

Ancient Knowledge of Ancient Sites: Tracing Dene Identity from the Late Pleistocene and Holocene

Christopher C. Hanks

The oral traditions of the Dene of the Mackenzie Valley contain some intriguing clues to cultural identity associated with natural events that appear to have occurred at the end of the Pleistocene and during the early Holocene. The *Yamoria* cycle describes beaver ponds that filled the ancient basins of postglacial lakes, while other narratives appear to describe the White River ash fall of 1250 B.P. This paper examines Dene views of the past and begins the task of relating them to the archaeological and geomorphological literature in an attempt to understand the cultural perspectives contained in these two different views of "history."

STORIES, NOT STONE TOOLS, UNITE US

The Chipewyan, Sahtu Dene, Slavey, Hare, Mountain Dene, Dogrib, and Gwich'in are the Athapaskan-speaking people of the Northwest Territories. Collectively they refer to themselves as the Dene. Their shared cultural identity spans four distinct languages and four major dialects, and is spread from Hudson's Bay to the northern Yukon. Based on archaeological culture histories, there are relatively few strands of evidence that suggest a close relationship between these groups (Clark 1991; Hanks 1994). However, by using oral traditions, the archaeological record, linguistic theories, and the geological record, it can be argued that in the distant past the ancestors of the Dene lived as one group in the mountains along the Yukon-Alaskan border (Abel 1993: 9). For some archaeologists, the Athapaskan arrival east of the Cordilleran is implied by the appearance of a microlithic technology 6000-5000 B.P. (Clark 1991; Morrison 1987); beyond that, the physical evidence on its own does not reveal much about their shared traditions. Other archaeologists are unwilling to ascribe anything older than 2,000 years directly to the ancestors of the modern Dene (Abel 1993: 7). The reality is that there were probably a series of Athapaskan arrivals east of the Cordilleran over a period of several thousand years that eventually evolved into the modern groups. As archaeologists have become more interested in the Dene's perception of cultural landscapes, they have become aware of what Native people have been trying to tell them all along—that the Dene's ongoing knowledge of and relationship to the land is a key to understanding their cultural continuity.

To comprehend the cultural significance of *in situ* knowledge of traditional homelands, it is necessary to go beyond the archaeological record and the fur trade accounts of the Hudson's Bay Company, and re-examine the traditional narratives of the Dene. The oral accounts of the Athapaskans have been undervalued in the past as an historic source (Abel 1993; Andrews and Hanks 1987; Cruikshank 1990a) in the debate over cultural continuity, because to use them effectively requires an epistemological shift on the part of archaeologists trained in a world organized by linear time and *provable* cause and effect. Causality in Native narratives does not necessarily follow a linear time sequence. For instance, the events that spawned Native creation myths may, from a Western perspective, be spread over thousands of years and are therefore not easily causally related. In the Mackenzie drainage, geomorphology provides some clues that have allowed events alluded to in traditional narratives to be tentatively ordered in a manner that Western educated minds can understand. Specifically, the draining of the great postglacial lakes and volcanic eruption have been used to provide a chronological structure that links both archaeological and traditional Native interpretations.

An intellectual shift in Mackenzie Basin research began when elders from Fort Good Hope persuaded archaeologists to use Native place names as a way to understand traditional land use (Hanks and Winter 1983). According to Cruikshank, "By imbuing place with meaning through story, narrators seemed to be using locations in physical space to talk about events in chronological time" (1990a: 347). The ethno-geographic approach was first used in 1982 to examine Hare-Slavey use of the Mackenzie River corridor near Fort Good Hope. Subsequent projects expanded

