

From Dene Kedə to Dene Ts'lı́

Rethinking Resurgence in the Sahtú Region, Northwest Territories



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Three Key Messages

1. Sahtú Dene and Métis families need to live, learn, and be well on the land

Current knowledge, including literature and interviews for this project, points towards a link between Dene Kedə (language), Dene Ts'ı́lı (ways of life), and wellbeing. Some Sahtú youth have had opportunities to live on the land with their families, and it adds richness to their language and culture learning. However, such opportunities are increasingly rare as the cost of on the land activities increases, and time, capacity and resources for such activities becomes more constrained. **Policy outcome:** More supports are needed for local organisations such as Ɂehdzo Got'ı̨ne (Renewable Resources Councils) to help families spend time on the land. **Knowledge gaps:** Each Sahtú community is markedly different, but many sources of information about language, wellbeing, and ways of life are territorial or regional rather than local. As such, more intense in-community work (including work with people, schools, and physical records) is needed to create a coherent profile for each settlement region and identify corresponding strengths and opportunities. Moreover, it is worth exploring further the relationships between Dene Kedə, Dene Ts'ı́lı and healthy and fulfilling ways of life.

2. Holistic Dene Kedə/Dene Ts'ı́lı programs support strong governance

There currently exists a myriad of government language and way of life programs, but these tend to be narrowly defined and thus difficult to match with the holistic nature of community needs and governance. Governance systems arising from the Sahtú Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement, primarily focused on asserting space for exercising jurisdiction in relation to Territorial and Federal governments, have not until recently fully or consistently accounted for the role of Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'ı́lı. **Policy outcomes:** The Sahtú Region needs a strategic plan that can be the basis for providing coordinated supports for Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'ı́lı programs in schools, communities, and on the land as a basis for community and environmental governance. The example of the recently-formed NWT On the Land Collaborative, which brings together different funders to develop accessible and coordinated programming, can serve as a model. Regional bodies such as the Né K'ə Dene Ts'ı́lı (Living on the Land) Forum, a Sahtú advisory body involving Ɂehdzo Got'ı̨ne, government, and industry delegates as well as academic collaborators, along with knowledge sharing venues such as the Sahtú Cross-Cultural Research Camp, are well-positioned to serve as platform for developing a robust regional plan. Compiling and archiving multi-media Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'ı́lı learning tools and program reports will be helpful for program planners, users and evaluators. **Knowledge gaps:** More research is needed to explore relationships between heard/spoken and read/written Dene Kedə, Dene Ts'ı́lı practices, and governance. A comprehensive evaluation of Dene Kedə/Dene Ts'ı́lı programs, broadly defined, will be an important basis for regional strategic planning.

3. Youth need to be drivers for Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'ı́lı initiatives

Youth have demonstrated that they are inspired to learn their language and Dene ways of life: improved resources, structured and varying learning spaces, immersion strategies, and accessibility of funds and tools would help them to do so. Right now, language and cultural programs do not seem accessible to many young adults, in part because they do not account for the cultural and economic crossroads that contemporary youth must navigate. **Policy outcomes:** Improved training and support is needed for teachers and families in providing culturally appropriate supports for youth leadership and readiness to contribute to community economies. A well-supported youth-driven program such as has been aspired to by the Sahtú Youth Network and Dene Ts'ı́lı School are keys to building capacity and leadership. **Knowledge gap:** Research is needed to understand cross-cultural dimensions of learning for contemporary youth, linkages between Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'ı́lı in learning, and the role of youth in Indigenous governance and mixed economies.

Executive Summary

In Canada and worldwide, Indigenous languages and ways of life are increasingly recognized as key components of wellbeing, and an essential priority for all levels of governance in Canada. Language revitalization is integrated holistically with everyday life, ways of life, and worldview. In the Sahtú Region of the Northwest Territories, three major dialects of Dene Kedə, each themselves encompassing more than one variety, are spoken in five communities with a strong spirit of self-determination and continued land-based practices. This Knowledge Synthesis marshals more than fifty years of literature through a review of over 250 documents, along with current youth knowledge and co-authors' experience, to identify community and regional strengths, and inform best practices in resurgence – or language and way of life revitalization in this region.

