

REMEMBERING OUR RELATIONS: DĒNESUĻINÉ ORAL HISTORIES OF WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

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ISBN 978-1-77385-413-7

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The story of Wood Buffalo National Park and its impacts on the lives of Dënesų́nė people requires an introduction to the community's deep and longstanding relations to the lands and waterways taken up by the Park and the region. The Dene title for this chapter, meaning “we watch over/protect our land,” indicates the importance of these relations and of Dene stewardship over the land and water. In many of the oral histories shared in this book, Elders and members focus on the importance of the land and water and the life they support to the lives of the Dene people. Elder Jimmy Deranger's testimony powerfully communicated the extent and significance of the area that Dënesų́nė people consider their homeland and territories, and the deep connection the Dene have always had to it:

So that land is a huge, huge land, and it was Dënesų́nė land. And the Dënesų́nė people then, wherever they were, when people died, that's where they buried them, on the land . . . the Elders were saying that the land was made with Dene blood. And so, we asked how? They said, “wherever the Dene were traveling, wherever they died, they buried the people, and that blood went back into the land.” That's how the Dene land is recognized today. Because it was made by Dene blood wherever the blood went back into the land, all over the land. And [the Elders] were saying that the Dene people, the caribou, and the wolf are one person. And that's how the Dene people recognize themselves today in Dene lands. That's why they have a strong attachment to the land.

For the Dënesų́nė, the importance of the land, water, air, and the sentient and non-sentient relatives they sustain is not defined strictly economically, and their many ways of relating to and understanding the physical world are interconnected and must be understood holistically. The colonial natural resource management system imposed in the twentieth century stressed Dene

relations to the land and water, divided the environment into categories to be controlled, and dismissed and ignored Dene ways of knowing and being in their territory. Everything ties together in Dene worldviews: Elders and community members discussed the holistic importance of the lands, waters, and all living beings. Free and unimpeded access to homelands sustains people's health and well-being; supports livelihoods and local economies; provides physical, cultural, social and spiritual nourishment; underlies Dene law and governance; sustains widespread social and kinship relations; ensures the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, language and history; and safeguards cultural continuity. So, the creation, expansion and management of Wood Buffalo National Park had complex and long-term impacts on the Dēnesų́nė peoples who had, prior to the Park's existence, lived and moved freely in their homelands since time immemorial. In this chapter, Elders and members share their memories and their families' oral histories describing Dēnesų́nė relations to their extensive territories, as well as the ways these relations have changed over time.

The Dene people of the Athabasca River, Birch River, Peace River, Slave River and Gull River¹

The many names of the ancestors of ACFN shed light on the extent and significance of the lands and waterways the community has considered their homelands since time immemorial.² The name Etthen eldeli Dene indicates the vastness of Dene territories, which historically was defined by the migratory patterns of caribou herds. K'ái Tailé Dene translates roughly to the "real people of the land of the willows," referring to the low, woody shrub vegetation that grows throughout much of the Peace-Athabasca Delta, demonstrates the importance of this environment to Dene identities and lives.³ The language of Treaty 8 clearly indicates that the Dēnesų́nė lived, traveled, and depended on the lands in range of all the rivers in the region: commissioners referred in writing to "The Chipewyan Indians of Athabasca River, Birch River, Peace River, Slave River and Gull River."

The oral history and testimony shared in this chapter tells how Dēnesų́nė people lived, moved, harvested, and thrived far and wide. In 1974, one Fort Chipewyan Elder explained:

The people had trapped, hunted and fished around Lake Clair[e] and Mamawi as far back into the interior to the Birch Mountains.

The people who lived at Little Rapids had also trapped, hunted and fished around Lake Claire into the interior as far back to the Birch Mountain and Birch River. We lived at Jackfish Creek. We hunted, trapped and fish up to the Caribou Mountains. From Peace Point, we trapped and hunted to the Caribou Mountains.⁴

Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) Elder Mary “Cookie” Simpson, whose family resided at Peace Point for decades before they were forcibly transferred in 1944 to the Cree Band (Chapter 4), explained that when she was in residential school, children used to introduce each other by the names of places where they lived. She recalled Dene students saying they came from Gull River and Peace River. “They had homesteads all over the bush,” she said. One Elder explained to ACFN member and social worker Lori Stevens that the people traveled toward the Peace River along the Embarras River, following the Peace and Slave Rivers to trap beaver. “They all had that portion for where they would hunt beavers and whatnot. . . they used to go before the Park was created in the 1920s . . . that was all the area . . . everybody went there.» Oral histories and ethnohistorical studies tell us that that Dene homelands were not defined by boundaries until after the negotiation of Treaty 8 in 1899 and the establishment of the Park in 1922.⁵

