

Ekwò and Tłìchò Nàowo / Caribou and Tłìchò language, culture and way of life: An evolving relationship and shared history¹

John B. Zoe

Tłìchò Government, Box 412, Behchokò, NT X0E 0Y0 (johnbzoe@tlichocom).

Rangifer, Special Issue No. 20: 69–74

Introduction

My name is John B. Zoe. I'm a member of the Tłìchò Nation in the Northwest Territories. Up until recently, I was the chief negotiator that worked on the Tłìchò agreement that was given effect in 2005. I've been involved in the talks about decline of ekwò (caribou), in the Northwest Territories, and an interim plan has been put together over the past two or three years towards gaining a better understanding of herds status and recovery.

We are now going to go back in time to long before co-management was even contemplated and before the Government of the Northwest Territories existed, back to the pre-colonial relationship between Tłìchò and ekwò. We will consider how this has changed over time, with our people being influenced by the fur traders and the global market economy.

When ekwò declined, it really became an emotional issue for a lot of people, especially the elders, because ekwò is what defines our language, culture and way of life. Since the time of Yamozha, the Tłìchò have lived in co-existence with ekwò, with rules and laws of respect and appreciation defining their relationship with ekwò. Even where we live, and where the communities are situated is because of ekwò. All the trails that we have, the portages,

all lead towards ekwò grounds. And all our original pre-contact clothing, our blankets, our moccasins, our tents, all come from ekwò. The carry-alls on our dogsleds, the harnesses, the ropes, the babiche, the snowshoes, everything is derived from ekwò, including a lot of the ancient medicines and tools.

Many of the placenames on the landscape relate to activities that happened while travelling to the barrenlands and back, following ekwò migration. We now call them trails of our ancestors. On those trails, there are very many placenames that talk about the fisheries along the way, areas where the moose live, and the different types and methods of harvesting that are embedded in the landscape. So we know that the placenames are built in layers from pre-contact times. The placenames have a lot to do with harvesting, and the movement of people, and habitat areas for different animals. It was very important for people to minimize their impact in these areas when they were passing through, so that those habitats would continue to exist.

Our relationship with ekwò defines who we are. It's a foundation for our nàowo – a Tłìchò concept that encompasses our language, culture, way of life, as well as our knowledge and laws. So it wasn't surprising that people would get emotionally involved when they learned of declining ekwò populations, and wanted to know what was happening. When there was talk of reduced harvest, it became a very difficult issue. And it will continue to be difficult. Our revered former Chief Mòfwi, who was a signatory to

¹ *This paper is adapted from the author's contribution to the NACW presentation co-authored with Kerri Garner and Jan Adamczewski, "Tłìchò People and Ekwò (Caribou): An Evolving Relationship And Shared History," as well as contributions to the NACW Aboriginal Talking Circles.*



Photo 1. Forty tents at Gots'okati (Mesa Lake), August 1988. (Photo: John B. Zoe)

the treaty of 1921, said that he and his people would not be restricted from carrying on their *nàowo*, and that includes hunting. So when people hear about targets on total allowable harvest and restrictions, it is perceived as an attack on who we are as a traditional hunting society.

Old and new pressures on *ekwò*

A lot has happened in our traditional territory since the pre-contact period when we lived intimately with *ekwò*, with the outside influences of the global market economy and trade leading to commodification of this sacred animal. As early as 1700, the European fancy for beaver pelt hats brought trappers and traders to the North, increasing the need for *ekwò* as a trade item. This caused people to begin hunting on a competitive market basis, and thereby altered the relationship between man and animal.

The original trading posts were set up in our area not for the fur trade, but as provisional posts. The *Ṭḥcḥò* would sell their *ekwò* to the post, only to end up purchasing it back later at times. *Ekwò* had now truly become a product to be bought and sold. The trading posts wanted to buy and trade for as much *ekwò* as they could. They would trade for tongues, drymeat, pemmican, anything they could get their

hands on, so that could be distributed along the Mackenzie River to the other posts. That way, people working at those trading posts wouldn't end up eating all the trading goods. So the trade in *ekwò* actually started over a hundred years ago in the 1850s, and that pressure continued until the early 1970s when *ekwò* trade was stopped (though they were still trading for fish and other resources).

