

An aerial photograph of a wide, winding river flowing through a vast, green landscape. The river's path is irregular, with several large loops and meanders. The surrounding land is a mix of vibrant green fields and darker green forested areas. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall scene is one of natural beauty and tranquility.

Indigenous land & water stewardship as decolonizing practice

The case of Dehcho K'éhodi

Alex Latta
Wilfrid Laurier University

Robyn McLeod
Dehcho First Nations

Dahti Tsetso
Dehcho First Nations

Overview

- Geographical and political background: the Northwest Territories and the Dehcho Region
- Decolonization & Indigenous resurgence
- The Dehcho K'ehodi program

Geographical and Political Context

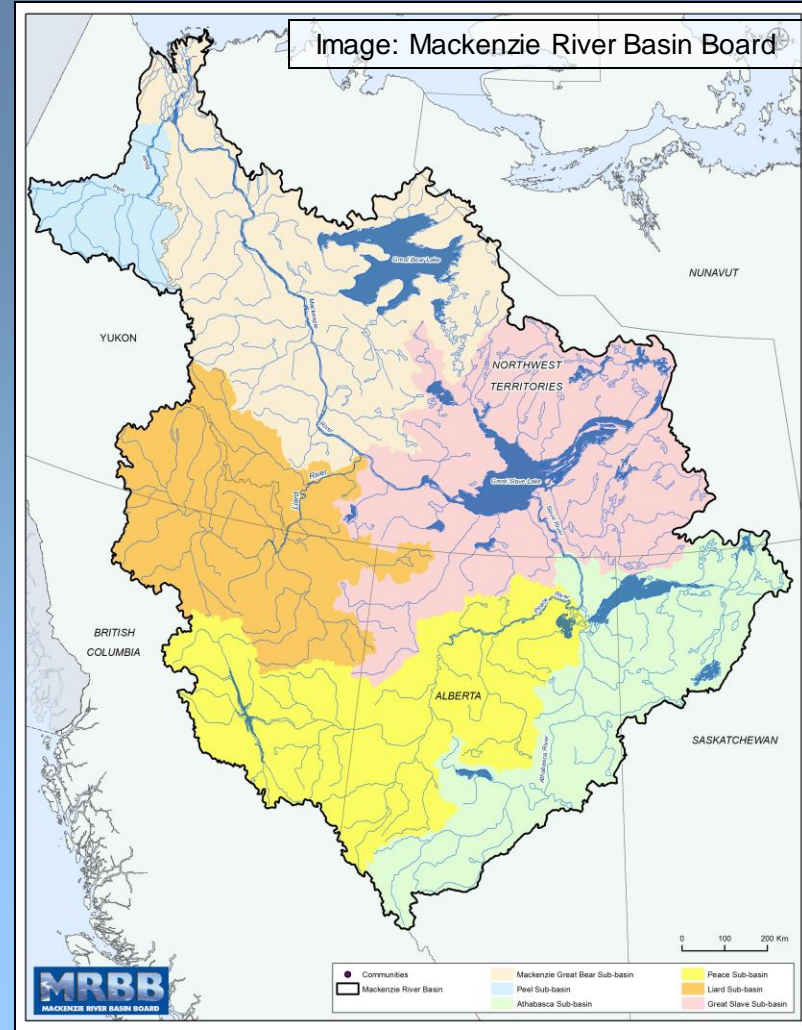
Canada's Northwest Territories

- 1.346 million Km²
- Population ~ 42,000
- Half live in Yellowknife, the rest spread across 32 small communities.
- 52% are Indigenous, including:
 - ✧ 13,345 First Nations
 - ✧ 3,245 Métis
 - ✧ 4,340 Inuit



Image: Government of Canada

The Mackenzie River and its sub-basins



“Settlement Regions”

- Rough approximation of historical territories of NWT Indigenous Peoples
- Subject to land claim negotiations beginning in the late 1970s.
- Many claims settled:
 - ✧ Inuvialuit, 1984
 - ✧ Gwich'in, 1992
 - ✧ Sahtu, 1993
 - ✧ Tlicho, 2003

