

ʔekwò Kwìjì

Tłıchq Traditional Methods used to Harvest Caribou

Sally Ann Gon (nee Zoe) and Aalice Legat

"A long time ago when the caribou did not travel the trails to this area, the Tłıchq were starving. A man had a dream and the next day he walked straight to the barren lands and invited the caribou to follow him to this land ..." (Romie Wetrade)

ABSTRACT

This paper was first released on March 31, 1995 based on research Elders initiated due to changes in ʔekwò (barren ground caribou) behaviour. It is being published here because, if caribou are to come back and become sustainable, the authors of this paper think it is imperative that documented knowledge of Indigenous harvesters needs to be recognized and shared.

This paper shows Tłıchq Elders of that time had intimate knowledge necessary to manage themselves as well as to manipulate ʔekwò in specific ways during specific seasons – to protect the herd, by and for the people who depend on it. This is still relevant today.

The original document was prepared by Dogrib Treaty 11 Council with support from Dene Cultural Institute for use by the Dogrib Renewable Resources Board and The Department of Renewable Resources GNWT. It was updated by Tłıchq Government for this Journal. The update (August 2023) revises some of the terms and community names, to change them from English to Tłıchq with explanations if not in original report. The exception to this is organizations from the past, such as the Dogrib Renewable Resources Board and Dogrib Treaty 11 Council.

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BACKGROUND

During 1993-94 Tłıchǵ Elders commented that ɬekwǵ were not following their usual caribou trails. Elders think it may be due to the plastic ties used by prospectors to stake claims. These plastic ribbons are tied to trees and flutter in the wind. Elders think the caribou are afraid of the fluttering ribbons, which causes ɬekwǵ to move away from them. Elders also think that since there are so many ties fluttering in the bush, the caribou have become confused, causing them to go in all different directions.

In 1994, community researchers working on research projects suggested by Elders, claimed that Elders know this because they traditionally used the movement of trees and material to get caribou to go where they wanted them to go.

Researchers hypothesized that if movement could be used to redirect caribou during the traditional hunt, and if plastic ties fluttering in the bush can cause confusion when they are placed randomly, then movement may work to help keep ɬekwǵ away from past, present, and future mine sites.

In February 1995, the Dogrib Renewable Resources Committee (DRRC) proposed that preliminary research be conducted to document Tłıchǵ knowledge of how people in the past manipulated caribou movements. The Department of Renewable Resources, GNWT provided funding for preliminary research, which would take place over five weeks in February and March 1995. They agreed there is a critical need for concrete information associated with Tłıchǵ knowledge of ɬekwǵ behaviour and migration.

The need for information arose from increased mining activity in the Tłıchǵ region and the desire to keep caribou away from both active and inactive mines and the associated tailing ponds. There is much to suggest that Elders' knowledge of caribou behaviour should play an important role in developing a management plan during the next few decades, as territorial and federal governments continue to encourage mining activity. The objectives for the preliminary research were to:

- Document methods used to redirect caribou movement.
- Document locations where specific methods were used.
- Document which methods were used at specific times of year.
- Compile information on who made the decision to redirect caribou and why.
- Translate the information into English for future education purposes.
- Transcribe the information into Tłıchǵ for future education purposes.

The first four objectives were met in a preliminary fashion. But the research team was unable to transcribe the information into Tłıchǵ. Transcripts will be completed in the new fiscal year. We note here that by the late 1990s these same Elders did not want any information given in Tłıchǵ to be translated and transcribed in English, as they thought this would cause young people to forget important land concepts and knowledge. They did want the information to be transcribed in Tłıchǵ so in the future people could read what they had to say as well as listen to what they had said.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this project, the Dogrib Renewable Resources Committee chose to use the Gamètì research team, who were then working on documenting Elders' knowledge on traditional governing systems. This team was used because they were working with Elders on decision-making and some of those interviews focused on caribou.

The research team in Gamètì used the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method. This method ensures ownership by community Elders, who are holders of traditional knowledge. This method also ensures that community members receive on-the-job training as researchers. The research is usually directed by the Elders' Community Advisory Committee (CAC), consisting of Elders chosen by all other Elders in the community. In this case the CAC and DRRC took specific roles to direct the project.