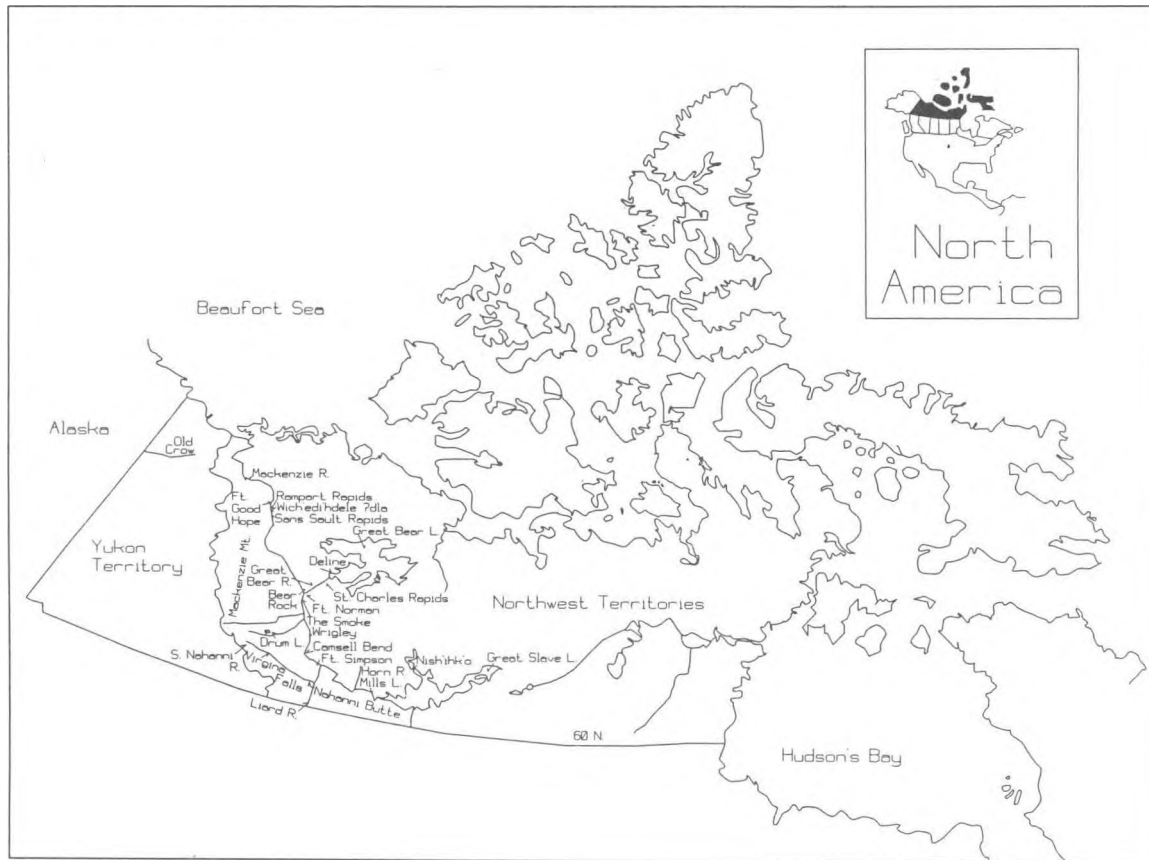


Figure 1. Places in the Bear Rock Narratives.

its application to the Fort Norman area and the Mackenzie Mountains. Ethno-geographic and ethno-archaeological research in the central Mackenzie basin sought to refine our understanding of the relationship between places that the Dene named, traditional Native land use, and the distribution of archaeological sites (Hanks and Winter 1986, 1990; Pokotylo and Hanks 1985). Perhaps the greatest intellectual danger of the approach for archaeologists, however, is the temptation to sift oral accounts for facts and then try to force them into the mould of Western science (Cruikshank 1990a: 346).

The onset of ethno-archaeological and ethno-geographic research around Drum Lake, in the Mackenzie Mountains, provided a chance to examine Dene knowledge about traditional settlement patterns within a region where the archaeological record was reasonably well known (Andrews and Hanks 1987). Those studies demonstrated the depth of information relating to traditional land use that was imbedded in the narratives of the Mountain Dene (Hanks 1994).

Andrews (1990) and Cruikshank (1990a, 1990b) took the next significant step when they independently demonstrated the importance of *place* in narratives that transmitted cultural knowledge and societal values. Geographic locations are the repository of the myths, legends, and stories that are essential to individual enculturation within Athapaskan societies. Being told about a place is often not enough, however, and many of the most important stories can only be meaningfully related at the narrative's home. From a Dene perspective, the land is thus a primary repository of culture.

The ethno-geographic and ethno-archaeological research approach (Andrews 1990; Andrews and Hanks 1987; Hanks and Pokotylo 1989; Hanks and Winter 1983; 1986, 1990; Pokotylo and Hanks 1989) was continued by work I conducted for the Canadian Parks Service to develop the community-based study done by the Sahtu Slavey of Deline on the Grizzly Bear Mountain and