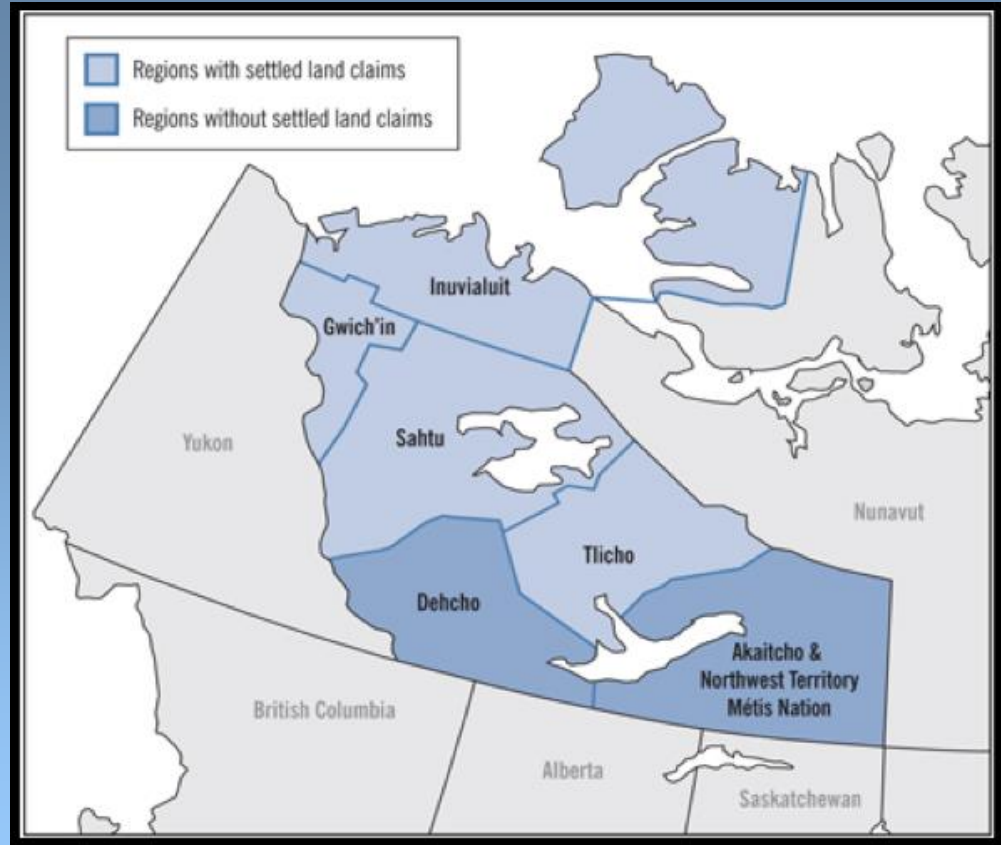


Image: Government of Canada

Dehcho First Nations



*“Deh Cho” means
“Big River” in Dene
Zhatie (South Slavey)*

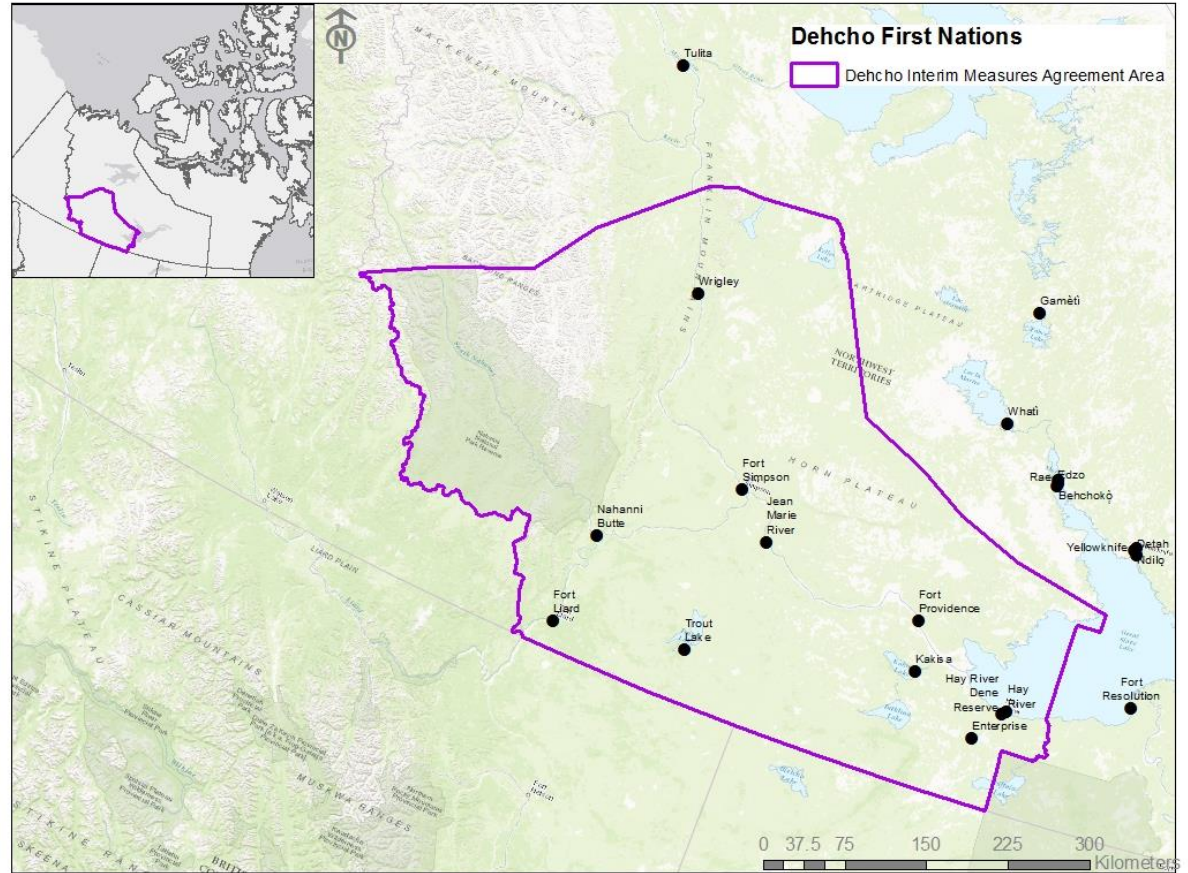
Member Communities

- Deh Gáh Got'îê First Nation
- Tthets'éhk'edélî First Nation
- Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation
- K'atl'odeeche First Nation
- Líídlíi Kúé First Nation
- Naha Dehé Dene Band
- Pehdzeh Ki First Nation
- Sambaa K'e First Nation
- West Point First Nation
- Ft. Simpson Métis
- Ft. Providence Métis Council



Dehcho Interim Measures Agreement Area

- “Dehcho Process” negotiations began in 1999; IMA in 2001.
- Negotiations intermittent since then, ongoing in 2018.