Domains of Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'lı́ Revitalization

A framework of seven “domains” of resurgence emerged from this Knowledge Synthesis. Interconnected spheres such as law and policy, education, and local knowledge variously impact languages and ways of life, and change can be mapped in each of them across time. What emerges is a complex scenario that highlights challenges in strategic planning – since each domain invokes a distinct historical thread, and thus a distinct planning consideration for the present and future. We have sought to identify Sahtú-based processes that may represent solutions to barriers thrown up by historical and contemporary circumstances. As such, we suggest that local organisations such as ɻehdzo Got'ıñę (Renewable Resources Councils established by the Sahtú Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement), the Nę K'ę Dene Ts'lı́ Forum, a Sahtú advisory body involving ɻehdzo Got'ıñę, government, and industry delegates as well as academic collaborators, and the vision for a Sahtú Youth Network all represent key potential forces, complementary to and supporting local self-government, in supporting Dene and Métis resurgence.

Law and Policy literature begins with the first steps taken by the Government of the NWT (GNWT) into working with multiple official languages, and establishing frameworks for accommodating traditional knowledge and traditional economies. Over time, with greater activism and consultation as well as comprehensive land claims agreements, responsibility for language and ways of life was increasingly devolved to local Indigenous governments. Now, with self-governance on the rise in the Sahtú, a plethora of authorities, mandates, and funding sources mean that resources for language and ways of life are bountiful but not always accessible. As Sahtú organizations work towards an emphasis on Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'lı́, new policies bring together community and environmental governance. The ɻehdzo Got'ıñę Gots'é Nákedi (Sahtú Renewable Resources Board – SRRB), a regional land claim organisation responsible for wildlife, habitat and harvesting, has recently formally adopted a community-driven, Dene Ts'lı́ and youth-centred approach that takes a lead from ɻehdzo Got'ıñę conservation planning initiatives. In addition, Délı̨ne's *Belare Wile Gots'é ɻekwé – Caribou for All Time* plan, the first formally approved community conservation plan, is infused with Dene language concepts and Dene Ts'lı́ approaches to conservation. Similarly, the *Best of Both Worlds Action Plan for a Traditional Economy* situates conservation planning in the context of the region's mixed economy, reflecting priorities established in the Sahtú Land Use Plan. The Nę K'ę Dene Ts'lı́ Forum and youth caucuses convened as part of research and conservation activities in the region have helped to strengthen community voices in policy decision-making.

State-sponsored **Education** has had a sad history in the NWT as evidenced by the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Early territorial schools had to adapt to be more locally and culturally responsive in part by dealing with this legacy. Working with community partners in the 1980s, a

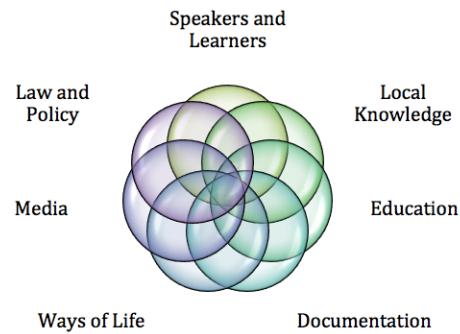


Figure 1: Domains of Resurgence

variety of stakeholders began developing Dene literacy materials for use in NWT schools. In the following decade the ground-breaking *Dene Kede Curriculum* was developed. Other education programs such as language nests met with success during the early 2000s. The impact of land claim agreements, devolution and self-governance on Sahtú language and way of life education is yet to be clearly seen. Initiatives to explore learning processes outside the school setting include Cross-Cultural Research Camps and the Dene Ts'lı School. The experience with these relatively new initiatives is that learning is most successful when it is two-way and cross-cultural.

Documentation of Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'lı has been practiced for over a century. The federal government supported the development of dictionaries and grammars in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The Dene Language Standardization project, with a 1987 report, was a catalyst for a proliferation of shareable written Dene Kedə documents, including dictionaries and place-names maps, locally, regionally, and at the territorial level. Now, digital technologies are beginning to make Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'lı recordings and texts accessible in new ways. Community members are working with technical collaborators to document Dene language and ways of life, and communities are learning what it takes to realize OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) research principles as part of revitalization processes.

New digital technologies have also expanded the availability of Dene **Media**. Radio, local and regional, was an early home for recordings of Elders and other speakers, and the impact of having radio in each Sahtú dialect is still felt today. In addition, television, physical media, museum exhibits, and maps, have proliferated since the Official Languages Act of 1984. The contemporary availability of digital multimedia, web-based and social media provides learners with new ways to support integrated learning through creative expression.