After the treaty when the lands were now open for development, new exploration started to happen. The first wave of exploration was the prospectors. It was small time activity, but even those people had to eat. When the early exploration camps were being set up, a lot of trade happened with the cook shacks. *Ekwò* meat, *ekwò* clothing and firewood were traded for flour and other groceries. You can still see the remnants of the wood piles out in the bush, especially at the old mining camps. Then the first cat trains (Caterpillar tractors attached to freight laden sleighs) came into the area to replenish the exploration camps, and those people needed to eat too, especially *ekwò* meat.

In the 1970s, the communities were becoming more permanent and children had to go to school, and so all the hunters, the women and their families had to stay in the community. Since it was no longer possible to make the long trip to hunt *ekwò* by land,

hunters began using aircraft to fly to the barrens and bring back ekwò meat. That became the norm in hunting, even till today, almost thirty-five years later.

Now we have a lot of exploration in our territory. We have three diamond mines, and there are at least two major ice roads going right into the barrenlands on the migratory path. The pressures are great because these roads are still public, so anybody can go up there and do a lot more hunting than was possible before. And there are other pressures, like motorized vehicles that can go where dogteams couldn't go before. There are a lot more ordinary citizens going up with private vehicles, like skidoos and four-wheel-drives. With gas powered machines you can go where nobody's foot has touched in the history of the world. More and more, people are using high-powered rifles. Successful hunting no longer requires that you get as close as possible to the animal, which required a lot of experience and patience in the days of limited firepower. With so much access nowadays, there's no sanctuary left anywhere for ekwò.

I'm not trying to say that we have been the only culprits. There are other pressures that have developed, especially with the emerging territorial government that established itself in the north in 1967 to promote tourism and economic activity in a suppressed small market. There was a lot of support for big game outfitting, including more access to non-resident hunters, and an allotment of tags to the aboriginal groups for commercial purposes. In addition, access to the mineral resources became possible. So, since the late 1960s, there has been a lot more activity, a lot more pressure on the landscape.

New management actions

I think everybody's learning a lesson from the current ekwò decline. But how can we act on what we've learned? That is the big question. It's no longer possible to do things the same old way, the way it was under the old colonial systems and policies. We need to raise our voices in the aboriginal world. The *Revised Joint Proposal on Ekwò Management Actions in Wek'èezhì* that was submitted to the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board by the Tłıchǫ Government and Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT, 2010) is a good example.

The first version of the proposal was done exclusively by the GNWT – and here we are in the 21st century! We raised enough noise to force them to pull it back. The board realized that they needed our nàowo and the involvement of aboriginal groups to make it work. It's a two year recovery plan (2010-2012). That will give us enough time to put our

heads together and move beyond what we've done so far. We'll need to learn from how we've come up with this joint proposal, and apply it to a longer term plan with provisions for adjusting to the changing times.

The overall intent of the Revised Joint Proposal is to help Tłıchǫ relearn their traditional ways, their nàowo, and respect and relationship with ekwò. If these traditions are renewed, ekwò will come back, like the elders have always said.

Our legends talk about ekwò disappearing long ago. There have been times of scarcity and times of abundance. The elders have always believed that when ekwò became scarce they would go away to be left alone – to recover and replenish themselves. They would then come back to offer themselves to the Tłıchǫ. When hard times came upon the Tłıchǫ and other aboriginal people, they turned to other sources of food – moose, beaver, muskrat or fish. The elders knew to always leave “seed on the land” in order to ensure that the species they were hunting or trapping would be able to recover. There was a mutual respect between man and animal.

The most recent memory of a time of scarcity was in the 1960s. At this time, the community of Wekweèì had to be evacuated to Behchokò (Rae-Edzo) and Gamètì (Rae Lakes). This move led to significant changes in the political and social fabric of Tłıchǫ society. Due to an influx of people and lack of infrastructure in Rae, the community of Edzo was developed by the GNWT. During this period, the Tłıchǫ endured the greatest exodus of their children, who were taken residential schools in exchange for relief from the government. The Tłıchǫ culture and way of life changed as a new day school system and amenities such as a hospital further influenced the Tłıchǫ to live in communities and leave their bush life behind.

We know that scarcity is a reality that repeats itself over time. The big difference today is that there are a lot more pressures on ekwò than existed in the era before industrial development, before the fur trade, when aboriginal peoples led a natural way of life on the land. Now we have a lot of development, we have a lot more people, we have new methods of harvesting. These modern pressures caused by humans are something that must be dealt with.