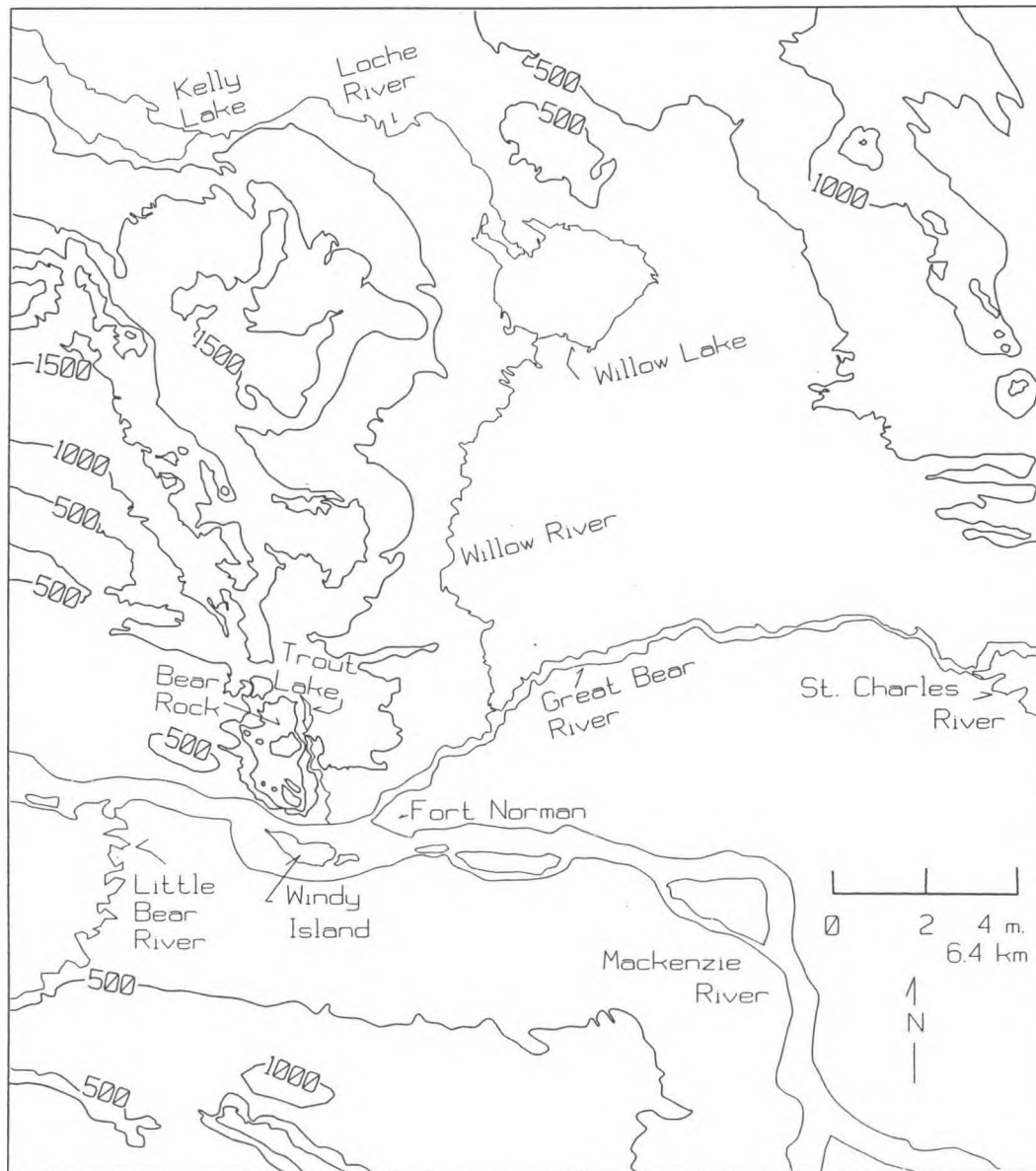


Figure 2. Bear Rock and Mackenzie River.

the Scented Grass Hills historic site proposals. This approach has also been used by Tom Andrews within the homeland of the Dogrib between Great Slave and Great Bear Lakes to both broaden and refine the understanding of *place* within Athapaskan narratives and the transmission of cultural knowledge as it relates to the archaeological record (see Andrews and Zoe, Ch. 10).

In the video *Drum Lake Archaeology* (1987), Mountain Dene elder Paul Wright made the point that it is only when the Dene and archaeologists combine their knowledge that the larger story becomes whole. For this chapter, I have chosen Bear Rock as my primary example of a place within Dene oral traditions because the narratives about it are the ones that unite the Dene as a people (Figure 1). What is especially interesting from an archaeological point of view is that there are no material clues that this landscape feature should figure so prominently in the perception of Dene cultural identity.