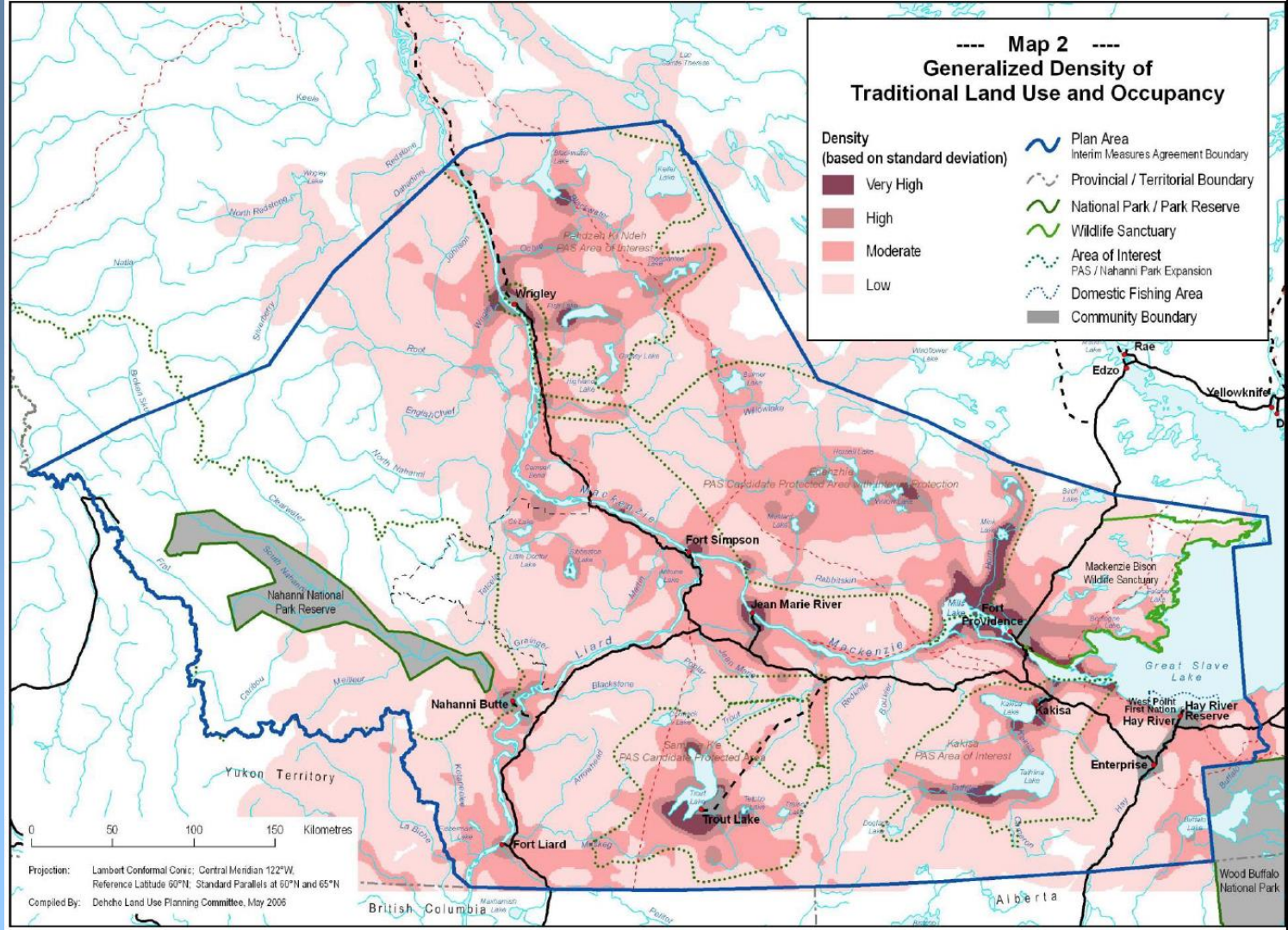


This map is for illustrative purposes only. The actual boundaries of features depicted on this map may not be exactly as shown. Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations is not responsible for any errors or discrepancies occurring on this map.