“We are the land because the land is us”⁶

Oral histories and testimony tell us that the identities and lives of the Dene people are inextricable from their relations to their homelands. As Elder Alice Rigney eloquently explained, “we are the land because the land is us—that’s how we think of it. We are part of it.” She continues, “Water is life, and Mother Nature is who looks after us, but we have to look after her. And in between that, that’s where the work and the trust is needed.” Alice’s words tell us that Dënesųhíné relations to the land, water, and the life they support have always been marked by movement, active and responsible stewardship, trust, and reciprocity. Historically, Dene people traveled for much of the year in small groups for subsistence purposes and settled seasonally at other times of the year, usually near waterways like the Peace and Birch Rivers and Lakes such as Lake Claire, Lake Mamawi, and House Lake. ACFN member Scott Flett explained that people’s widespread movements on the land and water also kept them closely connected to kin, lands, and resources across vast distances, noting that the land is “all Dene.” He expands, “They just moved around,

eh—they didn't stay in one area. They probably went to . . . places where they could spend the winters and stuff like where there's food you know, there's fish, abundance of the wildlife, you know. They moved around, eh? Like they're all relatives, right?" Trails that ethnographer Laura Peterson and Dene and Cree Elders uncovered in WBNP in 2018 demonstrate that the area that became the Park was part of an extensive network of paths, harvesting grounds, and homelands that supported the seasonal subsistence movements and the kinship networks on which the people depended.⁷

Dene relations to the land and water have always been diverse and adaptive. Members and Elders described berry-picking, medicinal and other plant harvesting, hunting, trapping, fishing, and gardening as critical subsistence practices that have upheld families and the community throughout the centuries. The Dene people historically harvested caribou and other large game like moose and bison, as well as migratory birds and smaller mammals like rabbits and fur-bearing animals like beaver, mink, and muskrat. Beginning in the late-eighteenth and into the mid-twentieth centuries, trapping fur-bearing animals became both a way of life and a living for Dene people. Elder Big John Marcel said that trapping was for him both subsistence and income. From his own experience he recalled: "this area was my bank, eh. When I was young, whenever I was broke, I would hitch up my dogs and I'd go to our reserve and I'd set traps and I'd killed a couple hundred rats. You know, and I'd come back in town and I'd sell it, I'd sell it to buy the stuff that I need. And it was my bank for me." Elder Jimmy Deranger similarly explained, "When you fly to Fort Chip, look down there. That's our bank. When you look on the land that you're flying into Fort Chip, you look all around, as long as your eye can see. That's our bank. Your bank is Bank of Montreal." Dene people have also always picked berries, fished on the small lakes, and traded along the rivers. These ways of relating to lands and waters have not only sustained people's lives but also have kept the community connected across the territories. Many of the oral testimonies in this chapter also suggests that maintaining connections to the land has been key to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. It upholds Dēnesų́né ways of living, being, and knowing. For example, Elder Alice Rigney said that her grandmother, Ester Piché, was happy and healthy living near Lake Claire, picking berries and medicines, drying fish, and sharing knowledge with her children: "she made her medicines and passed all this knowledge on. And some of that knowledge is passed on to me."



Fig. 1.1 *Hudson's Bay Company post, Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, 1919*, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary, CU1108601.

As Alice's oral history suggests, the lands and waters are like a pharmacy, where people go to gather medicines—sustaining Dene people's mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical health and well-being. Elders' testimony indicates that Dene people harvested salt from the salt flats, gathered birch, and also harvested the medicinal, spiritual, and cultural resources the Delta and surrounding area sustains. Scott Flett explained that the people "had certain areas to get their medicines and stuff, eh. Rat Roots and lavender tea and stuff like that is harvested." Elder Ed Trippe de Roche and Keltie Paul also described the environment as a place to heal: a "hospital," a "retreat," a "spa," and somewhere to "get away from it all," and reflect on life. Elders told researcher Laura Peterson in 2018 that they survived the violence and trauma of residential schools by getting out to the land when they returned home.⁸ Edouard Trippe de Roche recalled that when he was a child in residential school, summers spent on the land were a retreat, a time to heal and

reconnect: “everybody wanted to get out [of residential school],” he said, “we wanted to go back to the land, you know . . . This was, the life we all wanted, and we were taken away from it. That’s the retreat we’d get after ten months in the residential school.”