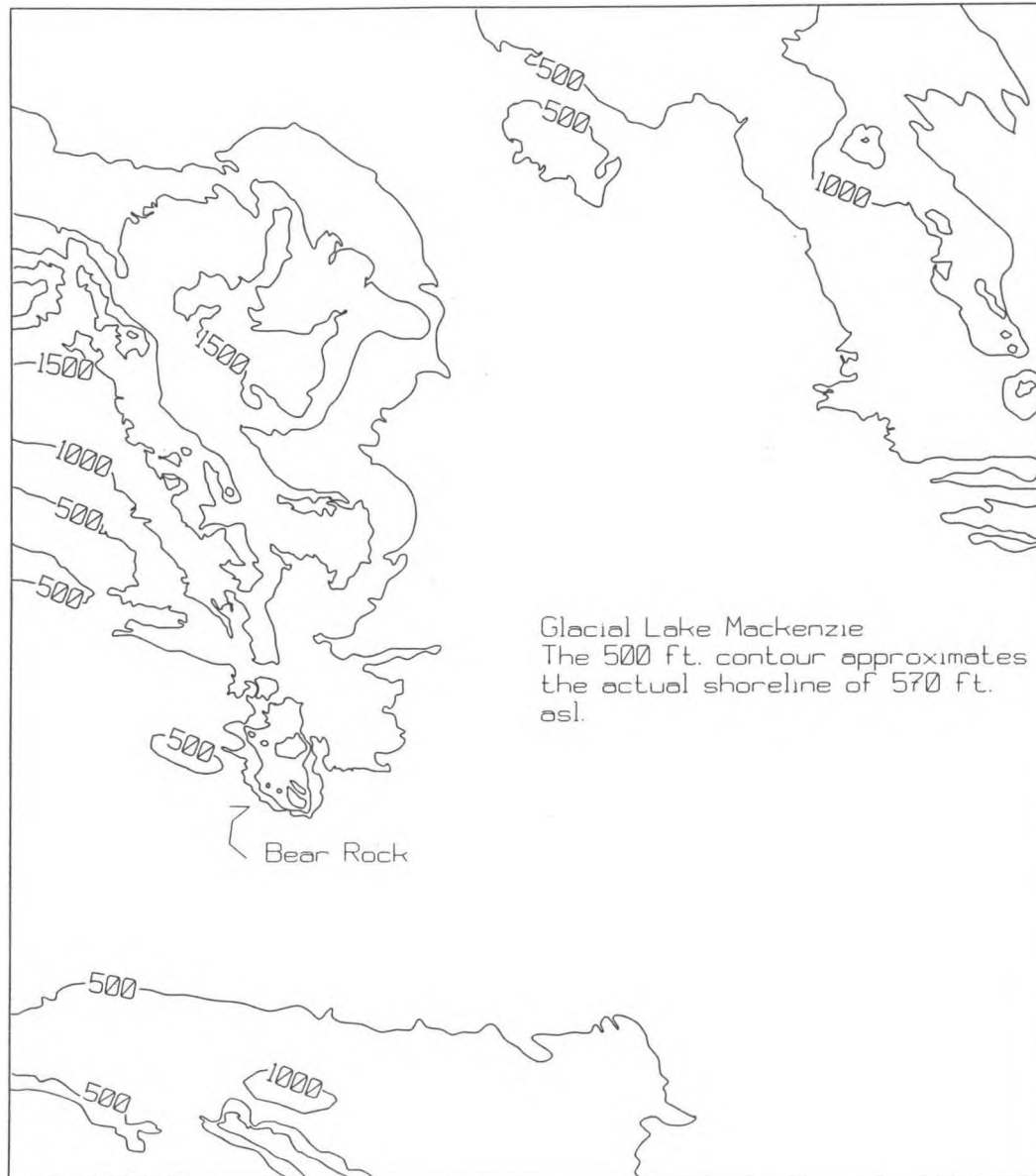


Figure 3. Bear Rock and Glacial Lake Mackenzie.

BEAR ROCK NARRATIVES AND DENE CULTURAL UNITY

Bear Rock is a small peak at the southern end of the Norman Range of the Franklin Mountains (Figure 2). It is situated on the east bank of the Mackenzie River, three kilometres west of the mouth of the Great Bear River. From the bank of the Mackenzie River, Bear Rock extends N-NW 8.5 km; at its widest point it is 2.5 km in width and 450 m tall (1,500+ ft. asl.). The combination of treed slopes and barren crags gives it a distinct profile against the relatively flat, tree-covered Mackenzie Valley. The "rock" dominates the Mackenzie River for 20 km in all directions.

It is the presence that Bear Rock emanates over the landscape that must have focused the attention of Native people on it from the earliest times. At the end of the Pleistocene, when the central Mackenzie Valley was flooded by postglacial Lake Mackenzie, Bear Rock would have jutted out of the water like a beaver lodge. An upper Lake Mackenzie beach was identified at 174 m (570 ft asl) near Big Smith Creek, 54 km south of Fort Norman (Smith 1992: 1760; Alexandra Duk-Rodkin, pers. comm. 1994). This elevation was generalized for this paper as the Lake Mackenzie shoreline and is illustrated by the 500 ft. contour in Figure 3. It agrees in substance with geo-morphologist Derek G. Smith's interpretation, which also has Bear Rock featured as the south-west tip of a long peninsula that protruded out into Glacial Lake Mackenzie (1992: 1762).

Evidence suggests that the lake started to form around 11,760 B.P., and reached its maximum size by 10,600 B.P. (Smith 1992: 1763; Lemmen et al. 1994: 811-812). Although geomorphologists disagree over the date when Lake Mackenzie drained, the most recent glacial studies indicate it must have been after 10,000 years ago (Alexandra Duk-Rodkin, pers. comm., 1993). A "Clovis-like" point from the T'logotsho Plateau in the Mackenzie Mountains suggests that there were people in the region before this time (Hanks 1992), and it is reasonable to postulate that they would have seen Bear Rock protruding from the lake. After the lake drained, its size and relationship to the shore of the Mackenzie River would have continued to make it an important landmark. The empty lake bed would have left ample scars on the landscape for interpretation as the remains of a battle between giants by the people who arrived afterwards.

Although there are no known early Holocene archaeological sites around Bear Rock, there were contact and post-contact period foreshore fish camps around the base of the southwest corner of Bear Rock, associated with eddies on the Mackenzie River (Hanks and Winter 1990: 50). There was also a post-contact interior lake fishery (LfRr-1, 2) at Trout or Bear Rock Lake on the northeast side of the mountain. Additionally, there are some high grade chert outcrops on Bear Rock that may have been utilized as quarry sites.

Bear Rock's broad cultural significance, however, is not tied to human occupation of the land around the mountain, but rather to its mythical association with the origins of the Dene through the slaying of the giant Beavers by the humanoid giant *Yamoria*¹ (Blondin 1990: 30). The recognition and use of a "medicine" spring on the west face of Bear Rock by Mountain Dene (Gabe Etchinelle, pers. comm. 1992) is a physical manifestation of the sacredness of the place. Bear Rock's significance is based upon the role of the place within the Dene's perception of history as related through their traditional narratives. The oldest Bear Rock narratives relate to a time when the *Go'de'n'e* ["the giant people"] lived (Elizabeth Yakeleya pers. comm. 1987).