Image: Government of NWT

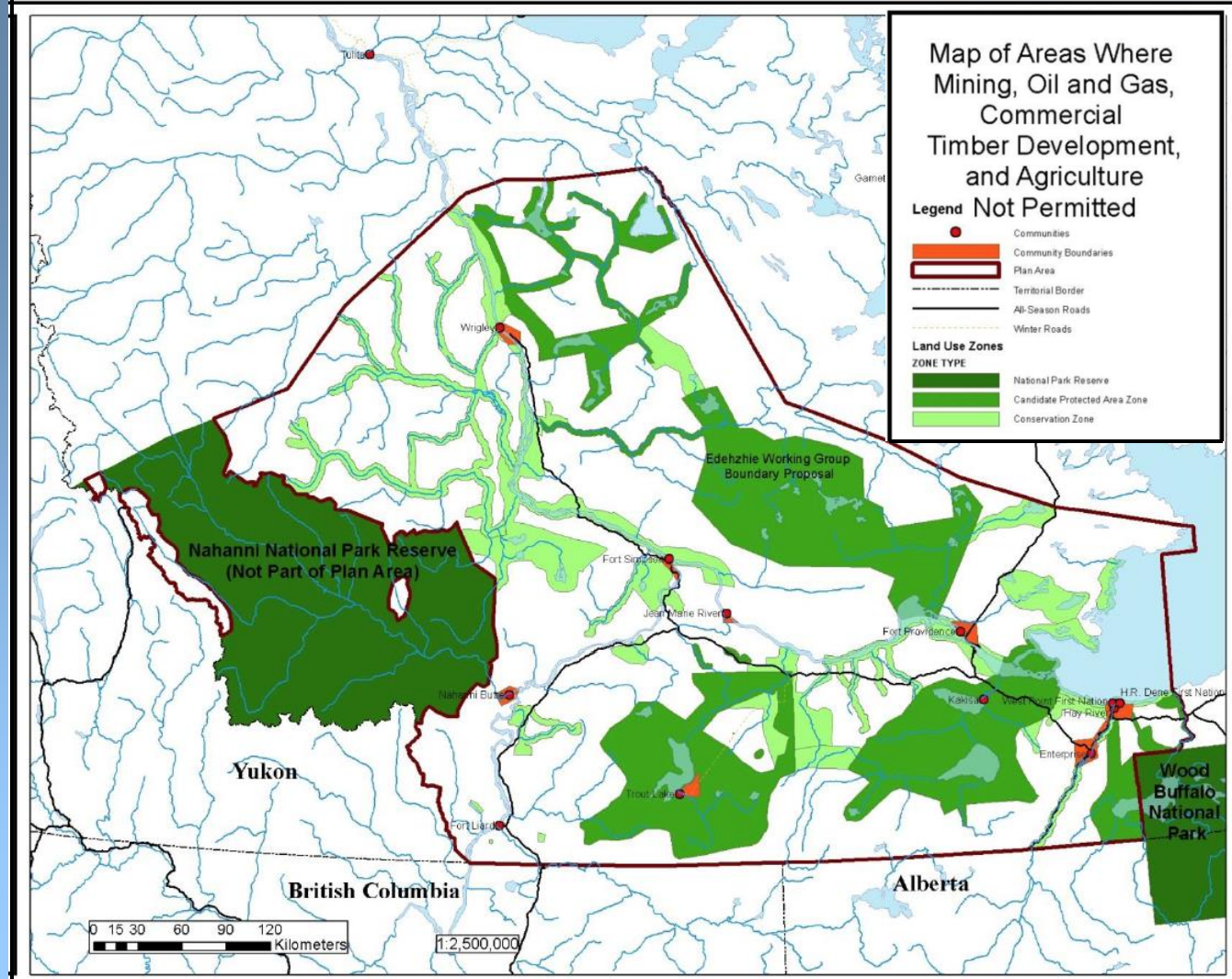
Draft Interim Dehcho Land Use Plan

- Areas of traditional use and occupancy.
- Note the significance of waterways to Dene livelihoods.



Draft Interim Dehcho Land Use Plan

