living and working in harmony with nature. Designation is considered after the area is selected by a national committee and proposed to UNESCO by a member country. Each reserve is typical of one of the world's major terrestrial or coastal ecosystems. It is an honorary, non-regulatory designation intended to recognize important areas where people are living sustainably and whose approaches to sustainable development are instructive for others.

In the case of the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve, the designation would affirm the importance of the various "northern tools" that form the context for sustainable

development in the area. It would recognize, endorse and promote those tools at the international level. It would not alter or affect them in any way.

The term “reserve” is something of a misnomer and can be misleading. As used by UNESCO, it does not mean that these places are set aside from human use and development – human activity and the health of people and communities are, in fact, an integral part of the biosphere reserves program. Nor does the UNESCO label bring with it any new authorities over land, water or resources. The existing powers, rights and responsibilities of governments, businesses and landowners remain unchanged. It does not, in any way, create more barriers to development. The term “biosphere reserve” highlights a special area within the biosphere where people have made an outstanding commitment to work together for a sustainable future.

Biosphere reserves have three major functions. They:

- contribute to the conservation of ecosystems, species and genetic variation;
- foster sustainable development (development that is socially, culturally, economically and ecologically sustainable), and
- build local capacity for research, monitoring, education and training activities related to the promotion of conservation and sustainable development.

Biosphere reserves have three distinct zones: core area(s), buffer area(s), and areas of cooperation. In the case of the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve, the core areas are represented by Sahoyúé-?ehdacho National Historic Site and the conservation zones established through the Sahtu land Use Plan, buffer areas are represented by the special management zones, and the areas of cooperation are represented by the general use zones and the hamlet of Délı̨ne.

Implications

The Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve is the first north of the 60th parallel in Canada, among the largest in the world and the only one encompassing the Taiga Plains, Taiga Shield and Southern Arctic ecozones. It includes the largest lake entirely within Canada, the eighth-largest lake in the world and fourth largest in North America – and likely the last great arctic lake in a pristine state. The watershed provides habitat for many species of boreal and arctic vegetation, birds, mammals and fish, some of which are sensitive, at risk or endangered. The Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve has a framework of legal protection, a history of cooperative stewardship and is based on the GBL Watershed Management Plan, which was developed by Délı̨ne.

The Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve is the homeland of the Sahtuto’ine and the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve management plan is led by them, in cooperation with a range of agencies and organizations. It is the first (and only) biosphere reserve in Canada to be created at the express request of its Indigenous population. The Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve thus shows significant leadership in Canada and beyond in relation to engaging Indigenous peoples in all aspects of Biosphere Reserve stewardship, from inception to implementation. It meets all the objectives of UNESCO’s World Network of Biosphere Reserves in a way that no others do.

The designation recognizes, affirms, endorses and promotes the use of “northern tools”. It in no way displaces, overrides, or alters those tools or affects the rights of residents. It in no way adds additional layers of bureaucracy or regulation that would further constrain

development. It endorses the approach being taken in the NWT, recognizes it at an international level, and promotes that approach in a way that few other designations can.

International recognition of the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve will help to ensure that the area is managed according to the principles of sustainable development and will assist the Sahtuto'ine in achieving their vision for Great Bear Lake: that its waters remain clean and bountiful forever.

Finally, the Tsá Tué Biosphere Reserve will be a showcase for success that will serve as a model and inspiration for others in the NWT, in Canada and across the globe.