

## Using Indigenous stories in caribou co-management<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

I was so happy when I learned I was going to be Chair of the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board (SRRB) and would be able to spend more time talking to people about wildlife. The SRRB is a co-management board, developed like others in the Northwest Territories (NWT) through the comprehensive land claims which were settled in 1993 in the Sahtu Region. The co-management board is a public institution. Half of the appointees are nominated by federal and territorial governments, and half by the aboriginal government. The board members do not represent the governments that nominated them; the board is not a political body. In order to make good decisions, institutions like ours have to be left alone, without political influence. The people who developed the land claims were very wise in setting the boards up like that.

People often think co-management is the answer to challenges in management. Yes, the co-management boards have powers. They have powers that are protected by the Constitution. We make decisions, but they're subject to change or modification, or maybe even rejected in some places. Although the co-management board is structured so that it is the main body that would make the decisions on wildlife in

the Sahtu, the ultimate power over wildlife is not in the hands of the co-management board. The ultimate decision-maker is the Government of the NWT's Minister responsible for wildlife. But the only time the SRRB's decisions can be reversed is if they made a huge error in law or in process.

Co-management is a new beast. We haven't really seen it work to its full potential. The co-management board is a powerful institution, but it faces immense challenges. Our society is so complex today. You have the pro-development people, the people that are in the middle, the people that don't want development. They don't behave much different than people behave in the south. I have a son that's 12, 13 years old now. Probably he doesn't behave any different than kids in Toronto – more so today than any other time of our lives because of technology, the internet, television.

### Dual lives: Harvesting and law in Dene Territory

The Sahtu Region where I live and work is a huge area. It's approximately 283 000 square kilometers. It is dynamic and diverse. We have mountains, boreal forest, tundra. We also have the biggest lake within the boundaries of Canada, Great Bear Lake.

For many years I used to be a wildlife officer. Here's the kind of things that happened to me when I became a game officer. I came back in May. In the NWT prior to the 1980s, we still had a law called the Migratory Birds Convention Act that prevented

<sup>1</sup> *This paper is adapted from the author's plenary presentation at NACW, as well as the Barren-Ground Caribou Symposium presentation entitled "Barren-ground caribou management in the Sahtu region: bridging traditional knowledge and science," and contributions to the NACW Aboriginal Talking Circles.*

Aboriginal people from hunting in the spring. At least in the NWT, May is the spring. But my people hunted anyway. I hunted, we hunted, and May has always been the time that we hunt migratory birds, that is what we eat in May.

So I came home in May in a brand spanking new uniform. I wanted to see my mom. I hadn't seen my mom for a while. I knew she was around because I could smell the geese boiling. Boy, you know, with the wind blowing towards me I could smell the geese cooking five hundred yards away. She didn't know I was coming, but somehow through the window she noticed me coming in. So I came in and I hugged my mom and I said, "Mom, where's the geese?" She said, "No geese. Don't have any geese."

I said, "What do you mean, Mom? I know, I smell it. We eat geese all the time."

"No, no, no," she said. "You can't eat geese." See, right off the bat, the uniform. I can't eat. I'm a Dene, I want to eat geese. She says no, you can't do that.

I remember those days very well. The priest spent a lot of time in our homes, the Hudson Bay people, and certainly the police. I was taught not to ask questions. But I should have asked, "Grandfather, how come you behave different when the RCMP and the priest are around?" Because they lived dual lives. They behaved the way the RCMP wanted them to behave. The way the priest wanted them to behave. This is the way the Dene people are. They try to respect and respond to people. And then they are themselves when these people were not around.

So people would hide who they really are when I was around in my uniform, even though I was Dene. But when I asked them if they knew anything about the Wildlife Act, or the Migratory Birds Convention Act, or the Environmental Protection Act, they would say, "No, why should I? They're not my laws. They belong to somebody else."

We used to deal with wastage a lot. So I thought, my people had ways of dealing with this. I asked the question, how did they deal with that in the past? How did they do that before contact? So one year I got some money to do some clean-up. At the same time I was talking to people and trying to understand how my people, the people of the Sahtu, Sahtúgoṛ'ıne is what we call ourselves, how they dealt with wastage. Well, by the time the project was over I learned that they didn't have any waste. All the waste we found was cans, things that didn't deteriorate. With aboriginal people prior to contact they didn't have any waste. They used everything. Whatever was left was scattered by animals and disappeared. I'd never really thought about that at the beginning, when I first asked that question.

It really scared me the first time I had to deal with a grizzly bear. I was just a brand new game officer working with a guide, and we were trying to scare the bear away from my grandfather George Blondin's camp. That was the first time I had to do that. When I grew up I didn't have to scare bears away. My grandfather had taught me, if there's a bear, you go somewhere else. It was midnight, it was cold, I think it was late October. I could hear the grizzly bear chew and crack solid bones. You know, femur of caribou. You could hear it two miles away. I said, gee, maybe I shouldn't go over there. I should leave him alone. When I resigned from the Wildlife Service I said, I'm never going to shoot another bear again unless I'm going to eat it. And I think that's one of the reasons I have a journey today. A journey to become a human being, a true Dene.