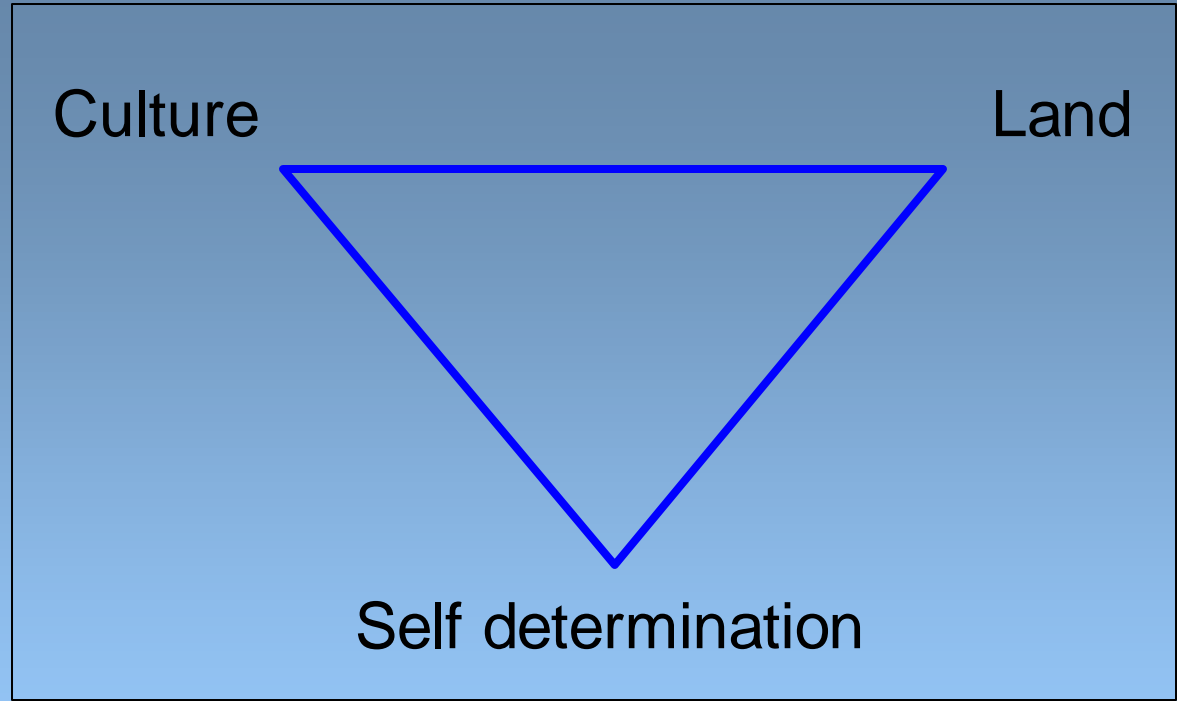
- Protected Area Zones (under interim land withdrawal).
- Nahanni Park the only major existing protected area. Boundaries expanded in 2009.
- Protected Areas Strategy stalled in 2014.