And so new management actions are being taken. But the harvesting targets that are allotted for our territory also provide a good opportunity to return to the traditional style of hunting, where we're actually reviving knowledge of the placenames. The placenames describe the state of ekwò back at the beginning of time, so that by comparison with the present, it's possible to understand changes that have



Photo 2. Tłıchǫ elders and youth at Edzo's Rock, Gots'okati (Mesa Lake), August 1988. (Photo: John B. Zoe)

occurred. That traditional view needs to be shared, so that the scientific community can take those things into consideration. But that's like pulling teeth because the laws don't necessarily recognize the traditional view of rights and titles.

The only way to get our perspective recognized is through negotiations. Management regimes rooted in the laws and processes and imported from England just don't work. We need to ensure that our *nàowo* and the information that exists on the landscape is brought forth in a meaningful way. The practice of those laws that existed in pre-contact times have always been what *ekwò* were comfortable with in their recovery.

Traditions for the future

The young people are going to inherit the decisions that we make. We need to ensure that there's something left for them to inherit. But the survival of future generations as Tłıchǫ in this environment requires that they remain rooted in their language, culture, and way of life.

Way back before the communities were established in the NWT, people would fish and hunt small game

to get their food, wherever they were for the summer. But in the fall they would head out towards the barrenlands, following the ancient canoe routes, the waterways and portages. They would take their dry fish and the things they needed to get to where they were going, to where *ekwò* were. They went only as far as they could carry food and supplies to survive on the barrenlands. Tłıchǫ did not control the land; the land controlled the people and their actions.

I remember that in my youth as a small kid, the whole community would rush to the shoreline, and the people would get in their boats and we would watch them leave. They would be gone for weeks. While they were gone, people were always talking about where the travellers might be and what they might have seen. A lot of stories would be told in the community by the old people who were remembering their own journeys on the land. So it was a really good time to listen to them. The community was waiting and filling time by telling stories about their own experiences.

Some of the young people who were brought to those trails were picking up a lot of information, especially around the camp fires. The elders say that the more camp fires you have, the more you know.

Among them they have thousands of camp fires. It's an information network. When they came back to the community, there was a big celebration with guns going off and people rushing to the shore to unload big bundles of dry meat. The meat was limited to what could be carried on the backs of the hunters over the portages on that two hundred kilometre journey, so it didn't last more than a week for a community that big. But the meat was less important than the coming together of a community, the coming together of new stories, and the knowledge and experiences gained by the young people. Those youth were always changed when they came back.

That stopped in 1972 when the aircraft was introduced in order to keep children in the schools, and allow people to continue hunting even though they no longer could take the full month needed for travelling by land. Between 1972 and 1988, all the hunters flew right to the barrenlands and brought their meat back to the community. Though the fall chartered hunts are not the truly traditional way of doing things, they did allow people to go to the barrenlands in a communal way, harvesting and practicing their traditional activities and ways of respecting the land.

Community freezers were installed. The availability of ekwò was no longer limited to certain seasons of the year. It became available all year round, whether or not ekwò close to the communities. The need to depend on other species at periods of time throughout the year now became a choice, not a necessity.

But all those stories of experiences travelling along the trails, the memories that were embedded on the land, were starting to fade from the community. Although the community still had good shooters, good hunters, they had no longer had the stories.

So in 1988, our community came together with the elders to have a discussion about culture, language, and way of life. One of the first things that the elders were saying was, "Take us to the barrenlands. We can't go by land now. But if we fly there, you younger people can go by boat and meet us there." So they flew, and we took the boat. We did that the first year. The second year and the third year, we made a side trip. But this initiative died in 1991.

So I hooked up with sub-arctic archaeologist Tom Andrews of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre. Tom wanted to do an archaeological survey, but he wanted to do it differently. He wanted to do what you call ethno-archaeology, which is about asking people about their history first, before doing the surveys. We needed someone to come with us. I had heard about the elder Harry Simpson from the community of Gamètì. He used to tell a lot of stories. I was very intrigued by this man. I asked him if he

could come along with us, and he was just ready to jump in a boat.

We visited a lot of sites over the following three years. The elder showed us where they had the winter hunting camps. All the places that we visited were based on the stories of the old people. We plotted it out on a map and spent a lot of time visiting. Every site was an archaeological site, still used today. On the last year, we were sharing the same tent, spending twenty-four hours a day together.

One day the elder said, "You know, we've been travelling for three summers now and we've seen geologists, we've seen teachers on holidays, we've seen Americans, we've seen Europeans travelling all over, but we haven't seen any of our people. There's something totally wrong here. We have to get the young people out there, because otherwise our nàowo is all going to end up in a museum. That's the last place we need it. We need to get the information out to the young people. We should make an effort to get them out."