In tandem with regional and territorial efforts, **Local Knowledge** projects and programs have provided the grassroots backbone of resurgence in each Sahtú community. While many of the projects that have gone on for the past 50 years suffer from a lack of monitoring, evaluation, and records, they have had significant impact that is documented in collective memory. The NWT began recording local work more comprehensively following the Official Languages Act (1984) and Traditional Knowledge Policy (1993), and the expansion of traditional economy programs. With increased local advocacy, capacity building, devolution, and self-determination, local knowledge and leadership has begun to spearhead and guide programming.

Dene Kedə **Speakers and Learners** form the key measurement of language vitality: the nature of statistics around Dene language use in the NWT has changed over time and continues to improve. In the 1980s and 1990s, occasional, inconsistent assessments by individuals such as missionaries and anthropologists were replaced by standardized community surveys and studies by the NWT Languages Commissioner. In these same decades it is possible to see declining numbers of Dene Kedə speakers in each Sahtú community. More recently, questions have been added to survey instruments to include adult second language learners, as well as Dene Kedə speakers who grew up with the language, and this extra nuance shows a less extreme degree of language shift. Additionally, records from the early 2000s and forward have begun to track shifts in attitudes and ideologies about language use, which are essential to understanding why people choose to learn their language, speak their language, and pass it on.

Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'lı are holistically brought together in Dene and Métis **Ways of Life**: for example, the impact of economic shift and the emergence of a mixed economy combining wage labour and traditional practices is an important area of study. Considerations about ways of life inform all the sections of this study. **Pehdzo Got'ıne** play a key role in supporting way of life activities, and community governments also prioritize this – there are numerous activities throughout the Sahtú Region that are relatively undocumented. The **Né K'ə Dene Ts'lı Forum** has recently decided to expand its mandate to provide more consistent and coordinated support for Dene Ts'lı initiatives. Regional Cross-Cultural Research Camps and the Dene Ts'lı School are means of strengthening confidence and capacity through cross-cultural learning and leadership-building.

Youth Wellness, Knowledge and Leadership

Sahtú youth participating in an on the land Dene Ts'lı́ School during two weeks bridging August and September 2017 contributed significantly to this study through focus groups, interviews, learning activities, and co-authorship.

Dene youth believe their languages and ways of life to be important in connecting them to their heritage, granting them access to a different worldview, and making them better leaders. Youth learn some words and phrases from family, and are exposed to the language regularly in their communities on the streets, from Elders, and from media like community radio. Some have had opportunities to practice traditional activities with their families and through community programs. However, the youth first encountered structured opportunities to learn Dene language and skills in school. Classroom learning provided a good introduction, but has not allowed them to speak fluently or feel confident that they possess core traditional skills and knowledge that will help them to thrive in current times.

There are few opportunities for youth to continue learning Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'lı́ in a structured way once they leave grade nine. Students would prefer that learning in-class Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'lı́ continue into high school and college, and that language learning take more of an immersion approach that is socially and culturally relevant to them. Once they are out of school, youth encounter several challenges to learning: self-consciousness, feeling overwhelmed, a lack of motivation (sometimes rooted in addictions, trauma and other contextual factors), combined with low accessibility of language and skills learning resources. However, youth had a number of ideas for how to prevent and circumvent such problems.

In the future, youth recommend programs that are judgment-free, safe spaces to practice Dene Kedə. They want Elders to be involved in their learning process so that they have access to Dene Ts'lı́ along with the language, and an opportunity to learn in a structured environment would allow them to take the language day by day rather than feeling overwhelmed by the immensity of the task. They emphasize that it is also essential to practice Dene Kedə and Dene Ts'lı́ in the home, in school, in the community, on social media, and on the land.

Imagining Indigenous Futures, Imagining Canada's Future

Indigenous languages, knowledge, and land-based ways of life have been shown to point a way forward for sustainable futures in Canada and globally. The Sahtú Region presents fascinating insights into the complex nature of efforts to reclaim Indigenous language and ways of life as a basis for Indigenous governance. Such efforts must consider seven distinct domains, each with its own history, barriers, and opportunities for innovation. Further research can provide a more in-depth understanding of community strengths, programming opportunities, and the role of youth as present and future community leaders and land stewards. The Dene and Métis communities of the Sahtú Region, like many Indigenous communities across Canada, are both vigorously self-determining and increasingly integrated into the global context. They are conscious of the importance of their role as stewards of their language, knowledge, and ecological integrity. This Knowledge Synthesis points to the role that in-depth regional and local research with the critical involvement of community members as researchers can play in providing valuable understanding of Indigenous resurgence and how it can be meaningfully supported.