"Two brother tales" are central to the oral traditions of the Chipewyan, Dogrib, Slavey, Mountain, Hare, Sahtu, and Gwich'in Athapaskan groups east of the continental divide (Tom Andrews pers. comm. 1992; Blondin 1990; Petitot 1976; Paul Wright pers. comm. 1992). It is the actions of the good brother, considered by the Dene to be the law giver, who slew the giant beavers at Bear Rock that are the key to its significance (Blondin 1990). He is known by different names among the various Athapaskan linguistic groups—*Hatchowe* by the Chipewyan (Bertulli 1986), *Yampa De'ja*² by the Slavey (Williamson 1955), *Yamoria* by both the Mountain [Paul Wright, pers. comm. 1992] and Bear Lake (Blondin 1990), and *Wich'edi'hdele*³ by the Hare (Hanks and Winter 1983)—but the significant details of the Bear Rock story remain the same among the Athapaskan groups of the middle and upper Mackenzie drainage. Despite linguistic variations of the giant hero's name and local vicissitudes that tie various segments of the story to different parts of Denendeh, a key element of the story is that he always slays giant beavers at Bear Rock. In modern political terms, the image of Bear Rock is used by the Dene Nation as the

¹ All transcriptions in this chapter reflect the interpretation of local interpreters in Fort Good Hope, Tulita (Fort Norman), and Deline (Fort Franklin). These names were not transcribed into the emerging "standardized" orthography to respect the views of some of my interpreters.

² *Yampa De'ja* translates as "traveller at the edge of the world" (Dolphus Jumbo, pers. comm. 1993), or as "always moving" (Williamson 1955).

³ An island at the top of the Rampant Rapids on the Mackenzie River is identified by the Mountain Dene in Fort Norman as *Yamoria's* over-turned canoe (Paul Wright, pers. comm. 1992). The same feature was identified to the author by the late John Shae of Fort Good Hope as *Wich'edi'hdele's* canoe (pers. comm. 1992) Among the Hare, *Ya'moga'* and *Wich'edi'hedele* are not the same person (Tom Andrews, pers. comm. 1996).

central device in their logo (Figure 4) and symbolically expresses Dene unity (Andrews 1990).

Published versions of the Slavey story from Fort Simpson (Williamson 1955) and the Bear Lake⁴ narrative from Fort Franklin (Blondin 1990) provide a sample of how the Dene relate the creation of the New World (Andrews 1990; Paul Wright, pers. comm. 1992). The stories of Paul Wright and Madeleine Mouse (Robert Williamson 1955: 123, pers. comm. 1993; Alison Jumbo, pers. comm. 1993) reflect the Dene view that the old world dominated by giant animals changed and a new world safe for people was created through the actions of mythical culture-heros. This theme of death and rebirth of the world repeats itself at least one more time with the events surrounding the eruption of the White River Volcano in 1250 B.P. (Hanks 1994). The concepts of death and rebirth are also central to the process by which an individual acquires power within Dene shamanistic beliefs; its extension to the occasional restructuring of the “world” is thus quite consistent with their traditions.

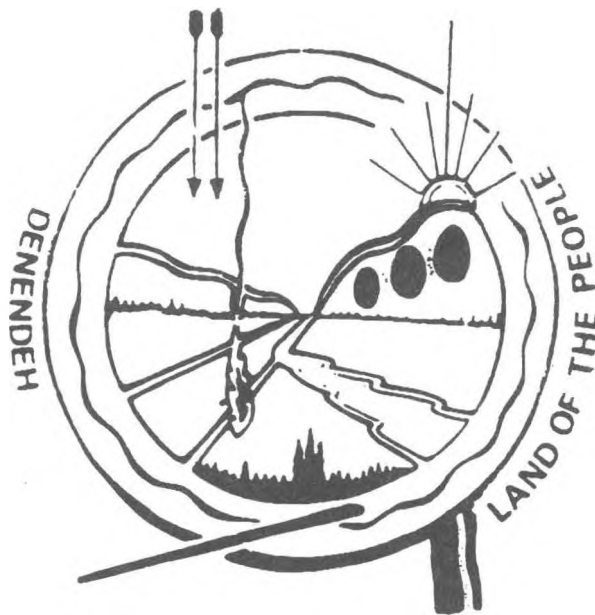


Figure 4. Logo of the Dene Nation.

⁴ The Bear Lake Athapaskans are a mix of *K'achogot'ine* (Hare) and *Ts'igot'ine* (Dogrib) (Rushforth 1984: 1-10). As a result, Blondin's rendition of the *Yamoria* story is blend of those two traditions. According to Tom Andrews (1993: pers. comm. 1993), in the Fort Rae Dogrib version, *Yamoria* is born along the Camsell River trail. He eventually encounters the giant beavers near Great Slave Lake and then pursues them down the Mackenzie River.