The CAC provided all policy direction, selected the researchers, offered advice on which Elders are the most knowledgeable on any given subject, and approved the release of reports prepared by the staff. The DRRC provided direction on which topics they need information and selected the community to carry out the research.

Due to time, there were several modifications to the method. Professional translators Celine Football and Madeleine Chocolate were hired to help with translation. This allowed Community Researcher Sally Anne Gon (nee Zoe) and Principal Investigator Alice Legat to concentrate on discussing the topics with Elders.

Group and individual interviews were conducted. Sally Anne Gon continually returned to Elders David Chocolate, Madeleine Drybone, Andrew Gon, Harry Simpson, Amen Tailbone, Rosalie Tailbone, and Romie Wetrade to clarify information – specifically place names.

The report was verified by the CAC and Elders interviewed. First, the report was interpreted verbatim to them. This process took five hours over two days. Additional information was incorporated into the report.

The report was then read to all Elders of Gamètì who verified the contents. This second reading took three hours. During the first reading senior / oldest Elders clarified points. And during the final reading several younger Elders told their own stories. Harry Mantla and Harry Simpson, both young Elders, expressed how they were glad to be learning from the old people again because they both felt they had all but forgotten many of the details – such activities as ʔekwə kwij required them to know if using this harvesting technique.

CHALLENGE TO THE RESEARCH

As with much community-based research, the schedule / timing of the researchers and funders was not always in tune with the reality of the people living in the community. Two of the most crucial weeks of the five-week research period were when most of the people in Gamètì made a traditional trip to Deline, the first spring trip in four years.

The schedule also caused other difficulties.

- Not enough time to document, understand, and report on Elders' collective knowledge about re-directing caribou to preferred harvesting sites. In order to understand methods used to redirect caribou it is also important to understand why these techniques were used and to understand how caribou were viewed spiritually and how caribou behaviour was perceived.
- Not enough time to fully discuss concepts and verify translations associated with redirecting caribou.

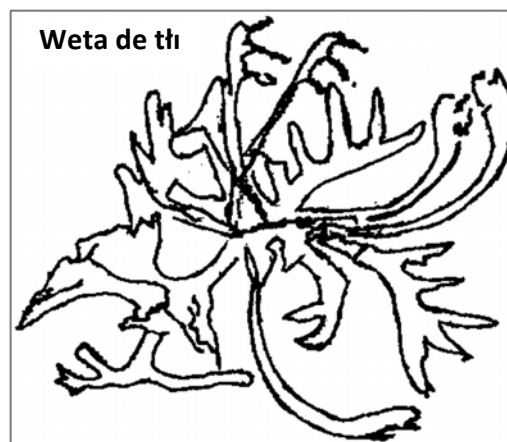
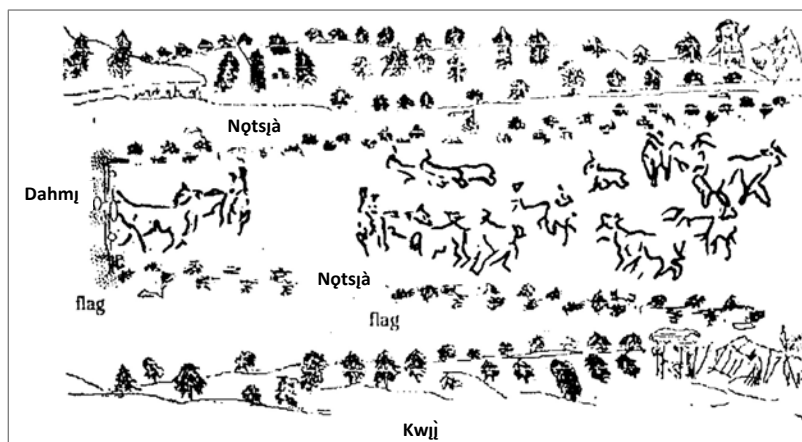
Another challenge was using topographic maps of the places where kwij (caribou funnel and snare) were constructed. Older Elders know the details of the land intimately and what takes place in any given miniscule location, but they cannot read maps. For this reason, it was necessary to record the information of the oldest Elders and then use younger Elders, who know the locations of the places, to mark the places on the maps.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The research results include drawings made by Sally Ann Gon. Elder Amen Tailbone made Sally Ann redo her drawings over and over until she got it right. This was important to the research and to 'getting it right', and knowing the information before going on the land.

