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I would like to tell you about a First Nation that has protected its cultural heritage and whose community has been involved with archaeological explorations for years. They are the *Shùhtagot'ine*, or Mountain Dene. The Mountain Dene inhabited the continental divide of the Mackenzie Mountains of the western Northwest Territories. They moved between five rivers—the Keele, Naatla, Tuchi, Redstone, and Gotlin—and into the Yukon. Their livelihood depended on moose, caribou, and sheep, and they were known for their generosity. They shared the fruits of their hunt with the whole community. The *Shùhtagot'ine* are unique to most First Nations peoples as they were not greatly impacted by the coming of the Hudson's Bay Company to our land. Their lifestyle was not dramatically altered until after the Second World War.

As with any group of people, we are proud of our heritage and our ancestry. We want to teach our children about their ancestry. In my family, my grandfather Zaul Blondin was one of the signatories of Treaty 11, signed in 1921 between the Dene and the Queen's representatives. My eldest son is named after him: such are the intergenerational bonds of the Dene people.

As archaeologists, I ask you to remember the people whose history you are excavating. I ask that you respect their traditions and more importantly, that you involve as many as possible of those people who are connected with the site. It is important that in doing your research you involve all the members of the community. Young people need opportunities to be connected to their heritage. Hands-on experience is the vehicle that will connect them with their cultural heritage and history.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SHÛHTAGOT'INE

The *Shùhtagot'ine* began trading with the Europeans in the early 19th century. They came down from the mountains to trade, and immediately returned to their home once the trading was completed. These transactions were completed on *Shùhtagot'ine* terms. They were independent of the European traders as it was the *Shùhtagot'ine* who provided the settlers with food. As a matter of fact, many of the supplies that the *Shùhtagot'ine* received from the settlers were used up before they left for the mountains. The Europeans were never invited into the mountains, and they were not able to find an easy way through them until much later.

Guns were not essential until the mid-20th century. When they ran out of ammunition, they resorted to snares and bone-tipped arrows. According to elders, guns were often impractical because enough shells could not be packed for extensive use, as the hunters were usually away from the trading post for long periods. Mountain Dene elders can still describe how to peck and grind a stone adze and use it to fell a tree. Traditional ways are still used today by the *Shùhtagot'ine* when hunting. Although they may no longer use drift fences for hunting caribou and sheep, elders and younger hunters will still discuss fence locations.

Beginning in the late 19th century, dogs were used with increasing frequency for both packing in the summer and hauling in the winter. Dog sleds gave hunters a great deal more range than before and permitted partially dried meat to be hauled long distances back to camp. The continued demand by traders for greater supplies of fish, meat, and fat to supply posts in the Mackenzie Valley led to the late 19th century development of the mooseskin boat.

The creation of the mooseskin boat reflected the best of two different designs. According to archaeologists, the Dene used the York Boat, from the Hudson's Bay Company, as a model and then applied their own technology and traditions to create a new type of boat suitable to their needs. This was much larger than the traditional mooseskin craft, yet it proved to be every bit as reliable. Elders credit the design to a Dene man named Soldat. This craft suited the conditions of the mountain rivers, while using the materials naturally available in the Dene mountain habitat. The mooseskin boats were made at mountain camps in early spring to transport people, dogs, meat, furs, and other goods down the Mackenzie River to the trading posts. These boats were designed as temporary watercraft to be dismantled after the journey. The hides were then tanned and used for clothing and other items, while the wooden frames were abandoned. These boats are

significant because they demonstrate the creativity and adaptability of the *Shùhtagot'ine*. By the 1920s, certain events changed the dynamics of the Mountain Dene and, for that matter, of all Dene people forever. The fur market collapsed, oil was discovered in Norman Wells, large steamers and gas-powered boats appeared on the Mackenzie River, and Commissioners arrived to visit the people. Treaty 11 was signed in 1921. In 1928, an influenza epidemic swept through the Mackenzie Valley and decimated the Dene population.

*Yáts'ule* (Mackenzie Andrew), the last traditional chief of *Shùhtagot'ine*, foresaw many of these changes and attempted to prepare his people. In the last few years of his life (1945-1946), he composed 52 songs, a drum cycle, that established a moral basis for his people to use in coping with an uncertain future. *Yáts'ule* not only revived the drum songs, but redefined them to give his people a beacon in a rapidly changing world.

*Yáts'ule* realized the great need to protect *Shùhtagot'ine* heritage. This need is now greater than ever. Several projects have occurred in the last 15 years to revive and remind the *Shùhtagot'ine* of their heritage. These projects in the Northwest Territories have been driven by elders for the most part. Some archaeologists have also gone to great lengths to inform and involve the Dene communities in their projects (see Andrews and Zoe; Hanks; Henderson; Kritsch and Andre; Webster and Bennett; all this volume). These projects are unique and deserve attention because they have not only incorporated the skills and knowledge of the elders, but have attempted to address the needs and interests of Native youth. Through their involvement in archaeological projects, Dene youth have gained an understanding of their own history. The two cooperative, largely community-based approaches to Dene heritage research described below are particularly important as they have included training opportunities for some *Shùhtagot'ine*.