To the Slavey of Fort Simpson, the story of *Yampa De'ja* starts on the South Nahanni River. Madeleine Mouse (cited in Williamson 1955: 126-127) relates that:

Once, long ago, at the mouth of the Nahanni River where it runs into the Liard, there was a family of giant beavers. There were two huge beavers and four smaller ones. They had a great lodge at this place, which is now called Nahanni Butte (a large mountain), and on the Liard there is a long calm stretch, near the Little Butte, which was the feeding place of the giant beavers. They were so large that they were a danger to the people, the splash of their huge tails upsetting the canoes and many Indians were drowned. Once there were fifty warriors together in their canoe, for they were a war party, and they all were drowned with a single splash of a giant beaver's tail.

So hearing of this, *Yampa De'ja* cut down a birch tree and made a birch-bark canoe. He left his home at Virginia Falls on the Nahanni and paddled down river to investigate. He climbed on to the top of the beaver lodge and thrust a huge pole down into it and broke it open.⁵

The beavers broke through the beaver dam, and that made the rapids on the Liard River. The big hole made by *Yampa De'ja's* pole can still be seen on the summit of the Nahanni Butte. It is so deep that sometimes the Indians can drop down a stone and wait a very long time before they hear the splash. Sometimes, however, they climb up and find it full of water. This augers good luck for the Indians and a long life, success on his hunts, or victory for his war party.

The half of the mountain which he broke off when he poked the hole, *Yampa De'ja* poled downstream, pushing it with the current. That is how the Mackenzie Mountains were formed and it is why they run northwest.

Yampa De'ja pursued the beavers. Two of the younger ones he chased over Horn Mountain [to] a big lake lodge made by these two. It is called *Sa Chon Kjin*. In their travels the beavers went up to the mouth of the Mackenzie River. One flapped his tail and formed Beaver Lake. When they came downstream towards the Horn River, the other flapped his tail and made Mills Lake. Two of the other beavers went north and *Yampa De'ja* pursued them past what is now Camsell Bend. Its name is *Theh t-th-yn Teh*—The Clear Mountain. He caught up with them at Bear River. At the mouth of the river, opposite Fort Norman is Bear Mountain (Rock). He caught them by their tails and threw them against the rock face and stretched out their skins. To this day the impression of the two beavers can be seen. (Sandstone outcrop in shape of two beavers, one smaller than the other on the rock face). (This was a place of many wars. There were so many bones that no trees grew).

While *Yampa De'ja* was stretching out the beavers on the rock, he saw a female caribou and young crossing the Beaver River [Great Bear River]. He shot at them from the top of a rock. The huge logs which can be seen on the Beaver River [Great Bear] are his arrows. They float up the Bear River against the stream.

In more recent times Indians with York boats tried to tow them away but failed. "They will always be there." *Yampa De'ja* killed the other beavers by the river bank and one can see to this day where they slid into the water.⁶ That evening, *Yampa De'ja* was eating his meal at the river bank above Fort Norman when two Indians passed in a canoe and saw the smoke of his campfire. He said to them that from then on any hunters who passed this place and saw the smoke⁷ would have a long and successful life, but if they did not see any smoke they would have bad luck—and so it is to this day.

This Slavey story from Fort Simpson orders the country between the South Nahanni River and the Great Bear River by explaining the origins of the landscape in relationship to the deeds of

⁵ The lower South Nahanni River contained a series of large post-glacial lakes at the end of the Pleistocene (Alexandra Duk-Rodkin, pers. comm. 1992).

⁶ At La-Roche-Qui-Trempe-à-L'eau between Fort Norman and Wrigley.

⁷ This is the carboniferous outcrop that is still burning above Fort Norman. It is noted by Mackenzie in 1789 (Lamb 1970) and is cited as a sacred location by Paul Wright.

Yampa De'ja. In the next story about *Yamoria* and the giant beavers by George Blondin (1990: 30-31), we see the same "mapping" of the land from Great Bear Lake, down the Great Bear River to Fort Norman:

Many years ago, before the white man came into this country, a special man named *Yamoria* travelled our land, putting everything into its rightful place. The animals and human beings were separated from each other, and *Yamoria* also got rid of whatever was harmful to people. In doing this, he set laws for Dene to follow, which we still do to this very day.

In the time when *Yamoria* came, there were giant beavers living in *Sahtu'*. The beavers were harmful to the Dene, who travelled across the lake by canoe to hunt caribou. The beavers did not like people to cross their lake. They would get as close to their canoes as possible and splash their tails, hoping to tip them over. They often succeeded, and got rid of many people. When *Yamoria* learned of this, he came to *Sahtu'* and told the people he would chase the beavers away.

Yamoria began chasing the beavers around the lake, and the old ones swam immediately to *Sahtu' De'* hoping to escape down the river. The younger beavers were harder to chase towards the river, and during the time *Yamoria* was busy with them, the old beavers built a dam to block his way. You can still see where they did this, at the rapids on *Sahtu'*.⁸

At last *Yamoria* got the young beavers to head for *Sahtu' De'* and then he chased all the beavers down the river.

Near the place we call *Tulit'a*, at the confluence of *Sahtu' De'* and *Deh Cho*, the Great River, *Yamoria* killed two medium beavers and one small one. He stretched and nailed their hides to the south face of Bear Rock Mountain, where you can see them to this day.