These drawings introduce the Tł̨ch̨ technologies used to redirect caribou.

- **Kwij** is a funnel shaped structure used to drive caribou towards a set of caribou snares known as dahmj.
- **Notsjà** are the sides of the kwij where the flags and ribbons are put to flap in the wind.
- **Weta de tli** are rattles made of caribou antlers.



The research results discuss the caribou in relation to the kwij – a description of the parts of a kwij, their size and geographic location, the decision-making process associated with building a kwij, and how the Tłıchq acquired their knowledge of the caribou.

Limitations to the research mean that this paper does not describe the Elders' spiritual understanding of caribou and the relationships and responsibilities associated with killing caribou. Nor does it discuss the importance of this communal hunt to the Tłıchq society.

In general, the research team found that waving flags, ribbons, or trees, and the sound of howling wolves were used in the spring to redirect caribou, whereas rattles were used in the colder fall months and winter.

NQTSJÀ

Nqtsjà are the sides of the kwij – the fence-like structure that funnels caribou to the dahmı – a set of caribou snares. The nqtsjà varied in size but were often several miles long. They were constructed by pounding spruce trees into snow-covered open areas such as a frozen lake or the barren lands in spring. The spruce trees were placed in a zigzag fashion, rather than in a straight line. Spread among the spruce trees were sticks with flags or ribbons attached. At least one pair of sticks with ribbons was placed near the ends of the side opening of the kwij. Another set was placed about mid-point down the nqtsjà. And a third set was placed some distance from the dahmı.

All aspects of the nqtsjà were designed to scare the caribou, redirecting them to where the people wanted them to be. The fearful reaction of the caribou in the spring to movement, perceived movement, and sound was used to the Tłıchq advantage. The nqtsjà were only built in the spring.

At this time, the caribou's eyes become blind from the snow. It was said there was a lot of snow blindness back then. Because [in the spring where there are heat waves] it seems like they're seeing two things, so if there are any nqtsjà the caribou don't go near them. ... for that reason [the people used trees and flags that move in the wind].

... where there are dark things set on the lake, [the caribou] will not go near them. That's why they [our ancestors] made nqtsjà. In the ... [springtime] the caribou are afraid of the nqtsjà and in the winter they're not afraid of the nqtsjà. At the time when the caribou begin to migrate, the nqtsjà looks as if there's something moving ... because the trees look as if they're moving from side to side, and they look like it's something walking. ... so they're afraid of it.

... a stick ... with a ribbon ... it blows in the wind ... [and] the caribou are afraid of it. They do that for that reason. (Romie Wetrade, 03/16/95)

During spring the lack of wind was not a problem. In fact, the Tłıchq name for the period of time that coincides with March can be translated as the 'time of the winds'. And the time that coincides with April can be translated as the 'time the sun dances'. The wind, heat waves, and apparent snow blindness of the caribou combines with the movement of the nqtsjà and creates a confusing environment for them. Amen Tailbone explained that to capitalize on this situation and increase the probability of caribou not escaping, Tłıchq constructed the nqtsjà so that the trees were not in a straight line. This causes the trees to appear like a crowd of people to the caribou, whose sight was affected by the heat waves and snow blindness.

All Elders explained that there is a lead caribou who guides the other caribou back to the birthing grounds. For this reason, the nqtsjà was placed on well-known caribou trails where it was most likely the lead caribou would go.

When the lead caribou goes into the nqtsjà the others follow. (Amen Tailbone, 03/10/95)

Once the lead caribou entered the areas of the nqtsjà, the caribou were caught by the fact that they were trying to avoid danger. When the caribou ran into one side of the nqtsjà, they turned slightly but continued following the leader. If they turned too much, they eventually ran into more movement from the other nqtsjà. They turned again.