#### **The Mooseskin Boat Project**

In 1981, a project to build the first mooseskin boat in many years took place, and involved many Mountain Dene, young and old. The project was driven by elder Gabe Etchinelle. The building of the boat, from its construction to its arrival in Fort Norman, took three months. The moose were hunted, the skins prepared, the meat dried. The forests were scoured for straight-grained spruce trees with an appropriate natural curve. This project enabled all those who participated to learn more about their people. The project was recorded on film and has become the First National Film Board Slavey Language Project. In having the entire process filmed, the *Shùhtagot'ine* will be able to educate others about this aspect of their culture and history.

#### **Drum Lake Field School**

During 1985 and 1986, an archaeological field school for Dene students was run at Drum Lake, sponsored by the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre and the Northern Oil and Gas Action Plan. The school was directed by archaeologist Chris Hanks, who for many years has been involved in heritage research in the *Shùhtagot'ine* region located in the Mackenzie Mountains. Drum Lake was selected because of its research potential, being an important hunting and fishing area. It was also an area where *Yáts'ule* spent many of his winters.

The Dene trainees first began by building a fish camp. While they were processing and drying the fish, discussions were held as to the potential archaeological significance of the debris they were leaving behind. The students subsequently learned archaeological survey and excavation techniques, worked with elders to record traditional place names and stories, and learned how to set fish nets and other important bush skills. They also learned how to make stone tools.

The Drum Lake Field School also encouraged community participation. Dene youth were given an opportunity to learn from both elders and archaeologists. Everyone benefited from this approach. The archaeologists were able to gain a better understanding of, and respect for, the differences in attitudes, perceptions, values, and aspirations held by Dene elders and youth. In turn, the community participants, many from regions far from *Shùhtagot'ine* lands, learned from each other, and gained from the archaeologists a new perspective on Dene heritage.

Both the Mooseskin Boat project and the Drum Lake Field School involved the entire community. One result of such an integrated approach was that the amount of suspicion and distrust within the community toward archaeologists dropped significantly. However, the single most

important feature of both projects was the involvement of the youth. It is important to ensure that they are taught the significance of their culture. These experiences provided them with a greater understanding of their ancestry.

### THE VALUE OF ORAL TRADITIONS

The incorporation of knowledge derived from oral traditional has greatly assisted archaeological explorations. Oral societies have developed sophisticated memory devices to structure their myths and legends. Events may lose their chronological sequence, but still retain the elements necessary for a group's on-going social relationships. Narratives about *Yamoria*, an important hero, provide pertinent information about the landscape for the Dene by naming key geographical features and relating them to the power of spirits (see Hanks, Ch. 11). For the Dene, the landscape reflects the oral tradition, and the oral tradition reflects culture; consequently the landscape becomes inseparable from culture (see Andrews and Zoe, Ch. 10). When oral stories are written down, they lose some of their meaning because the intonations of the voice and the gestures cannot be translated onto paper. In order for the Dene, and indeed all people with an oral tradition, to preserve their culture, they must also protect this oral tradition.

### LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

I feel that there are some important lessons to be learned from the work of the *Shuhtagot'ine*. The first is the need for archaeologists to gain the trust of the people whose heritage they are trying to uncover. Trust is attained through community involvement. Archaeologists must not simply take from the elders, but should try to give something back.

#### Youth-Oriented Programs

It is important that archaeological research involve the youth. Through training, hands-on experience, and direct exposure to archaeological knowledge, young people will be provided with new and exciting ways to interact with and understand their own heritage. This will require a commitment from archaeologists and funding agencies to ensure that research activities provide training opportunities for young people. There are many programs available to assist with the costs of training (for example, the Youth Service Canada program) and archaeologists will need to work in partnership with communities to access these programs.

#### Cultural Institutes

The Dene have begun to take control of preserving their own heritage and to regain control of their education. For example, the Dene Cultural Institute coordinates research and educational activities that promote Dene culture, language, spirituality, heritage, traditions, and customs. The Dene Cultural Institute is hoping to share Dene skills and to provide educational programs for both Native and non-Native youth. They have, for example, recently completed a project on the use and preparation of medicinal plants and animal parts for traditional healing practices, which includes a report and data base on ingredients for treatments and cures.

The Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI) has also been working to take control of heritage in the Gwich'in Settlement Area. Among their many programs, the GSCI has been directly involved in archaeological research. This research involves youth, elders, and archaeologists working cooperatively toward common goals (see Kritsch and Andre, Ch. 8). Archaeologists working in the north, and indeed throughout Canada, should seek partnerships with cultural institutes and work together to forge a new future of cooperative projects that will foster and strengthen communities and their heritage.

## CONCLUSIONS

I believe that if partnerships are forged between the First Nations peoples and those who are studying their culture, much of the distrust and suspicion common in the past can be avoided. For my people, the past and the future are not as separate as they are for Euro-Canadians. Sacred sites are places that are culturally and historically important, not because of the physical remains on the ground, but because of their mythological and legendary connections with traditional Native beliefs. Even if we do not practice all of the old traditional ways, our cultural heritage is extremely important to us. It is my hope that archaeologists and Native people can come together to integrate their knowledge and skills. This partnership must be made with the whole community. The youth are an integral part of First Nations society and only through their education can our *Shùhtagot'ine* heritage hope to live on.