Decolonization and Indigenous Resurgence

Approaching decolonization

- Coulthard (2014): a “critically self-affirmative and self-transformative ethics of desubjectification”(p. 48).
- Alfred (2009): “decolonization starts becoming a reality when people collectively and consciously reject colonial identities and institutions...”(p. 44).



*The interconnected facets of
colonization/decolonization*

Indigenous Resurgence

Taiiaki Alfred (2015): Characterizes resurgence as a movement “towards re-establishing ourselves as cultural beings who are psychologically and spiritually connected to the land”(p. 8).

Leanne Simpson (2011): Asserts that “Nishnaabeg thought provides us with the impetus, the ethical responsibility, the strategies and the plan of action for resurgence” (p. 20).

Corntassel and Bryce (2012): Call for a move “away from the performativity of a rights discourse geared toward state affirmation and approval toward a daily existence conditioned by place-based cultural practices”(p. 153).

Dehcho K'éhodi

Taking care of the Dehcho

We the Dene of the Dehcho have lived on our homeland according to our own laws and system of government since time immemorial.

Our homeland is comprised of the ancestral territories and waters of the Dehcho Dene. We were put here by the Creator as keepers of our waters and lands.

The Peace Treaties of 1899 and 1921 with the non-Dene recognize the inherent political rights and powers of the Dehcho First Nation. Only sovereign peoples can make treaties with each other. Therefore our aboriginal rights and titles and oral treaties cannot be extinguished by any Euro-Canadian government.

Our laws from the Creator do not allow us to cede, release, surrender or extinguish our inherent rights. The leadership of the Dehcho upholds the teachings of the Elders as the guiding principles of Dene government now and in the future.

Today we reaffirm, assert and exercise our inherent rights and powers to govern ourselves as a nation.

Dehcho Declaration of Rights, 1993

We the Dene of the Dehcho have lived on our homeland according to our own laws and system of government since time immemorial.

Our homeland is comprised of the ancestral territories and waters of the Dehcho Dene. We were put here by the Creator as keepers of our waters and lands.

The Peace Treaties of 1899 and 1921 with the non-Dene recognize the inherent political rights and powers of the Dehcho First Nation. Only sovereign peoples can make treaties with each other. Therefore our aboriginal rights and titles and oral treaties cannot be extinguished by any Euro-Canadian government.

Our laws from the Creator do not allow us to cede, release, surrender or extinguish our inherent rights. The leadership of the Dehcho upholds the teachings of the Elders as the guiding principles of Dene government now and in the future.

Today we reaffirm, assert and exercise our inherent rights and powers to govern ourselves as a nation.