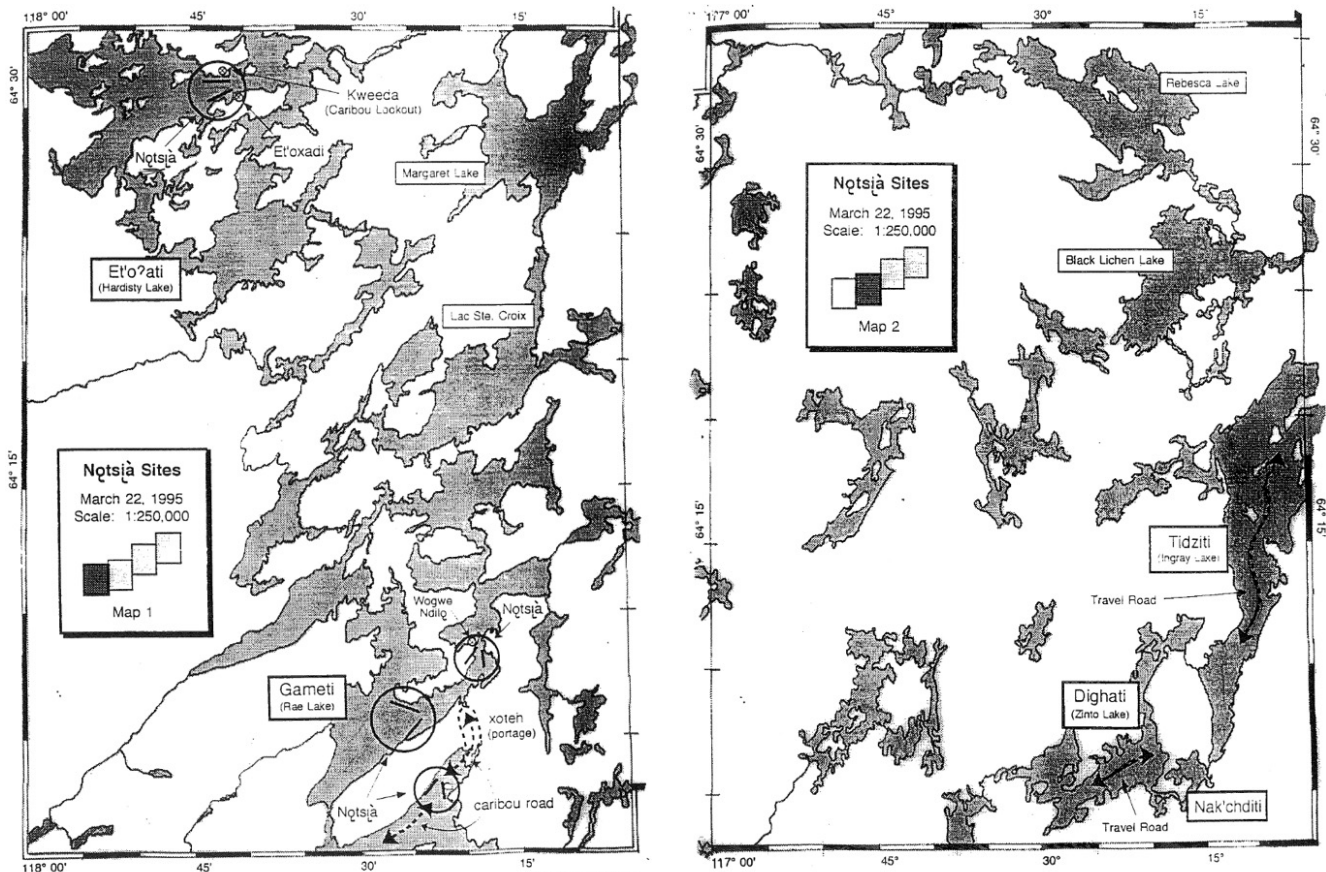
... if the caribou started to turn completely around the people who stood blocking the wide entrance area of the kwj] ... started walking next to each other and they howled like wolves. The caribou kept moving because they were afraid. That's how our ancestors did it. (Romie Wetrade, 03/16/95)

The sound and movement from the hunters kept the caribou from turning back and they were eventually snared by the dahm] – the snares set at the narrow end of the kwj].

