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On Yamòzhah's Trail: Dogrib Sacred Sites and the Anthropology of Travel

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My grandfather told me this story. He used to say to me "Are you listening to me really well?" And I used to tell him, "Yes, I am". "You have adopted and are raising six children so tell them this story until they learn it really well. Tell this story to anyone who comes to visit you. This story was passed on for us to retell, as long as the land shall last." He used to tell me this, and that's what we're doing now. This is a really good story. Young people who think about what it means can use it as an example to live by.

Harry Simpson, June 1994, at Gots'òkà Tl (Mesa Lake), near the peace treaty site of the Dogrib Chief Edzo and the Yellowknife Chief Akaitcho.

Introduction

This paper examines Dogrib sacred sites in the context of travel and story-telling. It is based largely on a multi-year research project designed to complete an ethnoarchaeological study of heritage sites located on two Dogrib traditional birchbark canoe and dog sled routes (Figure 1). Additional data come from the

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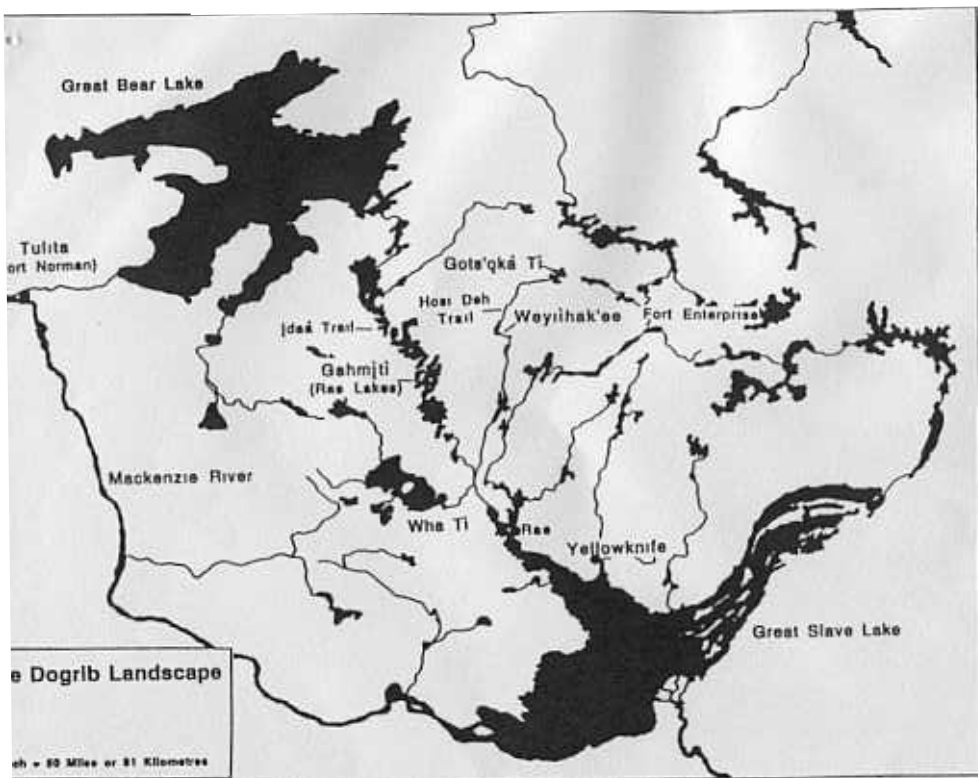


Figure 1.

Dogrib Treaty 11 Council's place name and trail research, undertaken as background for comprehensive land claim negotiations. The Dogrib are an Athapaskan-speaking group of Dene, or Northern Athapaskan, Indians who traditionally occupied an area between Great Slave, and Great Bear Lakes in the Northwest Territories. (See Helm (1972, 1981, 1994), Helm and Gillespie (1981), and Helm and Lurie (1961) for a detailed description of Dogrib ethnography and ethnohistory.) While completing the inventory of heritage resources of the trails, it became clear that many of the sites we were recording were not easily defined. Working with territorial and federal heritage policy and legislation extant in the Northwest Territories, we consistently found it necessary to stretch accepted definitions of "site", "archaeological site", and "heritage resource", in order to include these sites in our archaeological inventory (cf. Carmichael 1994, Matunga 1994). Many of the sites exhibited no material remains that could be attributed to human origin, and consequently did not fit the definition of "archaeological site". In other cases, many of the graves date to post-contact times, and therefore could not be defined as archaeological sites.

