

## Renewing our traditional laws through joint ekwò (caribou) management<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Fred Sangris is my English name. When I was born, my grandfathers gave me my Dene name, which is Nogache or Wolverine Tail. To my community I'm a hunter and trapper, and the last of the Yellowknives Dene who have trapped on the barrenlands north of Yellowknife. Over a period of about twenty years, I used to spend up to five months of the year in the barrenlands trapping white fox just south of Lac de Gras where the diamond mines are placed today. My life has always been on the land, with the wildlife, with ekwò (caribou). I was very happy to be born into a family with a unique culture and way of life. Our ability to live on the land with the wildlife is something that I'm very proud of, to this day.

I'm a former Chief, and former Grand Chief. In 2010 I negotiated a harvesting agreement with the Government of the Northwest Territories (NWT) for the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, so the Aboriginal people can harvest their traditional foods.

I'm going to talk about how we can co-exist and still walk side by side with ekwò. We need to really work on that.

I'm going to share a story with you. My grandfather David Sangris was born on the Coppermine River around 1865. He was born there, living on the land in nomadic times. Nothing came from stores or from the European trade. They lived mostly by themselves in the traditional way on the Coppermine River, surviving on muskox and ekwò. Clothing, everything came from there. My grandfather and his

family didn't own a rifle. They were still using bow and arrows, spears, snares, traps.

When I was born in 1957, my father was still driving sled dogs. My grandfather lived with us at that time. I remember in my early years travelling by dog sled across many, many lakes in the NWT, just north of the city of Yellowknife. Then I was introduced to ekwò. I had never seen this animal before. When I first saw them, I asked, "Grandfather, why are there so many sled dogs on the lake? Big sled dogs. And they're all wandering free!"

He said, "Those are ekwò. They are our traditional food, given to us by the Creator. Ekwò is there to take care of us until the end of time."

I truly believe that ekwò did come to live with the Aboriginal peoples of the North, and ekwò has always sustained them. To this day we still harvest ekwò as we have done for many, many generations.

### Understanding traditional law

In my youth, my father would take me to the barrenlands every year just after I got out of school. He said, "I'm going to teach you, so that you will be knowledgeable. Before you harvest animals, you have to learn to understand them. The way they think, their habitat, the way they live, what they eat. Before you harvest ekwò you must understand them first. You must understand the names of ekwò and the reason they're doing what they do, migrating, going to the forest from the arctic barrenlands and back again. And there are traditional laws that come with ekwò. Every Aboriginal child has to understand the laws pertaining to ekwò."

<sup>1</sup> This paper is adapted from contributions by Fred Sangris at the NACW Aboriginal Talking Circle.

Because I was taught those skills, today I take care of my game in a manner that is respectful to the Creator. My father explained to me the traditional names of the parts of ekwò – the antlers, head, hide, hind quarters, intestines, hearts, kidneys, livers. In our language we have names for all the parts of ekwò, similar to the names that scientists have given all those parts.

Our knowledge goes back thousands and thousands of years. Some of the stories are so old that they have spread out among the communities. Many communities share these stories. The stories are still there.

There are laws with ekwò, traditional laws that go back hundreds of years. These laws apply not only to my people, but to many of the Aboriginal people throughout this whole country who depend on moose, ekwò, muskox and buffalo. We all come from different communities, different languages, but all our minds are the same. Our hearts are with ekwò and we have great respect for this sacred animal that we all depend on.

In my younger days I learned about the Aboriginal biology of ekwò from my grandfather and my father and many of the older hunters who I travelled with. Over many campfires, they explained to me the importance of ekwò and the laws that go with them. One of the first things I was taught as a child is to respect and honour ekwò, because without this herd many of my ancestors would have perished and would be gone. Ekwò give us life, so in return we have to do our best to guard and protect them.

My grandfather told me many years ago that ekwò had a great concern one time. He wanted to talk about his concern. So he called upon the man and said, “I want you to gather as many animals as you can and people from all this land. I want to talk about laws and how I should be used in the future, because right now I don’t like what’s happening with me. When the wolf takes me down they do all sorts of things to me and I’m not happy with it. I want to talk about making laws.”<sup>2</sup>

So a big gathering was called where all animals came together. Ekwò talked about how he was being handled and how he was being abused and how there were laws that weren’t followed. He blamed a lot of the things on the wolf and fox, and told them that there has to be a law for how he would be respected and used in the future.

And ekwò said, “From now on, if the wolf takes me down, he shall not break my bones or chew my bones. That I don’t want. I would like a law put in

place so the wolf and fox will respect me and use me wisely and not scatter me all over.” After a long discussion the wolf agreed, the fox agreed. Then they talked about the laws for other animals, including the ravens, birds, mink, marten, everyone that came. They agreed there should be laws put in place that they should all respect each other.

