

Nahadeh

Paul Andrew



Nahadeh, or South Nahanni River

“Will you accompany a group of students into the south Nahanni River?” I was stunned. Although I was born in the Mackenzie Mountains and spent my early years there, the southern Deh Cho area is not my traditional area.

Trepidation, butterflies, fear. My body wanted to say no but my spirit told me it was an offering, a gift, a responsibility, an obligation. I heard of the beautiful and special place that Nahadeh or Nahanni River is, but I did not know the sacred areas or stories behind the campfires.

In times like this I walk. I meditate. I listen for voices in the wind and look for signs in the clouds and land. I ask myself: What would Elders do? Deep down I knew they would say Mahsi Cho and accept.

I went to see an Elder. He said when in doubt, sit and listen for voices of the ancestors. Think Dene songs and the beat of the drum. Think traditional teachings. I visited another Elder in Fort Simpson from where we were to fly out. The Elder told me to keep all senses open. Listen. Look, touch, smell. And always ask for humility and be grateful.

Traditional teachings say all lands and water and everything on or in it are sacred. I did not know the history of the area but I can treat everything as blessed and revered. I also remembered telling an Elder of my pilgrimage in Spain. He said we have a lot of trails here, why do you have to go to the other side of the world to walk? Besides I always said as part of reconciliation, people should travel in the north and visit Dene and Inuit communities.

Flying out, the mountains are coming closer and closer. Breathtaking, spectacular row of beautifully lined formation. Magical! Spiritual! Beautiful!

Words, photos, videos cannot, do not do justice to the land that is the South Nahanni. I feel totally inadequate in trying to convey what I saw and felt. I could not and will not try to.

We landed above Virginia Falls. Our journey was set to start just below what the Indigenous people in the area call Nailicho, the big falls. The river above the falls is calm and reassuring but even without trying one can hear and smell the falls just a few kilometers away.

First order of business, feed the land and the water. It became a daily ritual.

The river brought back memories of days gone by. The days of travel by moose skin boat. As a child of five or six I remember looking for spruce gum to plug needle holes and helping out making the "thread" to sew the skins together.

I will never forget the rides and the beauty of shuh tah or the Mackenzie Mountains. The powerful, strong, spectacular and awe-inspiring mountains. The clean, ice cold, and powerful water. As we travelled Begadé or the Keele River I remember thinking we must be in the most beautiful part of the world but turning every corner, another 'Kodak' moment as nature revealed its beauty. Each moment seemed more stunning than the last.

The day before we are to set out on the river, the group decided to walk the trail to the top of the mountain. I stayed behind. I needed to think Dene, to think Shuhtao'tine (Mountain Dene). I need my senses to come alive.

No matter the time of the year we were on the land, it was home. There was silence when you want it, when you didn't want it, and every other time. There was the peace of watching animals in the early mornings as they played and sang. The beauty of learning how the animals took care of you and how you care for and respected the animals. For example, you never hit a caribou or rabbit with a stick.

I chopped some wood, then sat down and listened to the wind, the air, and strained to hear sounds other than the falls. I tried to smell the river, land, and water and tried to feel everything around me. Being out of practice, I felt like being in residential school for the first time. Alone and frightened, I walked a bit. Then: I am not alone. There was a rabbit sitting nearby, a squirrel running up a tree, and a whiskey jack looking for handouts. Not only that, there are others and the land, water, sky, and everything in between. There is nothing to fear, Elders used to say, you have your role and everything else has its part. Just do what you have to do.

My dad and others told legends of landmarks like Bear Rock or the Ramparts. I remember fondly the stories of Yamozha, the man who set the law for the Dene to live by and the story of Creation. But without a doubt my favorites were of how the raven got to be as black as he is or how he got to squawk like there is something stuck in his throat.

Other teachings started to come back to me. Do not eat too much or eat food that is too cold or too hot. Drink only a little amount of water and only if the need is there. I remember Dene used to dip a finger into water and lick the water off the finger when they were thirsty. I wondered if I could do it. I like food too much and the non-Indigenous culture, which I am a part of, encourages drinking water regularly.

The daily meditation and offerings helped. Not only was I able to limit the amount of food and water I took in, I was able to do it for all of the days on the river.

It was not always easy or fun. The only way to travel in those days was by dog team in the winter and hiking from camp to camp in the summer. So in rain, snow, wind, or sunshine, if the family needed to travel to another location, we simply packed up and moved, usually fifteen or twenty kilometers away.