Meanwhile, the two large beavers continued to swim down *Deh Cho*, building two more sets of rapids along the way.⁹

From the top of Bear Rock Mountain, *Yamoria* shot two arrows at the confluence of the two rivers, saying, "As long as this earth shall last you shall call them *Yamoria's* arrows." You can still see them: two big poles that stick out of the river, even after the ice breaks up in the spring.

After shooting the two arrows into the river, *Yamoria* took the beavers he had shot to a place about 30 kilometres from where the two rivers meet, and there he camped. He cooked the beavers, and the grease that drizzled from them started to burn. To this day, *Yamoria's* fire continues to burn, and the people say that if you can see the fire when you go past by night, then you will live a very long life. This fire is not visible to everyone.

Stanley Isaiah of *Liidli Ko*¹⁰ used to teach that the symbol of the three beaver pelts on Bear Rock Mountain, and the ever-burning fire upriver from that mountain, are signs of the land set there as a reminder of our ancient Dene stories. Stanley said that if we remember the teaching of the stories and live them, and if we Dene take the sign set on the land as our symbol, we will never have any trouble surviving as a nation.

After his run in with the giant beavers, *Yampa De'ja* continued down the Mackenzie River where he encountered the giant wolverine by the San Sault Rapids, and also the black dog, the giant eagle, cannibals, and the murderous family (Williamson 1955; Paul Wright, pers. comm. 1992)

The end of the Fort Norman version of the murderous family story has *Yamoria* jumping from Bear Rock into Willow [Brackett] Lake, having killed his wife, who had been transformed into a bear by her parents. As told by Paul Wright (cited in Hanks 1992):

Yamoria ran away from the Giants. When he reached the edge of Bear Rock, he jumped, and he landed in Willow Lake (Brackett Lake). Plunging into the lake, *Yamoria*

⁸ St. Charles Rapids.

⁹ Sans Sault and Rampart Rapids.

¹⁰ Fort Simpson.

thought, I am going to be a wise beaver, transformed his shape and swam away. That is why beavers are so smart. When they see someone coming they slap their tails and dive. It is very hard to catch them.

The water in Willow Lake was low, so *Yamoria* made dams around the edge to raise the level and protect his home. You can still see *Yamoria's* dykes and channels around the lake today.

While *Yamoria* was swimming around Willow Lake as a beaver, his father-in-law sought out two big giants known as *Toncha* in Slavey. He told the *Toncha* to drink the water and drain Willow Lake. They drank until their bellies were full and then they laid on the bank to sleep. Meanwhile, the old couple scurried about the mud flats killing every creature they could find, hoping to strike *Yamoria*.

When they got close, *Yamoria* turned himself into a baby Jackfish and hid under a little stick that still had a small puddle of water around it. Gently finning round his little pond to stay hidden from the giants, he wished for Sand Piper to join him. No sooner had he thought of the bird, then a Sand Piper landed beside him. He told the Sand Piper to fly over beside the big giants. If they ask you what you are doing, tell them because there is no water now, there are lots of bugs for you to eat. Besides what business is it of theirs, you are not bothering them, but are simply eating bugs. Once they stop paying attention to you, run over to where they are laying and poke both their stomachs with your long beak and quickly fly away. When the Sand Piper left *Yamoria* he flew over and settled down to eat bugs next to the *Toncha*. Soon one of the giants ask him— "Sand Piper, you skinny legs, what do you want around here?" Go away they yelled at him. Sand Piper replied— "I am just eating bugs that are exposed because you drank all the water in the lake. Besides, I am not bothering you, so leave me alone." The giants were too full to move and so they went back to sleep. Once they started to snore Sand Piper flew over and poked their stomachs. He then flew quickly away as the water gushed from their stomachs.

When the water begin rushing from the *Toncha*, the old couple were caught in the middle of the dry lake killing things. Seeing the flood racing across the mud flats toward them, they ran as quickly as they could toward the shore but the mud slowed them, and they barely made it to shore before the waves caught them. As they fell exhausted on dry ground, they turned into two small hills,¹¹ as *Yamoria* had taken all their medicine away.

Now the water in Willow Lake is always low in the fall. The only deep spot that always has a lot of water is the hole under the log where *Yamoria* hid as a Jackfish. It is really hard to find the hole, but if you do and set a net there you will always catch fish.

During his final battle with his giant father-in-law, *Yamoria* established a dependable low fishery in the lake. The reliability of the fishery made Willow Lake the desired home of the Willow Lake Band, which today lives in Fort Norman with the Mountain Dene. While *Yamoria's* famous fights with the giant animals set the broader tone for creating the world in which the Dene live, the locations where he slept and the smaller battles he fought with lesser giants mark the topography of *Denendeh*. On a local level his exploits, illustrated by his fight with the giants in Willow Lake, transformed and improved much of the landscape for people. For the Dene, the local identification of his deeds make his great battles all the more famous.

The Fort Good Hope people identify the crescent shaped island, *Wich'edi'hdele ?dla'*, at the Rampart Rapids, as *Yamoria's* overturned canoe that he had used to pursue the giant beavers (George Barnaby and John Shae, pers. comm. 1982). Among the Dogrib, the island of *Nish'ihk'o*, the site of Old Fort Rae in the North Arm of Great Slave Lake, is a giant beaver lodge associated with the *Yamoria* cycle (Tom Andrews, pers comm. 1993). For the Dene, the naming of the land in the *Yamoria* narratives orders the landscape with their history by providing toponyms for places that derive from the time when the "New World" was formed (Andrews 1990; Paul Wright, pers. comm.1992).