However, together they represent an important component of Dogrib "heritage" and consequently were included in our inventory. In order to provide these sites with a measure of protection, and to ensure that they receive appropriate attention by cultural resource managers, we redefined "archaeological site" to include these places, though we were careful to include explanatory notes as to their origin and significance on site inventory data bases.

We refer to these special places as "sacred sites". However, in an earlier paper (Andrews and Zoe, 1997), an external reader questioned our use of the term "sacred", as have some in the literature (Kelley and Francis 1994), noting that in English language usage, it has connotations which are inappropriate for discussing the complex association between places of this nature and the religious basis defining them in Aboriginal cosmology. This led us to inquire into the Dogrib nomenclature for these types of sites. Though we have not been able to elicit a Dogrib equivalent which matches the scope and extent of the English phrase "sacred site", we were able to record terms for categories of these sites. We present the results of these inquiries, though our synthesis must be regarded as no more than a work-in-progress, as we are continuing to refine this classification with Dogrib elders.

Classification of Dogrib Sacred Sites

From the perspective of Dogrib cosmology, the landscape is a living thing, immanent with entities, or "powers", both benevolent and malevolent. While "...travelling across the landscape one must constantly mitigate the impact of personal actions by appeasing these entities with votive offerings, and by observing strict rules of behaviour. For example, at each new water body encountered en route, offerings are left. In the Dogrib vernacular it is said that these places, and the entities inhabiting them, are being 'paid'. ... Through dreaming, and the acquisition of *ik'òò*, or 'medicine' (sometimes 'power', 'knowledge' or 'luck') one prepares to deal with the world, and the 'powers' inhabiting it" (Andrews and Zoe, 1997). At a few places, where specific entities are resident, or where culture-heroes are associated with landscape features, or where important events have taken place, special conditions exist providing the locality with power and significance. These places are often prominent landmarks, and consequently become powerful mnemonics for recalling the significance of the location. At sacred sites, the association with *ik'òò* is very strong. Travellers are always sure to stop and pay proper respect to these places: to do otherwise would risk the safety of the travellers, and may result in dire circumstances. Indeed all important or significant sites are visited in this manner.

We have organized Dogrib sacred sites into six categories though work in refining them is ongoing. Five of these categories are recognized by elders.

The remaining category is, for the time being, simply a catch-all, and consequently must be regarded as "etic" (i.e., defined from "outside") in perspective.

1) Goghanai? — “It Tells Us”

Often these are places where the activities of culture-heros are associated with landscape features, and they are always regarded as powerful. These sites may be visited by people of both genders, though some are particularly for one or the other gender. For example a few places are known as fertility sites: places where women, or sometimes couples, can make offerings in the hope of having children. Other sites, though powerful and always potentially dangerous, are intended to be entertaining. At some, a form of geomancy is practiced where votaries leave offerings and typically perform a prescribed ritual. By interpreting the local, and often immediate, environmental effects, the votary's future is augured. If one has "lived well" it is likely that the site will augur good luck and a prosperous future. At sites where geomantic rituals are required, the votary must perform the ritual only once per visit. If a poor future is predicted, and often this means that death will stalk the votary, then that person must live with their "fortune" until the next time that they travel past the site, when they can try their "luck" again. Though death is not unknown in the oral tradition, it is rare, and most individuals ensure that they are particularly careful in travel, and in observing all customs and rules until their next visit to the site. For example, see the discussion of the sacred site Hodooddzoo in Andrews and Zoe (1997).

2) Weyiidii — “Spirit Animals, Dwelling”

These are sacred sites inhabited by giant “spirit animals”, usually considered malevolent and dangerous. They are almost always avoided, and require strict rules of conduct and special rituals of appeasement. Weyıdıı have been known to abandon some sites, after which the location is rendered benign, though still respected. A related category of places are inhabited by whirlwinds (called *ıhts'ı dawhokq̄*; “where the wind sits”). These are occasionally associated with water bodies, and they are always avoided. Weyıdıı usually take the form of giant mammals, fish or, sometimes, insects, and are considered long-lived entities from an ancient time. If treated with great respect Weyıdıı will not typically interfere with travellers.

Basso (1978) has described this entity for the Slavey of Willow Lake. She ascribes the name Yareidi, which she translates as 'spirit animals' or 'monsters'. Andrews (fieldnotes 02/09/96) has recorded the term yedi among the Mountain Dene. Kritsch and Andre (1993) have recorded the Gwich'in term Chijuudie which they translate as 'monster that lives in the water'. See Helm (1954) for a discussion of 'spirit animals' in Slavey cosmology.