We don't mean that our ancestors always did this. Only when the caribou migrate. ... they may kill them like that once a year and sometimes not at all. In the late summer when the caribou migrate back to the barren lands they'll hide from the caribou and wait for the caribou. When the caribou begin to migrate, they move all at once and they swim at once. When they begin to swim, they [our ancestors] used a birch canoe to canoe after them. They spear them in their rib cage. They would pierce them through and take the caribou out of the water and bring the caribou there [on the land]. (Romie Wetrade, 03/16/95)

SIZE AND LOCATION OF NŌTSJÀ

Nŏtsjà varied in size depending on their location. Nŏtsjà located in the boreal forest were often placed in bays or beside land masses where the land features could be used to help with funneling caribou toward the dahmì (see maps 1 and 2). Elders explained that the nŏtsjà on the frozen lakes, where the majority of Tìjchò built their kwìì, were large because they didn't want the caribou to walk past.

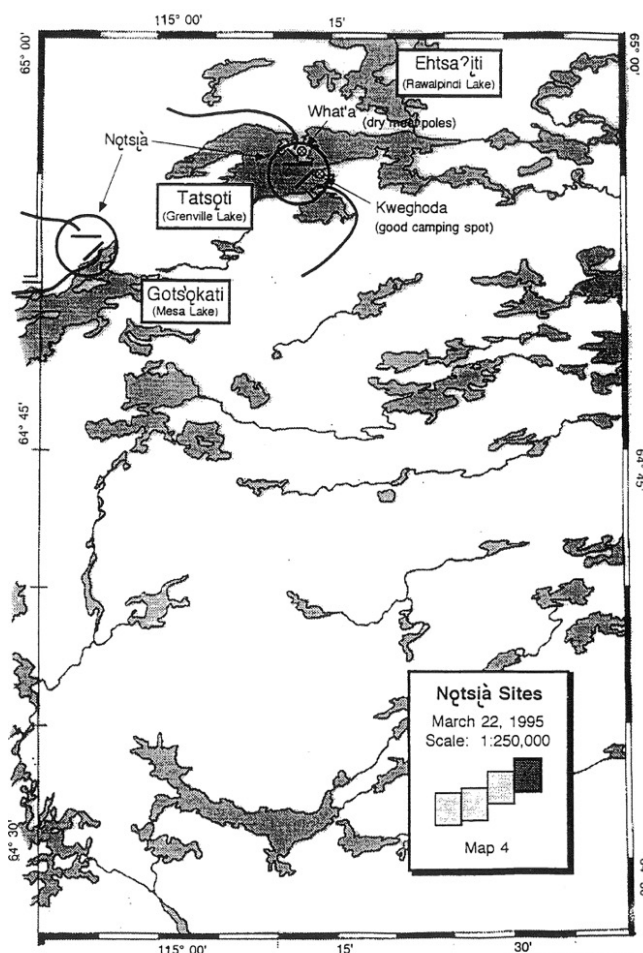
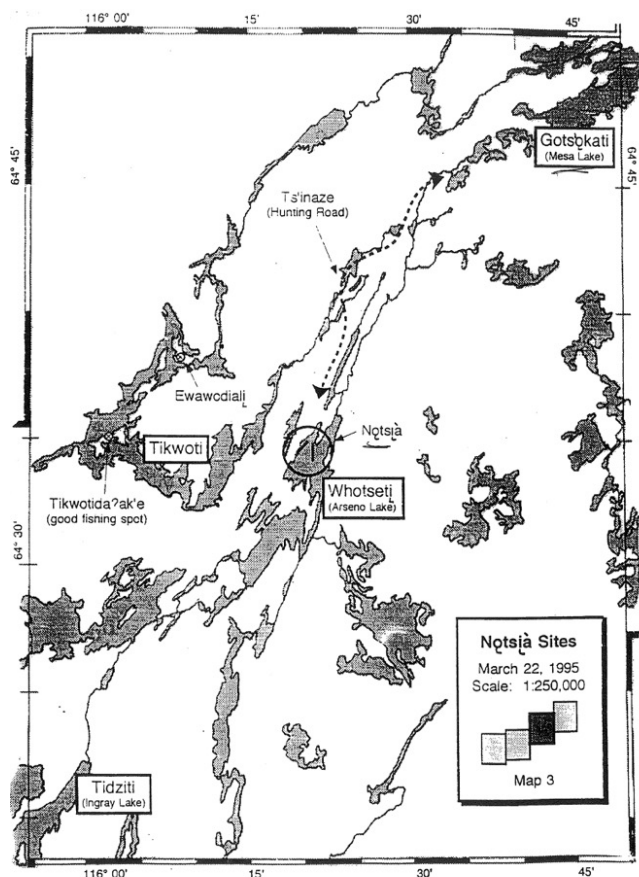