Dehcho Declaration of Rights, 1993

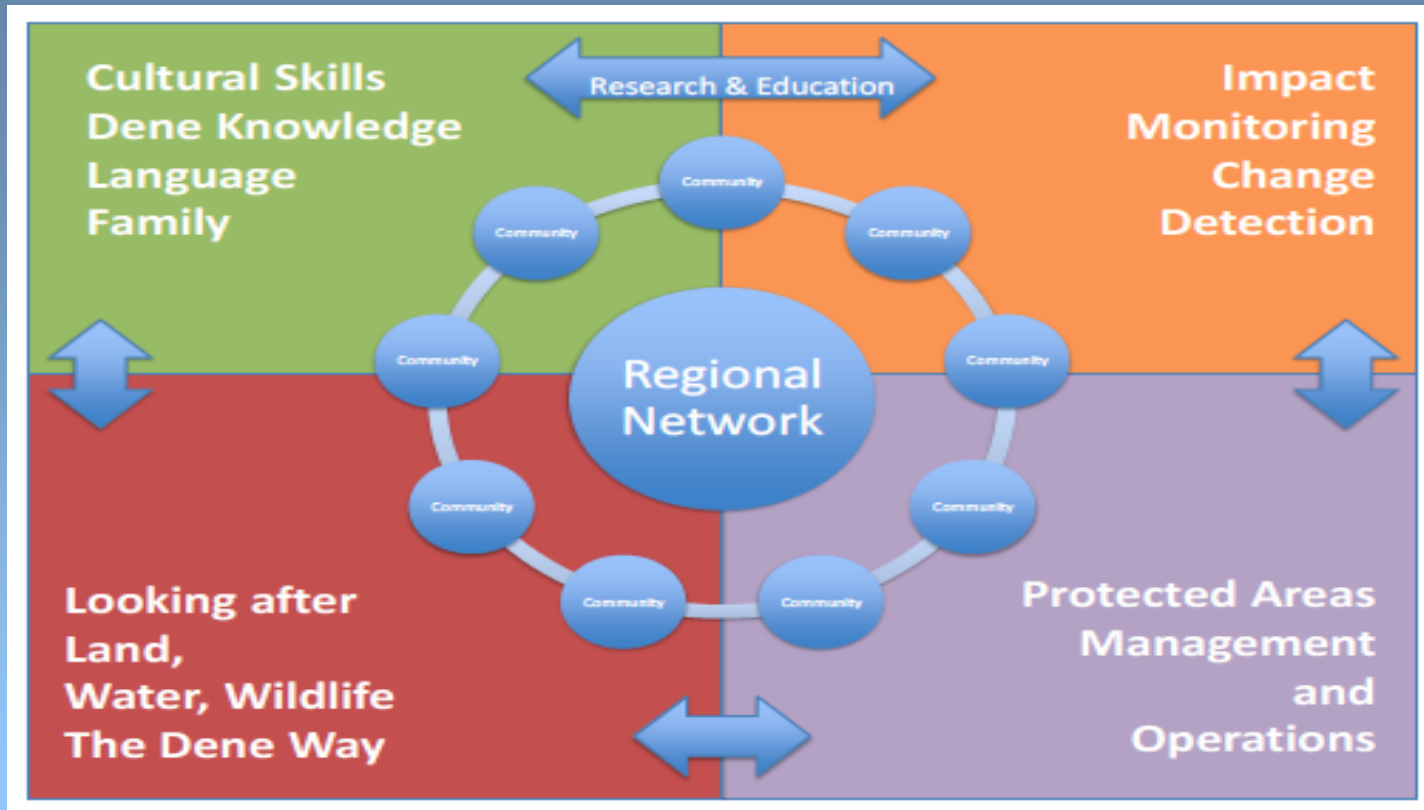
Responding to the perceived failure of the Protected Areas Strategy...

At the third Dehcho K'ehodi workshop, in December 2014, community members came to recognize:

*“That **the PAS was just a tool** to be used towards achieving their commitment to Dehcho K'ehodi, ‘Taking Care of the Land’”.*

*“This workshop concluded that the most effective way to resume traditionally held responsibilities for conserving the environment is to **get out on the land and practice our traditions...**”*

Taking Care of the Land:
K’ehodi Moving Forward Report (2015)



Taking Care of the Dehcho

Image developed for K'ehodi Moving Forward Report, by Larry Innes

Existing tools and opportunities

- Community-based water monitoring program:
 - ✧ Through the Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management Program (AAROM)
- A series of Dehcho First Nation and community-level initiatives to build upon:
 - ✧ Traditional knowledge surveys
 - ✧ On-the land camps for youth
 - ✧ Source water protection efforts, food security activities, harvester supports.

Challenges

- Multiple threats to DFN territory, many beyond their control, including rapid climate change.
- Current high rate of inter-generational language and culture loss, compounded by new technology.
- Land claim negotiations: drain on leadership, source of tensions and uncertainty
- Funding, and complicated relationships with the federal and territorial governments.
- Uneven preparedness, capabilities and resources across the region.



Ekali Lake camp, 2016

References

Alfred, T. (2015). Cultural Strength: Restoring the Place of Indigenous Knowledge in Practice and Policy. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, (1), 3–11.

Alfred, T. (2009). Colonialism and State Dependency. *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, 5(2), 42–60.

Corntassel, Jeff, & Bryce, C. (2012). Practicing Sustainable Self-Determination: Indigenous Approaches to Cultural Restoration and Revitalization. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 18(2), 151–162.

Coulthard, G. S. (2014). *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Simpson, L. (2011). *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. Winnipeg: ARP Books.

Acknowledgements

Dehcho First Nations

DFN community members and leaders

Wilfrid Laurier University