## Becoming Dene

One day my dream would be to write a policy in my own language and let somebody else interpret. I think my days of interpreting are going down steadily. I'd rather just talk my language these days and leave it at that. As an officer I used to do a lot of judging. I was trained to do that. After I left the Wildlife Service, my wife said to me, "How come you don't ask those questions anymore?" I said, "I don't have to. I don't need to. I just want to be a Dene, like the wildlife out there. Continue being a human being."

As a Dene person I'm taught to listen, to respect people, especially in learning centres because those are like my grandfather. I was taught never to ask questions. I don't, out of respect. We don't do that today anymore. The first thing I learned in school was the word "why." I can think right back when I was growing up as a small child there was no word "why" or "what for." I had to learn very quickly that if I'm going to be a human being in the future, then I'm going to have to start behaving so that my people will live.

Our history is written on the land, in the placenames and the stories, in the language. It's so important. Our people are disappearing very quickly. The place I come from, the Sahtu Region, I think they only have maybe three or four hundred people that speak the language. And unless you speak the language, you will not fully understand the stories. I'm always searching for stories. That's where our knowledge comes from. That's how knowledge in my area is passed on.

William Sewi was quite a storyteller. I remember him from when I was a young boy, because he spent a lot of time with my grandfather. I used to listen to



Fig. 1. Meeting of caribou and wolves. Credit: Alfred Masuzumi.

his stories many, many, many years ago. But when I went to school, when I started going to college and spending a lot of time in the south, I really didn't think about these stories anymore.

George Blondin is another grandfather of mine who taught me many things. He is one of the few people who made me understand that you have to break protocol, even if you love your people, so that you can survive in the future. George used to tell me that he wasn't going to write stuff down. The elders and his forefathers didn't want to do that. But he when he became older he did begin to write. One of the books that he wrote was *When the World Was New*. I think the other one was probably even harder for him to write, it was called *Trail of the Spirit*. These books had a lot to do with traditional "medicine power" and our Dene spirituality. George broke a lot of protocols with his elders and that was a huge decision for him. Those kinds of decisions make things easier for me to talk to an audience like this, interpreting the stories in new ways for the present context.

### Story of a meeting

William Sewi tells this story. William is an elder who died probably 10 years ago. I've been listening to a recording of his story. It's too bad that I couldn't let you listen to the original recording of the story and then you can tell me what you think about it. But I have to translate it. In preparation for this conference, I played the recording for the Délı̄nę Renewable Resources Council members, and we discussed the meaning of the story. William uses terms that I don't even recognize. The story goes on for about half an hour. It's about caribou and wolves, when the world was new. William talks as if the caribou tells us that the animal relationship with the land was the same as the relationship people have with the land.

The way William tells the story goes back thousands of years. He authenticates it. He said this is the truth. We must tell it that way. It is real. It happened when the world was new. He tells us where the gathering took place, using a traditional placename, ʔenake Túé – which I believe may be the lake known in English as Dismal Lake<sup>2</sup>. Then he relates this place all to the earth and the universe, where it fits in the ecosystem – the relationships among living things. William spends a couple of minutes just explaining how the story is the absolute truth that he knows. I think that gives you an idea about how oral knowledge is passed on. This is how they do it.

The story goes like this: The caribou and the wolves had a gathering because there was an issue. When the caribou came to the land, the wolves didn't appreciate that. They wanted to stop the caribou from coming to this land. They wanted the caribou to leave the land and the earth. After the wolves had their say, the caribou took their turn. They said, "We've come to this earth as food, and nothing else. We are a very good source of food for you wolves on this earth." And then they said, "Is there a reason somebody doesn't want us here?"

This meeting went on and on and on. There were probably other animals at the meeting. There are different ways they tell the story. Eventually one of the wolves spoke out and supported the caribou. He said, "What they are saying is true. They tell the truth. They're food for us. They're food for us in the future." He stood up and all the other wolves stood up and supported him. And they all said, "The caribou tell the truth. They are food for Dene, food for the animals that feed on them."

<sup>2</sup> George Douglas gave the English name to this lake. The Dene name means "one with two parks," likely referring to Qitirmiut (Copper Inuit) who followed the caribou from the arctic coast.

The Dene have the greatest respect for harvesters, and for food. The story is telling us the meaning of the relationship between the wolves as harvesters, and caribou as their food.

My grandfather taught me that you start developing relationships with everything from the day you're born. Even prior to that, while you're still in your mother, you start developing relationships with things. You learn. You begin to see what happens. You begin to see things that are talking to you, because everything has to be alive for us to have relationships. Whenever you want to meet something, whenever you want to build a relation or start one you say hi, hello. The Dene people do it by giving something. I've learned that very well as a child.

There is the big relationship with caribou and wolves. I'm sure as biologists and wildlife managers we're all aware of that. I knew that from the day that I first ate caribou.