They know [the general area] where the caribou are going to migrate and they know where the caribou trails are. They made the nŏtsjà structure all the way across because they didn't want the caribou to go the other way [and miss the dahmì]. (Dave Chocolate, 03/21/95)

Amen Tailbone describes coming across the remains of a very large nŏtsjà north of Gots'òkàtì (map 4).

I cannot make up stories and talk about it. Over at Gots'òkàtì [Mesa Lake] ... there's a t̃jda [long narrow lake] ... There's lots of hills and we paddled to the shore. After we paddled to the edge of the barren land we camped there. It was fall. There was no wood so we went up the hill to get wood. Spruce trees don't grow side ways and those logs did that. ... [Our ancestors used to pound] the spruce trees down [into the snow] for the caribou and then the spruce trees [would die] and start to fall over. ... it was like that all over the hill ... and we used to take wood from it. we took the big logs and that's how I came to see [the remains of the nŏtsjà].

That old nŏtsjà wasn't on water [frozen lake]; it was on the land. And they had the spruce trees standing and the structure was maybe one mile. (Amen Tailbone 03/05/95)



According to Amen Tailbone (03/05/95 pers. comm.) this particular n̄tsj̄a may have been the one used to funnel herds moving from the southwest to the northeast, as well as those herds moving from the northwest to the southeast, just before their migration route turns northeast again. The research team remains uncertain as to the location of this particular n̄tsj̄a as Elder Amen Tailbone was uncertain as to whether he was describing the n̄tsj̄a north of Gots'qk̄ati (Mesa Lake) or another one north of Tatsoti (Grenville Lake).

According to Gam̄eti elders, the seven most important locations for n̄tsj̄a can be found on maps 1, 3, and 4. These locations were also important for other survival reasons, such as important locations for finding birch to use for building canoes, and for fishing, so the people could eat if the caribou chose a different trail. As Romie Wetrade explained ...

... wherever there were [caribou] trails people lived there. ... but some of them we're not too sure about. But the ones that we know and the ones that were told to use we can talk about them. Just like over here, my dad had said, "over there they used to make dahm̄j for caribou and the people used to get together ... and they made a dahm̄j and they killed a lot of caribou here ... [at] Wogwe Ndilq. They know that [where the caribou will travel] and that's why when the caribou migrate back to their birthing ground they camp here [Gahm̄jti] throughout springtime, and they would make birchbark canoes. ... that's why they would camp out here waiting for the caribou [to go through]. That's the way the stories are and that's how I heard the stories about it." My dad said that.

And over there [Wogwe Ndilq] there's a good spot for fishing and it is also where they know the caribou will migrate. So that's where they prepared everything for the caribou. It is where the fish are when it gets warmer and where there's lot of fishing spots. They knew all that. And if there's now caribou they would get together to stay through springtime [to do fishing throughout the spring].

They lived at the camp until they finished making canoes and after they finished making canoes they would paddle [to another spot]. That's what they did a long time ago. The people did not stay in one place only. (Romie Wetrade, 03/05/95)

The structures built in the boreal forest were much smaller than those located on the barren lands, where the nqtsjà were often several kilometers long (see map 4).