Figure 2.

3) Nàte K'è — “*Dreaming Places*”

A few places are known as dreaming locations, where the dreaming activities of culture-heros have intersected the landscape. Though dreaming (Helm 1994) can occur anywhere, these places are locations where young men (according to the elders, these sites are almost exclusively associated with men) can go to attempt to facilitate a dream, and subsequently obtain the appropriate ɬk'òò, or medicine, to assist the youth in becoming a successful hunter. These sites are visited in spring by young men, alone or in small groups. Individuals are instructed to construct a stage or platform on which to sleep, and to deprive themselves of food and water until they receive a “vision” or dream. Stories instruct the visitor as to appropriate behaviour before, during, and following their experience at these sites. Only by diligently following appropriate customs and rules, by living a “good life”, by being respectful and generous, and by treating animals with respect and care, might a trip to one of these sites be successful.

4) Kwe Nezɬ — “*Good Rock*”

These are places where important resources, such as lithic material for stone tool manufacture (see Andrews and Zoe 1997), stone for carving pipes, ochre for decorating other objects, or birch for making bows or canoes, are found. Often they are places associated with other events, or are near other sacred sites. These places can take many forms requiring a variety of appeasement and use rituals (including geomantic rituals) and are always regarded as powerful.

5) Dòkw'òò Whetòò — “*Graves*”

Graves, typically marked by picket fences since the arrival of Christianity among the Dogrib, are considered sacred and powerful places. They provide an opportunity to communicate with the buried individuals, and often, upon the presentation of votive offerings, to ask for favours in exchange. While travelling, people will always stop at graves, repairing the fences, clearing brush, and to make offerings of prayers and gifts. Some graves, especially those located at trail junctions, become messages posts, where supplies (gifts) and messages can be left temporarily for the interred, but may be taken in times of need by visitors. Graves are often the site of certain rituals (such as “feeding the fire”) (Helm 1961) designed to ensure safe and fruitful travel. While visiting graves, deceased family members are remembered, kinship ties are delineated and celebrated, and the stories of an ancestor’s life and work on the land are often recounted. In this way, the landscape becomes an aspect of kinship (Gow 1995). Graves are very numerous along the trails (we recorded 189 on the ɬdaà trail alone), and elders are able to recall the names of the individuals buried at many of them.

6) *Places of Mythological or Historical Significance*

This final category contains a collection of sites which do not fit neatly into one of the categories defined above, and includes places of different origin and import. Included here are sites noted for their historical importance, locations regarded as dangerous, but for which the stories have been forgotten (such as islands which can be walked on during the day, but not at night because they might turn over), places of important battles, places where important meetings or the negotiation of peace treaties have taken place (Helm and Gillespie 1981), and places where tragic events took place. These sites, and indeed all sacred places, occur within the temporal realm of ‘linear time’.

Helm and Gillespie (1981) note that the concept of time, as reflected in Dogrib oral tradition, consists of two temporal eras: ‘floating time’ and ‘linear time’. The former describes a vast temporal era where stories are told without reference to relative time. These stories are usually said to have occurred ‘thousands of years ago’. Linear time succeeds floating time and describes the more recent past. Stories from linear time are “conceived as falling into a temporal succession.” The legends of Yamòzhah (discussed below) occur on the cusp of linear time and floating time, and provide a bridge between these two worlds. It is interesting to note that we have found no place names (though there are many stories) associated with floating time. ‘Floating time’ stories concentrate on the world when animals and humans could change form, and relate primarily to the relationships between them. With the coming of Yamòzhah the final agreements between animals and humans are completed, and they each take their respective, and final forms, forever adhering to the relationship of respect worked out in ‘floating time’. Yamòzhah is critical in bridging this temporal transition.

Sacred Sites and the Anthropology of Travel

The legends are there for the future, they should be recorded and written down. As it is now, we don’t go on the land as much anymore, but we know the stories of our ancestors. So we tell the stories, and we remember. My nephew is sitting here and listening to me. He will probably think about this story and someday will recall how his uncle used to work and travel with the people on the land. It is for these reasons that we work and travel on our land. The land respects us, so we should camp here and show respect for the land. I’m sure our grandfathers must have done that too.

So this place has a story, and it’s a good story too...

Harry Simpson, July 14, 1994, speaking at the sacred site known as Weyihak’ee (Figure 1).