The meeting was over and they were ready to leave, there was a voice calling, “What about me? What about me?” They looked all around and they didn’t see anybody, but they heard a voice. They looked down on the ground and saw a small little ant. He said, “Me too, I live on this earth. I don’t like how the moose is kicking my house and animals are digging my house. When it rains I have a hard time with my family. When my house is broken I can’t survive in the winter. There should be a law in place that when you see my house you don’t break my house, but walk around it.”

And a man was invited to witness this great gathering. The man was told to take all that he heard and pass it on, make laws and pass it on to not only animals, but all the people as well. They should have respect for the animals, and treat them with great care.

Today in my village we still live by these old traditional laws. When I came back from hunting, my old man used to ask me, “When you took ekwò down, did you give honour to ekwò?” I would say, “Yes, I took his right hand, I put it on my forehead, and I shook it and I said, ‘Welcome. You’ve come back to me again, and I’m happy to use you and I give great thanks to you. But I hope that in the future you will come back to me again in great numbers.’” So we still practice those traditional laws on the land.

One time I was hunting with an elder and we were cooking ekwò kidneys. He said, “Young man, you can’t eat that. That’s not for you. You’re not an elder. You should leave that alone.” So I learned very quickly about the traditional laws of ekwò.

One must not hit or abuse ekwò or wildlife in any way. When you shoot ekwò, you perform a small ceremony. You thank the Creator for this animal who has given up his life so that others can live. Once that animal is honoured, then you take care of it and bring it back to your families, to your villages, to share among the elders and people. Those are old ways that are still practiced today in some communities.

My father didn’t put me on the barrenlands to punish me. He put me there to learn. I didn’t go to an institution to learn, to sit behind the four walls and try to understand ekwò. The best way to understand those species is right there on the land. You have to interact with them. You have to watch them daily.

<sup>2</sup> A *Sabtiót’ing’Dél’ing* First Nation version of this story is discussed in Walter Bayba’s contribution to this volume.

Watch what they eat. Watch what they do. Aboriginal people learn by watching the behaviour of ekwò. We don't learn about wildlife behind four walls. We learn by being in the field, by being with ekwò all the time.

### An ancient management system

Aboriginal people are very careful. We have been managing our resources for generations, way before the arrival of the Europeans. If we didn't manage them, there would be no ekwò, there would be no buffalo, there would be no animals on earth. The same thing goes with the fish. We don't fish out the whole lake. When one lake is fished out we move on to the next one. So we're very careful. We have to manage the animals because this is our food source. We still make sure that our stock are not thinned out. We make sure that the food source is going to be there for many generations after we're gone.

For example, one time my grandfather said, "Go hunting in this area. Get some moose, get some ekwò. But once you've hunted there, don't go there again for a while. Go to another place, and harvest other animals too as well. Because if you stay in one area too long you continue to harvest the same animals, eventually they're going to thin out and disappear." So as Aboriginal people we've learned to manage our wildlife. We've learned to take care of our food source. We've depended on these animals for thousands of years, and we still continue to depend on them today.

What's happening today in my community is that the young people, my young generations are not following those protocols. They're not being taught. So I'm trying to push a hunter education program in my community to bring back the old traditional ways and the cultural ways, and teach the young people about respect and only taking what you need. I see young people bringing in many ekwò come down, fifty or sixty. I see no reason why such great numbers are taken.

I'm not a leader in my community, but as a hunter I take responsibility. I step forward and I'm going to try to do my best to work with young people to bring back education in our culture, hunting skills and the traditional laws of the people and wildlife. We need to go back to these laws because ekwò said, "If you don't keep the laws I will go away, and I might not come back." This is what we've got to think about: respect, and bringing the laws back, and trying to protect the sacred animal.

### Working together

Other peoples have come to this country. They want to manage and control the animals and to have authority over them. For example, nowadays biologists are flying out on ekwò surveys mostly on their own, with no participation from Aboriginal communities. This leads to conflict. The only way to avoid those conflicts is to have collaboration. If you put Aboriginal knowledge and the scientific knowledge to work together, it will be possible and find a way for ekwò to be managed well for the future. One group cannot go and study animals and make decisions by themselves.

I've always believed that science is a good thing. But it's still young. Aboriginal people were the first scientists in North America, and that information is still there today. The scientific community needs to get involved in our communities. They need to work out arrangements with the Aboriginal peoples, ways of collaborating and bringing science and Aboriginal knowledge together. The scientific community has to engage with Aboriginal people and strike up cooperation. You have to do it that way, because the elders, the people, the hunters, the harvesters have knowledge of what the scientists are trying to understand, thousands of years of information.