DECISION TO BUILD A KWIJ

The decision to build a kwij and the incredible work it took to build the nqtsjà was made by the group. To make sure this decision was right for the group, all individuals present were part of the discussion. They discussed where to place it and whether it was necessary. But the most knowledgeable person, usually an elder, made the final decision and gave the instructions.

Concerning the make of a dahmj, whenever it gets warm, the people sit and talk to each other and they make a naawo [agreement] and then they wait for the animal [caribou]. ... Those who were elders and knew about the things of the past would sit with the other people in the group and they would discuss it first. And then they would get ready for the caribou. ...

We're not talking about a few people. Many people were involved, helping each other. All who are capable of working, they all help in making the naawo and then they wait for this animal because that is all they live on. Whoever knows spoke, and they believe one another. That was how they worked.

... they lived according to an elder who possessed that knowledge. ... and using this knowledge, while sitting together [and discussing] they made a decision. ... whoever was an elder and who knew and lived by this knowledge, that one was like a k'awo [boss or camp organizer]. ... they regarded him as a k'awo for as an elder he had a lot of knowledge. They worked according to this. (Romie Wetrade, 03/06/95)

They discussed it among each other. ... there was lots of discussion about it. sometimes these structures were not put up because the caribou did not always migrate on those trails. (David Chocolate, 03/21/95)

WETA DE TŁI

Whereas the movements of ribbons, flags, and swaying trees, and the sound of wolves caused the caribou to move away, the weta de tlı drew the caribou toward its sound. This device was used in the winter when the caribou and hunters were in small groups or alone and when it was necessary to draw the caribou closer.

[The weta de tlı is a rattle made from] caribou antlers [which are] all cut off and all tied up with strings.

We walked [when we] hunted and we carried a small bundle of antlers all tied up together in our pack sack. If we saw a caribou, we made a racket with the caribou antlers. And ... if the caribou hears it, the caribou comes to us. (Amen Tailbone, 03/10/95)

At the verification meeting Andrew Gon stated that this device was only used in the very cold weather. The other elders seemed to agree. But the research team was unable to determine if they meant the coldest part of the year or if they meant the coldest part of the rutting season, because Elders also explained the weta de tɬi sounds like caribou fighting during the rut.

The sound drew the caribou toward the hunters, who used spears and arrows or snares in the bush. And before the wide-spread use of skidoos, it was used in recent times to draw the caribou toward hunters using guns.

Elder Madeleine Drybone also mentioned that the yigq was used to call caribou. This is a toy made of caribou hooves that the player tries to swing onto a bone peg. The men disagreed with Elder Madeleine Drybone. And the research team was not able to go back and discuss it with her. It is possible that since the yigq makes a loud rattle sound, it was used by women in camps when they were alone. Certainly, the weta de tɬi was used by women. As one young woman said, "I remember my mom sitting in camp and if she saw a caribou, she would rattle this big bundle of caribou antlers to draw the caribou towards us."

ACQUIRING THE KNOWLEDGE

During one of the later interviews, Sally Anne Zoe asked how their ancestors first learned about using movement and sound to redirect the caribou.

[their ancestors did not have guns or skidoos] ... so how were they going to kill an animal? ... they observed the animals. They used their minds. And they found ways to survive on the caribou. I know this from listening to [the stories of my ancestors]. (Romie Wetrade, 03/16/95)

The elders stressed that by watching the caribou their ancestors learned that the caribou are social animals who like to be with each other during migration to and from the north. They also like to be together in the barren lands. But they move in smaller groups when they winter among the trees. Caribou choose a leader and the other caribou follow the leader. So, if the leader goes into the kwɪ̃, so will the others. They also noticed that the caribou had a hard time seeing in the spring due to a combination of snow blindness and seeing double because of the heat waves. And that they are attracted to the sound of antlers knocking against each other.

Elder Amen Tailbone asked his own questions about why caribou might move through a nɔtsɬà under certain situations.