Morphy (1993) has remarked that the concept of landscape, as a frame for discourse, is a useful one because it is "a concept in between", noting that it "is free from fixed positions, [has a] meaning [which] is elusive, yet whose potential range is all-encompassing". He is careful to point out however, that it does not operate within a theoretical vacuum, noting, among other things, that it is processual in nature. Hirsch (1995) has suggested that landscape, as cultural process, is an act of balancing the reality of everyday life with the 'potentiality' of an idealized life. Employing a landscape painting as a metaphor for life, Hirsch argues that there exists both a foreground representing everyday life, and a background of an idealized life represented by the sacred or spiritual significance of the landscape, noting that individuals "attempt to realize in the foreground what can only be a potentiality, and for the most part in the background" (*ibid*:22).

The Dogrib landscape is a mosaic of significant places, all with names and stories attached to them. Place and narrative transform a physical geography into a social geography, where culture and landscape are transformed into a semiotic whole. In Dogrib cosmology, these places represent the physical embodiment of cultural process, which is realized through the combination of travel and story-telling. By travelling traditional trails, which link places like beads on a string, Dogrib youth are told stories as each place is visited. The stories provide all the knowledge necessary for living within the Dogrib landscape, and in later life these places become mnemonics for recalling the narrative associated with them (Andrews 1990, Andrews and Zoe, 1997). In this way, narratives relevant to knowing, and living, in the Dogrib landscape are passed from generation to generation. Travel is critical to learning, and understanding Dogrib cosmology (cf. Brody 1981, 1987; Heine *et al.* in press; Nelson 1973, 1983; Basso 1996; Riddington 1988). Without the visual, mnemonic cue of place, stories could not be accurately recalled, preserving the rich detail and accuracy they are noted for (cf. Helm and Gillespie 1981, Moodie and Catchpole 1992). If we accept the premise of landscape as process, then it is realized through travel. Travel replaces the metaphor of the landscape painting, and grounds the process in the activities of everyday life. Travel for everyday subsistence (foreground) provides an opportunity to communicate with the ideal and sacred nature (background) of the same landscape. Indeed, in Dogrib society, one gains prestige and respect through travelling. Those elders who have travelled and worked on the land all their lives, who have visited places of spiritual significance, and who have learned and recounted the stories about these places-are regarded as the most knowledgeable, and consequently must be "listened to" with great respect. Travelling the trails, visiting the places, and listening to the stories, provides Dogrib hunters with the knowledge necessary for living in the Dogrib landscape. However, as Layton (1995) has noted, the social landscape serves to order cultural relations and consequently is more than

a mere mnemonic or metaphor. It is tied inextricably to notions of prestige, identity, and the transmission of knowledge.

The triptych of travel, place, and narrative is embodied best in one of the legends of Yamòzhah, who is the most important of the Dogrib culture-heros. Yamòzhah is noted for his creation of many components of the landscape, for assisting with the transformation of floating time into linear time, for establishing many of the laws and cultural rules important to Dogrib existence, for mediating the enduring relationship between the Dogrib and the animals with which they share the landscape, and from which they draw nourishment, and for making the landscape secure. For the sake of brevity, an abridged and paraphrased version of the story is presented here.

Yamòzhah and the Wolverine

Yamòzhah woke one morning at [ht] k̄ka (Andrews and Zoe 1997) near Yahʷl̄ti and cut down a birch tree to make a bow. After working on his bow for some time, he began to walk south. Eventually he reached Hodoòdzoo, a place where people slid for good luck. Here he found that Nògha ("wolverine") had placed sharpened stakes at the bottom of the slide to entrap people. Yamòzhah decided that he would make Hodoòdzoo safe for people to slide at again, so he quietly approached the stakes and carefully slid his caribou skin shirt over one of them. Twisting his nose until it bled, he covered the top of the stake with blood, and then pretended to be dead. Soon Nògha came by and took Yamòzhah back to his camp. Yamòzhah, through the use of his power, freed himself and killed Nògha, though letting the wolverine's family escape unharmed. In this way Yamòzhah made Hodoòdzoo safe for people again.

Yamòzhah continued walking south on the trail. Eventually he reached the large hill known as Ts'okwè, where he sat down and continued making his bow. Tired after a long arduous day Yamòzhah slept. While he slept he had a dream. Ts'okwè forever after became a nàtè k'è (dreaming place).