Today we live in a very different world. It used to be I was travelling with sled dogs and living my traditional, cultural life as a Dene, as my grandfathers and my fathers did before me. Now I live in two different worlds. I'm educated, and I also live in a very traditional world. I've been working with scientists for about ten years now, and I've seen how scientists collect their data through surveys. This is good too. But I really believe that science and traditional knowledge can go hand in hand.

### Changes on the land

A lot of changes are happening in ekwò nowadays, whether it be climate change or activities on the land. Where I come from north of Yellowknife there is a lot of exploration going on, winter roads being built. When they find minerals, industry will pressure governments until they get what they want. But when they don't do proper planning at the beginning, the results can be really devastating.

There are two mines in the city of Yellowknife near where I grew up, Con Mine and Giant Mine. Both mines have really devastated the whole area. It will take a thousand years for those mines to clean up themselves. And the people who got rich off the mines walked away. But my community has to live with that mess. We're facing the consequences today

through illness, bad water, many problems. Governments must do their best to get a grip on industry. Industry has to be managed.

The rules in some areas are too flexible and some rules are not really good. For example, I know a non-Aboriginal person who went and got a moose and he didn't have a licence. He knew he was going to pay a fine. What he told me was, "I know I'm going to pay a fine and it's going to be \$200 or \$300. That's nothing. I'll pay that up and I'll still keep my moose." These are the kinds of things that are happening up North. People are taking advantage because the penalty is too low.

Ekwò are thinning out where I come from north of Yellowknife because of many things: mining activities, overhunting. I never see Aboriginal people overhunting. They always take home what they can provide for their families. But access to winter roads is a big problem. It brings in poachers from all over. The wildlife officers in the community go home at 5:00 pm and the poachers are out at 6:00 pm.

When the Crown came into this country, Aboriginal people had a treaty agreement that our way of life would not change, that we would continue to hunt, harvest, and provide for our families. In the North where ekwò are thinning out, we have to take action. We must protect those calving grounds, the home of ekwò. There are people who are exploring for gold at the calving grounds. If we don't put some kind of protection on the calving grounds, those ekwò are going to have problems. It's like disturbing a bird nest. If you disturb a bird nest, the birds don't come back. Same thing with ekwò. If you disturb the calving ground, they'll go elsewhere. They may decide to disappear.

## Ekwò relationships

Ekwò are part of this world. They're part of the ecosystem. They were brought here by the Creator to live alongside us. After many thousands of years, they remain wild animals, free and roaming. People are still trying to understand why ekwò migrate back and forth. Maybe that a question that the scientists should take on: Why do they migrate? There must be a good reason for it.

In northern Canada we have ekwò all over northern parts of the Arctic Ocean, all the way from Alaska, Yukon, NWT, and then Quebec, Innu, Labrador, even as far as Newfoundland. There's ekwò all over the place. I've talked with many elders, and the elders always say that all ekwò are the same, whether they're barrenland, woodland, or mountain ekwò. They know each other. Sometimes they migrate. When

they migrate they migrate together. No one has done a DNA study of all the herds from Newfoundland to Alaska, including the NWT and the coast to determine if ekwò are all related, or if they're different herds. That's something we should find out.

One time I went to Colville Lake, a very small community in the NWT of about a hundred people. That's the population. One of the elders was sharing a story with me about ekwò. He said in 1946 the whole migration of ekwò went through Colville Lake and to Mackenzie River at Fort Good Hope. The elders thought ekwò was going to stop at the river and go down the river to the rest of the communities. Strangely, ekwò did something they had never done before. They crossed the Mackenzie River and disappeared into the mountains in the Yukon. The hunters tried to follow them by dogsled. But it was impossible for them to follow ekwò into those rugged mountains. For about ten years after that they never had any ekwò. Then one day ekwò returned and not just a few hundred of them. They came back in the thousands. It was very unusual.

Nobody knew where they went or what they did, but they were gone for years. The elder that I talked to thinks that they might have gone to migrate with the other herds. I asked him, "Why do you think they would have migrated together with the other herds?" He said, the way nature works is that ekwò could be in big numbers, but in some years the breeding bulls are not there. When the breeding bulls are not there, immature bulls will take over. There is more inbreeding, and the herds become weak. The calves are not strong; many don't survive. He said the cows sense that something is wrong, so they leave, and migrate with other herds. Then years later they come back, when they're strong again.

I have been monitoring the Bathurst herd north of Yellowknife for many years. The scientists say that the herd was 350 000 in 1996, and more than 128 000 in 2006. Then in 2009, just a few years later, it went down to about 32 000. A big drop. We were trying to find out where the 100 000 ekwò went. We asked the pilots, we asked the exploration companies, we asked the mines to keep an eye out. If they found 100 000 carcasses on the land somewhere, that could be the answer to the disappearance of all the ekwò. But no one to this day has found anything like that.