Another teaching: Those who are happy for the land, show it by singing to it. Someone had brought along a small travel guitar. I brought my drum. I always loved singing and more so when I am feeling good. I sang my grandfather's songs, Dene love songs, and looking back most of the songs I sang with the guitar were happier songs. Pretty soon the whole gang was singing! I think we were beginning to realize just how lucky we were to be in this special place.

I recall getting up in the middle of winter to make fire in the tent. Everything would be frozen. I recall the cold freezing fingers but there was a lot of pride in making fire for the family. There were times when we got hungry but it was never for a long period of time. The land always provided.

For ten days, thirteen amazing mates were the only contact I had. Just like in my youth when we lived and travelled on the land. It was just us and the vast beautiful land. Nobody else. That's how it felt for ten days. My fellow paddlers became my friends, my confidantes, my counsellors. They are my teachers, my everything. That's what the land, and in this case the river, does.



My fellow paddlers

I grew up on the land. It is where I was most comfortable. My father, uncles, and Elders always spoke of land, sky, water, environment, and animals. My mom and other women taught relationships, respect, and love of fellow man. They taught sewing, washing, and other camp work, in case I ended up alone. It was fun growing up on the land. Everyone seemed so happy, joyous, and free. Everyone took care of each other. The people were healthy, happy, independent, strong willed, and hard working.

One incident stick out. We had a tip over. A reminder of the power of the river. No matter how experienced or cautious one is, nature gently reminds us who the boss is. Two people in the water, things were floating and a canoe was overturned. The response was calm, cool, and collected. One boat went after the canoe, another after anything that was retrievable, and another went after the paddlers. There was no panic. A smooth recovery!

We were taught to pay our respects to a new area of land or water. We also learned songs to sing in the mornings. These are things I enjoyed and never found anywhere else. There is nothing like lying on your blanket and listening to the birds in the early spring mornings or watching a rabbit run a few steps, stop, listen, and sit there. The beauty of listening to the wolves howl in the evening or the pitter, patter of rain drops on the tent as you try to fall asleep deep in the Mackenzie Mountains.

Sometimes I feel like I got more than I gave but I tell myself that is a sign of being open and teachable. I only wish my fellow paddlers could know how much they helped me. The younger ones taught me what it must be like to have a normal family. To grow up without abuse or separation from loved ones. They showed me how proud they are of who they are. They are open, funny, and they laughed and teased each other. They seem to know their place in the world already.

The gift I cherish the most about growing up on the land is being with the Dene at their best. I am one of the lucky ones who has been with them and enjoyed their prayers, songs, dances, stories, and laughter. One cannot ask for more!

The not-so-young ones reminded me of the need to set rules, to say NO, to be stern and strict when necessary but also to reward or award effort. To listen and comfort. To allow for mistakes. To find and enjoy one's place in life wherever and whenever that happens to be. They taught me that it is OK to ask for help.

One of my fondest memories of being in the mountains was waking up and hearing people outside. I knew by the light and sun's rays it was early but the older people were singing for the land and the sunrise. They are giving thanks for one more day.

On the last evening, we had a campfire and a drum dance. I sang my grandfather songs. The young men and women were dancing like there was no tomorrow. Singing old songs and being in a spiritual area, it wasn't long before I felt the intoxicating spirit and the power of the land and river. Then the presence of my parents and grandparents. I felt a tear trickling down my face. A tear of joy. I felt a deep pride in the people I come from. They did not have much but they were always happy.



Paul Andrew on the Nahadeh

I must have been ten. Me and my dad went on a trip. Just of two of us. I drove a dog team of two. My dad making and breaking trail. We went far out in the bush, made fire, and a lean to. After we had eaten, my father talked about the area. After the stories we went outside and watched the stars in the sky and later, father and son enjoyed the northern lights as they danced across the teepee in the sky. I was with my dad. I felt loved, safe, and cherished. I felt a deep joy and a deeper satisfaction to be Shutao'tine, Dene, and Indigenous.

Paul Andrew is a Shutao'tine, or Mountain Dene, from Tulita. He was born in the Mackenzie Mountains, grew up on the land, and spent seven years in residential school. Paul shares his knowledge as a former Chief, a Residential School Survivor, former politician and journalist, and as a Dene oral historian passing on knowledge from his Elders in Tulita. He lives in Yellowknife.