¹¹ Two small summits on the rise immediately north of Willow Lake. On Figure 2 it is marked as a single hill, denoted by the 500 ft. contour line.

Is it reasonable to ask if these narratives of giant animals and the formation of the landscape within the basins of post-glacial lake¹² reflect an *in situ* knowledge of the late Pleistocene and early Holocene by the Athapaskans of the Mackenzie drainage? Such an explanation would suggest a passing of traditions through cultural contact between late Paleoindian populations and early Athapaskans in the region. Non-literate or oral societies develop sophisticated memory devices to structure their myths and legends. Beyond recent occurrences, events often lose their chronological sequence, but retain the elements necessary for a group's on-going social relationships (Harwood 1976). For the Athapaskans of the Mackenzie drainage to trace their entry into the valley at the time when the glacial lakes were draining and/or had drained very recently, setting the rivers into their current beds, would require an unbroken link with a past of 8,000 to 10,000 years.

Unilingual Mountain Dene elder Gabe Etchinelle (pers. comm. 1992) says that, "Long ago, the north had all of the dangerous animals. Down south there was nothing. If it went like before, "down south" would have winter and there would still be places to live here in the north. The animals (from those times) still dream and travel." Gabe's apparent knowledge of the edge of Beringia comes from the cultural memory embedded in the ancient narratives of the Mountain Dene. Athapaskan explanations of Pleistocene megafauna in relationship to landscape features are not unique to Bear Rock. For example, Mountain Dene elders know of caves in the Mackenzie Mountains where the lion's spirit still dwells. The Gwich'in maintain that Churchward Hill or *Chii Ak'an* (Beaver House Mountain) along the Ogilvie River in the northern Yukon is the former home of giant beavers that once lived in the area (Greer 1990: 4). Giant beaver (*Castor ohioensis*), which is known in the far northwest from the fossil record of Old Crow Flats (Harington 1989: 94-95), became extinct at the end of the Pleistocene. Whether the stories of giant beaver relate directly to a time when the creatures still existed, or are the result of a knowledge of fossilized skeletal material, remains a mystery. The oral traditions do, however, support archaeological and linguistic interpretations put forward by anthropologists as they appear to contain general descriptions of the edge of Beringia, the late Pleistocene extinctions, and the alteration of the landscape following deglaciation and the draining of the glacial lakes.

Bear Rock has five levels of significant cultural meaning: (1) It acts as a legendary focal point within the origin myths of at least four of the five major Athapaskan linguistic groups of the Mackenzie. (2) The stories seem to link the cultural memory of the Dene to events that occurred at the end of the Pleistocene. (3) The medicine spring on Bear Rock used by the Mountain Dene demonstrates a physical manifestation of the mountain's sacred status. (4) The late pre-contact and post-contact fishery illustrates the continued human occupation of the area around Bear Rock. And (5) The legendary link with the past provides the symbolism of modern Dene unity. The Bear Rock narratives acknowledge the common origins of the Chipewyan, Dogrib, Slavey, Mountain, Hare (or Big Willow), and Sahtu Athapaskans who call themselves the Dene.

CONCLUSIONS

How do the Bear Rock narratives relate to questions about material culture change over time that are central to the discipline of archaeology? Both Dene origin narratives and archaeology revolve around culturally significant places and a world that changes over time. They differ in that significance for the Dene is imbued by sacred knowledge passed down through narrative and for the archaeologist by material remains excavated from the ground. Few archaeologists would disagree that the leap from projectile points to the social history embodied in traditional narrative is one that has not always been done well. Archaeological data, however, are quite good for examining stylistic and technological change in material culture both regionally and across the continent. Such changes are sometimes indicative of social transformations found in the cultural traditions of Indigenous people.

A relevant example is the shift from the middle to late pre-contact period in the Mackenzie Valley archaeological record and the most recent rebirth of the Dene "world." Both seem to revolve around the 1250 B.P. eruption of the White River volcano (Hanks 1994). In this instance,

¹² Great Bear Lake was part of Glacial Lake McConnell (Craig 1965); the central Mackenzie Valley between the Upper Ramparts above Fort Good Hope and the North Nahanni River was submersed by Glacial Lake Mackenzie (Alexandra and Derek Duk-Rodkin, pers. comm. 1993; D. Smith, pers. comm. 1992)

the convergence of two different ways of viewing the past combine to provide a fuller picture of the technological and social impact of a catastrophic event. This brings us to a potentially common ground. The description of technological and environmental change over time provided by archaeologists, and the cultural and natural history passed in Dene oral histories, do not exist as exclusive theories of the past, but simply as different schools of thought. They are alternative ways of knowing the past. Collaboration between the Dene and archaeologists does not degrade either form of knowledge. Instead, it offers an opportunity to look at new questions. Dene elder Paul Wright is correct when he notes that the sum of our knowledge will be greater than its parts.

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