That was in 1994. Harry and I worked on it all winter, and managed to get five boats. So in the summer of 1995 we started taking out youth. We took out thirty youths the first time. We travelled ekwò Trail, or the trail going to the barrens. We went all the way, almost to the barrens, and we followed the trail to the barrens from the next community. From there, we came back to where we started. It took almost a month.

Ever since 1995, we've been doing these canoe trips with the students and community members and elders every summer. Last summer we took out over two hundred and sixty people by canoe. In the last fifteen years we've taken out over a thousand people. But teaching language, culture, and way of life is not an easy task. It takes years. We've been doing it for fifteen years, taking people out over a week at a time.

If we say we're going to have to prepare our young people for the future, in order to protect our language, culture, and way of life, the important word is "protect." The only way to protect what you really believe in as your way of life is to build an army to protect it. But it takes a lot of training for those new recruits. Years and years of training for them to have as many camp fires as they can, so that they can have nàowo that they can pass on to the new recruits.

It all goes back to the beginning of time when the animals and people came together in a big meeting. They would feast, and they would dance. They all had to come together, but very many of them were far way and they could not wait until those ones arrived. They started the festivities and were dancing. By the time Notaa arrived people were petered out, animals

Ekwò Trail: A Childhood Memory

On the way back from the barrens, we always stopped on a certain island. Harry remembered this place. "We were here a long time ago," he said. He could see these old tent rings over here, old camp fires. All of a sudden somebody found something. It looked like an eagle feather, but it was made out of wood. Nobody knew what it was, so I gave it to Harry. He said, "Oh, that's dech̄ tsetu. I remember that as a kid. I remember the person who made this thing. We were here."

And here is the story that Harry told: "Late that spring after living among ekwò, we were now going north to Hottah Lake. So the elder left in the morning and we followed by dog team, but it was slushy. The dogs couldn't pull very fast, so everybody walked across Faber Lake. They walked and walked and walked. Finally they got to where the old hunters were. The hunters were laying on a rock resting, because they had just shot over ten ekwò. So they made camp and they did all the preparation of the meat and the hides. It took them a couple of days to make dry meat and hang it up and get it all ready to move. But the sun was so hot that not even the sled could be pulled with all the weight of that meat.

"So the elders all got together and one of them carved out what looks like an eagle feather. They attached a piece of babiche to a short stick. Then they got young people, because they have lots of energy and power, and made them stand on a little rock. I was one of them, as a kid. They made us stand there and take this stick, and swing it around our heads. And it's called dech̄ tsetu. It was notched in such a way that it made a whirling sound. What they were doing was calling the north wind. Sure enough, the wind started to pick up. It blew from the north all night long, and in the morning everything was frozen. They were able to load their sleds with the meat and started heading north towards Hottah Lake, towards what they call the noeʔe, which is the place where ekwò would swim across. Ekwò crossing before they head back to the calving grounds. The idea was to get there to do the last harvest of the season. And they made it there."

were petered out. So Notaa started to sing a song. Then the dance started again and it really became strong. And Notaa was so tired that he just fell back, and they danced over his feet. That's why today he still has flat feet.

The gathering was closed off with a dance. It's a tradition. When there was a dispute resolved between tribes, it was closed off with a tea dance. When the early traders came into the area and we traded with them, it ended with a tea dance. When the treaty parties came in and the people accepted treaty, they ended with a tea dance. Those are what you call traditions. Tradition is an activity to remember your own history, and pass it on to the future. It's to strengthen the young people. It's very important for them to be involved. But it's not an easy thing. You have to do it over and over and over again.

Yes, in the old days when people were living in the bush, the old people had everybody with them. They were living the life and talking to the youth every day. Now we not only have to do the activities on the land, we have to push it in the schools as much as we can to bridge that gap and recover what we have lost. Our children have a right to enjoy ekwò as we once did. It is our responsibility to begin to change our thinking and expectations, to give the herd an opportunity to recover. The future really belongs to the youth.

Masìcho, thank you.

References

Tłìch̄ Government and NWT Environment and Natural Resources. 2009 (November 13). *Joint Proposal on Caribou Management Actions in Wek'èezbìi: Proposal to Wek'èezbìi Renewable Resource Board*. http://www.wrrb.ca/sites/default/files/public_registry/Joint%20Proposal%20on%20caribou%20Management%20Actions%20Nov%204%202009%20-%20final_0.pdf. Accessed May 21, 2010.