

## In Memoriam: Deborah Simmons (1962-2022)

Jess Dunkin, Jean Polfus, and Tee Wern Lim



*Deb Simmons in Tulit'a, NT, 2013 (Photo: Jean Polfus).*

Our dear friend and colleague Deborah Simmons passed away on October 28, 2022. Deb was a brilliant and generous thinker who worked tirelessly to centre Indigenous voices, knowledges, languages, and governance in research and land and wildlife management. We could not think of a more fitting journal in which to honour Deb's memory than the inaugural issue of Xàgots'eèhk'ò. In so many ways, this journal embodies the research ethics and practices that Deb modelled and supported in the Sahtú and beyond.

If you ever had the chance to travel with Deb, you would have observed the immense network she developed over the course of her life. No matter where she was, Deb would run into people she knew, sharing hugs and laughs with friends in airports from Toronto to Inuvik. Deb grew up in Fort Smith and Yellowknife, with formative trips into Shúhtagot'ine Nënë (Mackenzie Mountains) accompanying her father on Dall sheep research trips with Dene families. Many elders in the Sahtú remembered her as a girl and would invite her for

tea or tease her with old stories of mosquitos and rivers. During her post-secondary schooling Deb cultivated life-long friendships with revolutionary thinkers who inspired her activism and passion for interdisciplinary and applied research, and with whom she continued to collaborate throughout her career.

After completing her PhD dissertation on the political economy of Indigenous resistance at York University and teaching at the University of Manitoba, Deb returned to the NWT to work with the Sahtú Land Use Planning Board, Dene Náowéré Chets'elə (Dél'ine Uranium Team), and the Dél'ine Knowledge Project. Starting in 2012, she served as executive director of the ʔehdzo Got'ine Gots'é Nákedí (Sahtú Renewable Resources Board - SRRB), a post she held until her death. Across these organizations and roles, Deb developed and supported countless projects, which shared a commitment to: Indigenous self-determination and governance, particularly related to ne (the land); Dene kədə (language) and Dene ts'ili (way of life); and ethical, community-led research. The full extent of

Deb's achievements is too substantial to list here, and so we offer a few examples of contributions we observed in our work with her and which speak to the theme of this inaugural issue and her dedication to *łeghágots'enetę* (learning together).

Under Deb's leadership, the SRRB, a co-management board with a mandate to maintain Dene and Métis harvesting traditions and keep *nę* and *tįch'ádıı* (animals) healthy for future generations, developed a focus on programming for youth. As in research, it was important to Deb that this programming be responsive, so the SRRB asked youth what they needed. Youth explained that they needed opportunities on *nę* to learn and practice Dene *kədə* and Dene *ts'ııı*, including hunting, trapping, hide tanning, and spirituality. The SRRB has hosted and supported a number of on the land camps for youth over the last decade, including Dene *Ts'ııı* Schools and *Nę K'édiké* - Keepers of the Land trainings, with each session learning from and building on the previous program. Deb also supported the formation of the Sahtú Youth Network, which continues to play an important advocacy and programming role in the region. With the goal of supporting young people to be capable, confident, and connected, these programs have brought youth together with knowledge holders and centred Dene and Métis *ts'ııı*. They have also given youth opportunities to complete other land-based certifications and further develop skills in research and monitoring. In the emergence and evolution of the SRRB's youth programming, which has also included hiring Dene and Métis youth as interns, we see Deb's foundational commitment to supporting young people in the Sahtú. In particular, she worked tirelessly to create opportunities for youth to feel at home on *nę* and in leadership roles, recognizing the value of their contributions to social and environmental governance now and in the future.

Deb had a way of materializing people to realize ambitious projects and goals. What appeared to be sleight of hand was in fact a combination of her sprawling network and her ability to bring people together and inspire collaboration across disciplines. Deb understood that interdisciplinary teams were the key to moving projects forward at the pace she envisioned. She worked with researchers from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, climate science, health, education, limnology, contaminants, food security, and caribou ecology – to name just a few. Deb had an astounding ability to see thin threads of connection between ideas (in an academic sense) and the on-the-ground needs of communities, and would skillfully mobilize researchers and funding to ensure communities could answer questions of importance to them. Many colleagues and students brought into projects through Deb's network-building had the opportunity to live and work in the Sahtú, where they gained valuable experience in community-led research methodologies and had the chance to share warm meals, coffee, and complex academic discussions with Deb. The work wasn't always easy, but it was rewarding, and Deb was a tireless champion and cheerleader, freely sharing opportunities, encouragement, and praise.

During the initial COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, Deb organized a series of virtual study circles about Dene and Métis history to keep people across the Sahtú connected, using an approach she and the SRRB had previously piloted in a project on Dene *kədə* and *ts'ııı* revitalization efforts. What began as an antidote to isolation was the genesis of a multi-year project with multiple funders and collaborators across the country to help Sahtú communities document the impacts of the Norman Wells oilfields on *nę* and Dene *ts'ııı*, and to support community involvement in closure and reclamation planning. Study circles remain a critical component of this ongoing project. They provide an opportunity for community members to collaboratively interpret archival materials, to tell stories about Dene and Métis experiences of and engagements with the Norman Wells oilfields, and to provide ongoing direction to the research team, which includes community experts and academics. More than an opportunity to learn together, this innovative approach to gathering, synthesizing, and analyzing information reflects Deb's commitment to research that is community-led, reciprocal, accountable, and respectful.



*Deb Simmons with youth participants at the second Dene Ts'ı̨ł School at Dəocha (Bennett Field) in August 2017 (Photo: Jess Dunkin).*

There is so much more that could be said about Deb's contributions to education and research in the Sahtú, the North, and beyond, to say nothing of her many other passions (which included worm composting, art and music, language, country food, and collecting books – oh so many books). We hope this is just the first of many published tributes. One area that deserves sustained attention is her support for Indigenous-led caribou conservation. This paradigm-shifting work has included the adoption of community conservation plans and the development of public listening sessions, a model for public hearings that centres Indigenous voices, knowledges, and languages. We know that her many collaborators, colleagues, friends, and mentees will carry on the work to which Deb committed her life.

Recognizing both the importance of and the barriers that exist to spending time on *nę*, Deb established the Dene Ts'ı̨ł - Dene Way of Life Fund. The fund will support Sahtú Dene and Métis youth to live with and learn from elders and knowledge holders on *nę*. For more information and to donate, visit: <https://makewaygifts.secure.force.com/donate/?id=a3061000002oeAh>.

**Jess Dunkin** is a settler historian and writer who lives in S̱m̱ba K'è (Yellowknife, NT). She met Deb in 2016 and is fortunate to have called her a colleague, mentor, and friend.

**Jean Polfus** is a settler who is grateful to have lived and worked in Tulit'a, NT, with Deb as a mentor and friend for 6.5 years. She now lives in the unceded territory of the *sq̱ilx̱'/syilx̱'* peoples (Okanagan Nation) in Kelowna, BC, where she works on caribou recovery plans for the Government of Canada.

**Tee Wern Lim** is a Settler-Immigrant from Aotearoa/New Zealand who credits Deb with a big role in his moving north ten years ago. Tee is a PhD student at the University of British Columbia and Senior Research Advisor with the Tł̱chq Government Department of Culture and Lands Protection.