A caribou, if we chase a caribou, even if there are clothes hanging, it will wander past. ... it does that too. Even so ... in late summer some caribou wandered to where there was a point. It was a point with a short portage and there ... we canoed ashore, and at the point where there were caribou, and there, they were about to go into the water, so we walked towards them. ... but then at the point we noticed some caribou jackets, blankets, and things like that which were hanging. About six [items] that had straws sticking out of them and they appeared like they were people standing. Despite that, the caribou ran ashore. We shot at them so the caribou ran ashore.

... the caribou ran in between them and that's how it was. I know for I saw with my own eyes and that's what I'm talking about. I don't talk with uncertainty. What do you make of the information anyway?
(Amen Tailbone, 03/10/95)

This statement seems to mean that Amen Tailbone was telling Sally Anne Zoe that to understand the caribou you have to ask questions when they behave in a way that you do not expect them to behave. Why were they acting in that way? He was also explaining to her that movement does not seem to work as well in the summer as in the spring when the snow is bright.

Another example of this is when Amen Tailbone explained to us that the caribou are currently traveling in a wide arc to the west, away from the ice road.

Why do you suppose they are doing that? Because of the traffic on the ice road. This year there are a lot more big trucks for the diamond mines. So, the caribou will probably not come close to it. it looks like they are making a big arc. (Amen Tailbone, 03/30/95)

As Amen Tailbone demonstrates, that becoming and being knowledgeable involves using it information for solving problems, and provides baseline data with which to make predictions and hypotheses. He also stresses the importance of observing and questioning when you see something that does not make sense or is not consistent with past behaviour.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Historically the Tìjchò used sound and movement to redirect caribou to specific locations. But caribou were not redirected to keep them safe, as in keeping them away from pollutants, tailings ponds, or large open-pit mines. Rather, the caribou were redirected towards an area where food, clothing, and tools were secured for the Tìjchò by harvesting as many caribou as needed.

Knowledge about caribou behaviour and how to move the caribou into particular locations has been remembered and transmitted to the next generation through oral narratives. The techniques used were not designed to change the migration routes, but to redirect the caribou away from one spot on the caribou trails to a more desirable spot for snaring or hunting. Decision-making included all members of the group and was never left up to one or two individuals.

Based on this preliminary evidence it appears that a management technique could be developed using sound and movement to keep the caribou away from past, present, and future mine sites, or any other undesirable or polluted area. Based on the statements made by the younger elders, that they are now learning from the very oldest members of their community, it appears important to have the very old involved in the design and decision-making process concerning caribou management.

Sally Anne Gon was born in Behchokq̃ where she attended school until the family moved to Gamètì when she was thirteen. A few years later, she was a resident at Akaitcho Hall and attended high school at Sir John Franklin. Sally Anne also attended Academy of Learning where she took accounting. In 1993, when Gamètì elders initiated what came to be known as the Whaèhdq̃ Nàowò K̃, Sally was asked by Gamètì elders to work as a researcher because she cared about the past, was considered an excellent listener, and she understood the importance of becoming knowledgeable by experiencing life and by what she had heard through Elders stories. As a community researcher, Sally Anne helped document, to name a few projects, Elders' knowledge on traditional governance, caribou migration and the state of their habitat, impacts of the Rayrock Uranium Mine, and placenames as biogeographical indicators. Sally Anne was the first in a Tłıchq̃ community to enter many of Tłıchq̃ placenames into a GIS – MapInfo. Sally Anne now lives in Yellowknife with her husband Bobby Gon and their three children.

Alice Legat is an anthropologist has made the NWT her home and worked with Tłıchq̃ since the early 1990s. She completed her doctorate in Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland and her post-doctorate at Trent University, Canada. Alice is interested in how the past informs present decision-making, especially in relation to the environment. Alice has been principal investigator on a variety of projects that focused on human-animal relations on the tundra, Canadian Shield, and the taiga plain. Most research that Alice has been involved with has been within Mq̃whì Gogha Dè Njıł'èe. She worked with Sally Anne Gon and others on traditional governance (including rules and laws associated with wildlife), relationships between barren-ground caribou migration and their habitat, the impact of Rayrock Uranium Mine, place names, and the effects of climate change on community well-being.