The elders suspect that ekwò have probably gone east because there's been too much exploration or drilling going on in the calving grounds. And at the same time, the calves are not strong. And heavy sports hunting is going on for big game, so for years and years the mature bulls have been taken out. The

elders believe the cows might have sensed something is wrong and gone to join other herds.

The older people who are former hunters suspect something is going on. Now we have climate change, we have a warmer climate. Ekwò are acting very strangely. They're going west, east, and in the last couple of years ekwò that my community and the Tłı̄ch̄ community depend on wintered over in Contwoyto Lake, which is up north near the calving grounds. By November, many of them haven't migrated down yet. I talked to an elder and he said, well, there are no leaders. There are no mature bulls to take the lead and guide them to the tree line and into the forests. So the younger ones are kind of lost and out there trying to find their way.

The scientists have been doing studies on one herd at a time. So if a herd moves over to another neighbouring herds, they may be count the same herds again the next year. So I believe there needs to be a counting of all the herds all at once, in one season. This way we can determine the numbers.

## Taking responsibility

Last winter was very hard for our people because of the ekwò decline. The elders in the community, some of them who were diabetic, wanted to get the hunters to go on the land and bring some lean meat back because the diabetic people can't eat meat from the store with all the fat on it. Ekwò is very lean and it's really good diet for diabetic people. So the hunters went out, and ekwò were taken away from them. I could see that in the future things were not going to be good. I don't want these crises to continue.

There was a chance to get people together, to make people understand that this is not the way. Working together, we could find another way to work with ekwò and protect ekwò.

In 2010 I was appointed by the Chief of the Yellowknives Dene to lead the negotiations with the NWT Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) to come up with an agreement. The Chief instructed me to find a way to make it possible for my people to still continue to hunt, while at the same time addressing the ekwò crisis by taking only what we need, so that we do our part in conservation.

It was very hard for my elders to talk about coming to an agreement. I sat down with them, and I talked to them in my language. I told them that if we don't do this there will be more crisis. If we don't make an agreement, soon there might not be any ekwò left at all. The time has come where we have to take responsibility, and do something to protect ekwò like we always have. I told them that yes, we do have

treaty rights to hunt, but with that right comes our responsibility as stewards. Then they agreed. They said, "You're right. We have a right, but responsibility is another thing. It's a bigger thing. We have to work on that."

So with that they gave us a mandate and their blessings, and we went to negotiate an interim agreement with ENR that was signed by Yellowknives Dene Chiefs Edward Sangris (Dettah) and Ted Tsetta (Ndilo) on October 7, 2010<sup>3</sup>. It's only for twenty-four months, two years, until ekwò comes back. In a year we're going to review it and then determine what we should do. This is the first step in taking measures that are important to our community.

We want to do our part. We want to make sure there are ekwò for future generations. I would like to go on the land one day with our young children and tell them, "Look, there's ekwò there. They're still surviving because years ago we did something right. We took measures to protect them and they're here." We can still use and harvest ekwò. But because they are sacred and they look after our communities, we have to go back to our traditional laws and ways, and respect ekwò and try to protect them as much as we can.

The Yellowknives Dene of Dettah and Ndilo are very cultural people, though we live right next to the big city of Yellowknife. We have little to do with the city that grew up beside us. Our villages are older than the city. Every fall, many of my people fish for their winter stock. We hunt not only ekwò, but also moose, and even the buffalo that have moved into our area over the past few years. My elders are afraid of buffalo, they think we shouldn't eat them. Never before have we had buffalo on our land. Now we're trying to understand how we can get along with this new species, and how we can use that and take less ekwò. We also have other animals, like birds, ptarmigan, rabbits, many other kinds of food that we can depend on.

I believe the interim agreement that we made is a really good one. I think it will work for us and I think the Yellowknives Dene are going to go out and work jointly with ENR to ensure that ekwò are monitored and taken good care of, and that our hunters are taking only what they need. We have to try to take responsibility and I think the Yellowknives Dene have done that. Many years from now, ekwò

<sup>3</sup> *Barren-ground Caribou Harvesting Interim Agreement Between Yellowknives Dene First Nation And the Government of the Northwest Territories. A press release and backgrounder on this agreement is available online at [http://www.enr.gov.nt.ca/\\_live/documents/content/Yellowknives\\_Dene\\_and\\_GNWT\\_Sign%20Agreement.pdf](http://www.enr.gov.nt.ca/_live/documents/content/Yellowknives_Dene_and_GNWT_Sign%20Agreement.pdf). Accessed December 18, 2011.*

will continue to be the topic of many of our meetings. The issue will not go away; the discussion will go on for a long time.

That's all I want to share with you. Hunter education is really important. As Aboriginal peoples of this land, we all have culture. We all have language.

But behind our language are our laws. They may be invisible, but we can put them in writing and start using them and pass them on to our young people, so that in the future they will also take responsibility to protect ekwò.

Masi, thank you.