At first the wolves didn't want to have anything to do with the caribou. You see that so often today. The new initiative. Or maybe something that's different. New knowledge systems. People hesitate. They dismiss things. If it's not in the learning systems that we have, the universities and all of the learning systems that we have, we dismiss them. I did that. I'm talking about myself. I used to dismiss a lot of these things and not think very much about it because I never really, I guess the knowledge system that I was involved in did that.

It took me about 32 years to understand what my grandfather was talking about. When I was a young man, my grandfather said, "You're not going to listen to me in the future, you're not going to use these things in the future." And he's right. I didn't. It's only when I turned about 50 when I asked the question, "Who is a Dene? What is a Dene?"

But after listening, the wolves changed their minds. The wolves changed their minds. They realized that the caribou are their source of survival, their source of wealth. In ancient times, the amount of fat, prime meat, fish, would determine how rich a Dene person was.

This story could apply to so many issues we are faced with today, and how they might be resolved. If we're going to survive, then we have to do things very differently in the future. At the meeting in William's story, all the stakeholders have a fair share of input before final decisions are made. I think we strive to accomplish that with our co-management system in the NWT. We have hearings, and make decisions based on consensus. Lots of people are questioning, "Is it the right road we're on?" But I haven't seen another management system that tries so hard to

support all the stakeholders to have a voice in the process.

When I started working with the wildlife service, one of the things I realized right away with my people is that they learn things from caribou by observing. There's no other way. I can't go up to a caribou and ask him, you know, how do you feel today or what do you think about all this development? You have to watch, observe, note behaviour. Our people have been doing that for thousands of years. Where do you find the caribou? In the stories, on the land. And in observing caribou, we learn something about what it means to be Dene.

There is an island called ʔek'a Du. Every year, some bulls always stop there. For some reason they don't follow the rest of the herd in their yearly migration to the calving grounds. They stay there all summer. If they don't get hunted by the Dene people then they continue on south in the fall time to join the rest of the herd. There's something special about these caribou that stay there, there's something special about the island, it must provide some kind of habitat that's not available elsewhere. People shoot those caribou in August when they're very fat. On that island I've seen big bulls with maybe two inches of fat. And so, ʔek'a Du means Fat Island. But it also means a place of wealth. In the old days, even though Dene didn't have money, if he had a lot of fat he was considered well off. Fat animals, prime, good to eat, he's rich. So the name of that island speaks not only to caribou ecology, but also to the nature of Dene well-being.

During our Aboriginal Talking Circle at this conference, I was really trying hard to get stories from everybody. We had many different First Nations there and they all had stories. They identified their story and they knew about that story. I'm going to try to use this method in the way I do things as Chair of the SRRB, the way I do things in the communities.

We have to pass a lot of this information on to our young people. One of the reasons I'm doing this is because I want to pass those stories on. We don't have time like in the days of my grandfather. If I had my way I'd be out back on the Johnny Hoe area trapping with my grandchildren, and leave the rest of the world to somebody else.

## From stories to policy

Our new co-management system is created by law and gives Dene rights to participate in decision-making, but it doesn't tell you what you're going to do tomorrow.

We never have enough time. Here I'm talking to a lot of people and it's still not going to be enough time to try to be comfortable with bringing knowledge back to your communities. The stories are one way of preserving the knowledge. As we gradually learn the meaning of the stories over time, we bring the knowledge alive in the present. In this way, our stories can become our policies for wise wildlife management again.

But it's not quite that simple. As a young game officer, and even when I became Chair of the SRRB, I was naïve, thinking that things would be simple if I went back to my people and this is the way they do things, we'll just write it up and we'll put it in law and it will work. I'm thinking, boy, here's my chance to talk about traditional knowledge, develop policies, all these beautiful things that I'm dreaming about. Well, it didn't work. I'm still trying.

One of the reasons it's so difficult is because the Dene culture, their whole system, their worldview is different. It doesn't work the same way as the federal and territorial legal systems. Their laws are different. Imagine trying to take a set of laws, like even as simple as wastage, the same way that Dene people think about it, and stick it into the Wildlife Act. It won't work. We tried it. The federal/territorial legal systems don't allow for the existence of protocols that don't fit. The lawyers would say no, we can't do that.

Part of the challenge is that things have changed. In the Sahtu we talk about five communities, all kinds of different hunters: resident hunters, people that hunt from outside, and you have to sort all of that out. There's more and more information to include. So we need to have a process. You want to do good work and you want to include everybody's comments then things slow down. As information comes in everything slows down. Answers, making decisions is not as easy as it looks when you want to include all of the information that comes in. Decisions are made with papers in front of you, the information. Already you see the issues with our own aboriginal people. It's not easy for them to bring their oral history into the board rooms. It's not as easy as it seems.

This is why I'm so dedicated in trying to get these policies from stories. If those stories get in front of us, they could be included as part of the process, part of the information that we use in decision-making. That's so important.

## References

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