The story represents a single day in the life of Yamòzhah and recounts his exploits in making the land safe. However, in undertaking these activities Yamòzhah imparts power in the landscape and the places he visits are transformed into sacred sites. Most importantly Yamòzhah travels a portion of an important traditional trail. The trail, called [daà ("up this way") (Figure 2), is geographically central to the Dogrib homeland and notably, nearly twenty sacred sites (not including 189 graves) are located along its length, a number not matched on any other trail in the Dogrib region. The story metaphorically connects travel, place, and narrative, and provides a focus for grounding the foreground of everyday life in the background of history and religion. As Yamòzhah works and travels along the trail, he transforms the mythological into

the real. However his foreground becomes the background of Dogrib life, and consequently provides the potential of an ideal life. In other words, place and narrative provide the potential ideal for everyday life, while travel and "work" provide the mechanism of achieving it. The landscape provides the fabric for grounding the metaphor in cultural process, and experiencing it is realized through travel and ritual. It is significant that Yamòzhah, known as "the one who travels", is the most important of the Dogrib culture-heros. Through his travels, Yamòzhah brings forth the laws governing Dogrib identity and life, and through his actions, serves as a model for an ideal existence.

The Yamòzhah myths are often collectively referred to as the 'stories of the two brothers', and are shared by many Dene groups. Among the Dene of northern Alberta he is known as Yamòhdeyi (Moore and Wheelock 1990), as Yambádéya (also Zhambádézhah) by the Deh Cho Slavey (Eleanor Bran, pers. comm. 1996), as Yabatheya by the Chipewyan of the Northwest Territories (GNWT 1993), as Yamòna by the Shatu Dene, and as Yamòzhah among the Dogrib and Mountain Dene. The culture-hero Atachookajj may be the Gwich'in equivalent (Ingrid Kritsch, pers. com. 1996). Many of the stories of this culture-hero are shared by many groups, some with identical geographical anchoring. For example in the narratives of the giant beavers, all versions share the story of Yamòzhah killing and stretching hides of three giant beavers on Bear Rock at Tulita (formerly Fort Norman). Interestingly, below Tulita the stories become dramatically different, an area requiring further research. Because the mythology of this important culture hero is shared widely among the Dene groups of the Northwest Territories, one of the Yamòna legends was chosen to symbolically represent the political unity of the Dene Nation, and is reflected in their corporate logo (Andrews 1990, Hanks, 1997). It is also a design element of the Dene Cultural Institute's new headquarters in Hay River.

In many of the Yamòzhah/Yamòna narratives, the culture-hero travels along existing trails. It would be interesting to map the entire corpus of narratives, providing perhaps a unique picture of the sacred landscape of the Mackenzie Valley area. It suggests that the relationship between travel, place and narrative is widely held among Athapaskan groups in the north. Direction of travel is important in narratives in other contexts (see Harwood 1976, and Kelly and Francis 1994). In the Dogrib story of Yamòzhah and the Wolverine, the culture-hero travels in a southerly direction. In Mountain Dene stories, Yamòzhah circles the globe travelling in an easterly direction, always facing the sun. His brother, travels in the opposite direction, always in darkness, and consequently there are no stories of his travels, until they meet (Judith Wright-Bird, pers. com., 1996). Interestingly, while Yamòzhah enacts 'good' deeds, his brother has often the opposite effect. The concept of direction of travel is intriguing, though its significance remains to be determined with further research.

Epilogue: Sacred Sites and Heritage Preservation

When it comes to talking about land claims, maybe we should bring our people to this lake called Gots'òkà Tì (Mesa Lake). In that way the government will know we are in the country where peace was made. They will know that we are doing things the way our ancestors have done. ...

When Chief Mòhwhì drew the boundary at Treaty, he did a good job. He knew his people depended on the animals on the land, so he made an agreement for things only on the surface, but I know they discovered things underground after. If only he knew about gas and oil then, and if he made a statement saying this, then his children would be living on the royalties today. But he didn't mention anything about that and so, we must work out those agreements today.

Harry Simpson, June 1994, at Gots'òkà Tì, near the peace treaty site of Edzo and Akaitcho.

Today in the Northwest Territories, the foreground of everyday life is typically grounded in a background of politics. Virtually all regions of the Northwest Territories are either in the throes of implementing a land claim, or negotiating one. Federal and territorial park agencies are negotiating land withdrawals, some of which contain sacred sites. Recently the Mackenzie Valley was opened once again for hydrocarbon exploration, and seismic research is proceeding vigorously. In the area claimed by the Dogrib, one of the world's largest mining companies is in the process of beginning a diamond mine, this following on the heels of the largest staking rush in the history of Canada. One of the results of this was recent announcement of a "protected area strategy" for the NWT, to be developed by 1998. The landscape is a prime focus in these activities, and two traditions with different world views are negotiating its future. Though the natural landscape is debated in these proceedings with almost clinical detail, the cultural landscape is often marginalized, if debated at all.

Present heritage legislation in the Northwest Territories has proven inadequate in providing protection to special places, though this is true for many other jurisdictions as well (cf. Carmichael 1994, Kelley and Francis 1994, Matunga 1994; Morphy 1993). For example, in the Northwest Territories there does not exist a legislative mechanism for protecting graves located outside designated cemeteries. Though the territorial government is planning to proceed with new legislation to correct this, the provision will apply only to Commissioner's Lands, in some ways the equivalent of provincial crown land, but representing less than 1% of the land mass of the Northwest Territories. This will require commensurate changes to federal legislation in order to provide protection over the remainder of the territories.

Federal and territorial park agencies have been lobbying Native communities in the north to set aside tracts of land as natural and cultural park areas; however, these mechanisms are designed to bring these areas to public attention, to foster tourism, or to meet system requirements established by park bureaucracies (Matunga 1994), and because of the potential impact of tourism, they may be inappropriate for protecting landscapes containing sensitive sacred sites. However in some NWT parks, sacred sites are explicitly included, while in others, Native organizations have agreed to set aside park areas but have protected the location and knowledge of sacred sites, hoping in this way they will remain undisturbed. In fact, many Native groups in the north have protected sacred sites for many years by keeping their location secret (cf. Johnson 1994, Kelley and Francis 1994, Matunga 1994, Mohs 1994, Mulk 1994). During the consultation process for future parks, communities must be provided with adequate resources to research the "cost and benefits" of these options.

In the realm of comprehensive claim negotiations, there does not exist an adequate precedent for protecting sites of sacred significance in the western NWT. In the Dene area there have been two claims completed to date: the Gwich'in and Sahtu final agreements. Though both of these modern treaties discuss heritage in general terms, there are no specific provisions for protecting sites of sacred significance (though the Sahtu claim does leave the question open ended through a provision which empowers a "Heritage Sites Working Group" to make recommendations to the responsible federal minister on "cultural and heritage sites"). Typically the claim negotiations provide for Aboriginal ownership of only a fraction of traditional lands, and communities are consequently forced to make hard decisions as to what should be protected. Clearly, there is a need to alter the basis of the negotiations to respect the importance and significance of cultural landscapes. There are many examples from other jurisdictions where issues of land title and disposition have interfered with, and often prevented access to, traditional lands and resources (Carmichael 1994).

Finally there needs to be a commitment from all levels of government and Native groups to work together toward providing for a new legislative regime which will recognize and protect sacred sites and cultural landscapes. Canada has fallen behind in this area, and as many regions experience increased development pressure, the urgency of this is growing. Recently UNESCO's World Heritage Convention (Cleere 1995) was modified to reflect the significance of sacred sites and cultural landscapes. It is now incumbent on Canadian legislators to ensure that Canada is at the forefront of enacting cultural landscape legislation. Canada must be careful, however, not to appropriate the culture of Aboriginal people, and consequently both must work together toward a common goal. Aboriginal groups should be free to employ new legislation to protect those aspects of the landscape which are significant to them.

Some young people today claim that the traditional way of life is a thing of the past. I believe that as long as there are Do.né (the word "done", pronounced do.ne means "man" or "people", and is the Dogrib equivalent of the Slavey word "dene"), then we will not abandon the traditional way of life. I tell the young people to listen to what we have to say because then they will be able to benefit from the teachings that we are passing on to them. Our oral tradition, once written, will last as long as this land, and if they retain this information in memory they will gain from it. That is why we are working on the land.

Harry Simpson, June 25, 1991, at Satsòtèh ("Raven Fish Trap") on the Camsell River.

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Finally, we would like to dedicate this paper to our friend and colleague, Aaron Herter, who was killed in a boating accident on the North Arm of Great Slave Lake in September, 1996. Though Aaron contributed to the outline of the paper, and provided important data through his own work as a researcher with the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council, his tragic death prevented him from contributing to the final written version. Our efforts have suffered from the lack of his insightful commentary, and we regret that the paper will forever be much less than it might have been. *Adieu*, Aaron.

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