Reliant on the land and waterways as they always have been, Dene people have practiced responsible stewardship. Elder Pat Marcel wrote that they “always had the responsibility of living in balance with the natural environment.”⁹ Elders think of the land and water as living and sentient, and of their relations to the land and water not just as “land use” but as kinship. Healthy relations with non-human kin are reciprocal and respectful. The Dënesųhné engaged in controlled burning, for example, and studied the migration and breeding patterns of game and fowl to determine appropriate harvesting seasons. Until they were outlawed under the settler land management regime in the twentieth century, Dene controlled burning practices and other such relations of care are “part of a holistic system of ecosystem stewardship” which exemplifies how, as Cardinal-Christianson et. al. put it, the Indigenous Peoples of this region have always “understood that humans were not the only agents of change in the boreal forest.”¹⁰ Ethnographic research that Henry Lewis and Theresa Ferguson did with Indigenous harvesters in northern Alberta in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated that Indigenous Peoples of the northern boreal forest, including the Dënesųhné, deeply understood the “systemic, relational effects of burning . . . [and were] well aware of the highly variable ecological relationships . . . resulting from [both] natural and man-made fires.”¹¹ These seasonal patterns and respectful practices across a vast and rich landscape have ensured that Indigenous Peoples lived healthy lives and maintained social connections and kinship networks throughout the territory from one generation to the next.

Intertwined with these stewardship practices of actively and respectfully tending the environment are Dene laws of sharing. Elders emphasized that Dene people take care of each other and of strangers in times of need by living in respectful relation to the land and water and sharing what they have. ACFN member Leslie Laviolette explained, “You know, the sharing part is: we take what we need, and if we have too much, we go give our Elders that taught us all these tools.” As Dene laws state, sharing “is an umbrella law; under it sit all the other laws. It was of absolute importance that people share what they had long ago for survival. Share all the big game you kill. Share fish if you catch more than you need for yourself and there are others who don’t have

any.” Helping flows from this: “Help others cut their wood and other heavy work. Help sick people who are in need; get them firewood if they need it. Visit them and give them food. When you lose someone in death, share your sorrows with the relatives who are also affected by the loss. Help out widows as much as possible and take care of orphaned children.”¹² Dene laws depend on sharing, helping, and living in loving relation with the land and water, and with all human and non-human kin. Under Dene law, living in good relations with the land and water is closely interconnected with living in reciprocal and caring relationships with community and kin.

Dene places taken up by the Park

Oral histories and archaeological evidence point to many places of importance to the Dēnesųhné within what are now the boundaries of the Park. Most frequently in their oral histories, Elders described Dene settlements along the Birch River (near Lake Claire), and at Peace Point on the Peace River, where Dene families resided and harvested for centuries and eventually built permanent settlements in the eighteenth century. As the fur trade grew, Dene seasonal movements shifted to align with a growing emphasis on fur trapping, and to eventually make use of seasonal wage labour opportunities such as commercial fisheries or sawmills. People began to settle more permanently and in larger groups to be closer to the trading centres, including the Hudson’s Bay Company Posts in Fort Chipewyan and Fort McMurray and the other economic and social opportunities that were arising. For example, oral histories tell us that Dene people lived and harvested near Lake Claire for generations, and it is likely that the settlements expanded in the late 1700s and early 1800s after the Northwest Company built a wintering fur trade post at the mouth of the Birch River. Some Elders indicated that the growing power of the colonial wildlife and resource management system also pushed people to settle more permanently in or near the towns and posts. In the oral testimony shared in this chapter, Elders vividly recall some of those settlements, or what their parents and grandparents told them about it. Their relatives were born there, harvested there, married there, and were buried there.

Dēnesųhné families shared space at Peace Point with the local Mikisew Cree community (which became MCFN) before the forced membership transfer of 1944. Members of the Simpson family, who are of Dēnesųhné heritage, described Isidore Simpson’s homestead at Peace Point. The family built a two-storey home there in the 1920s before they (excepting one

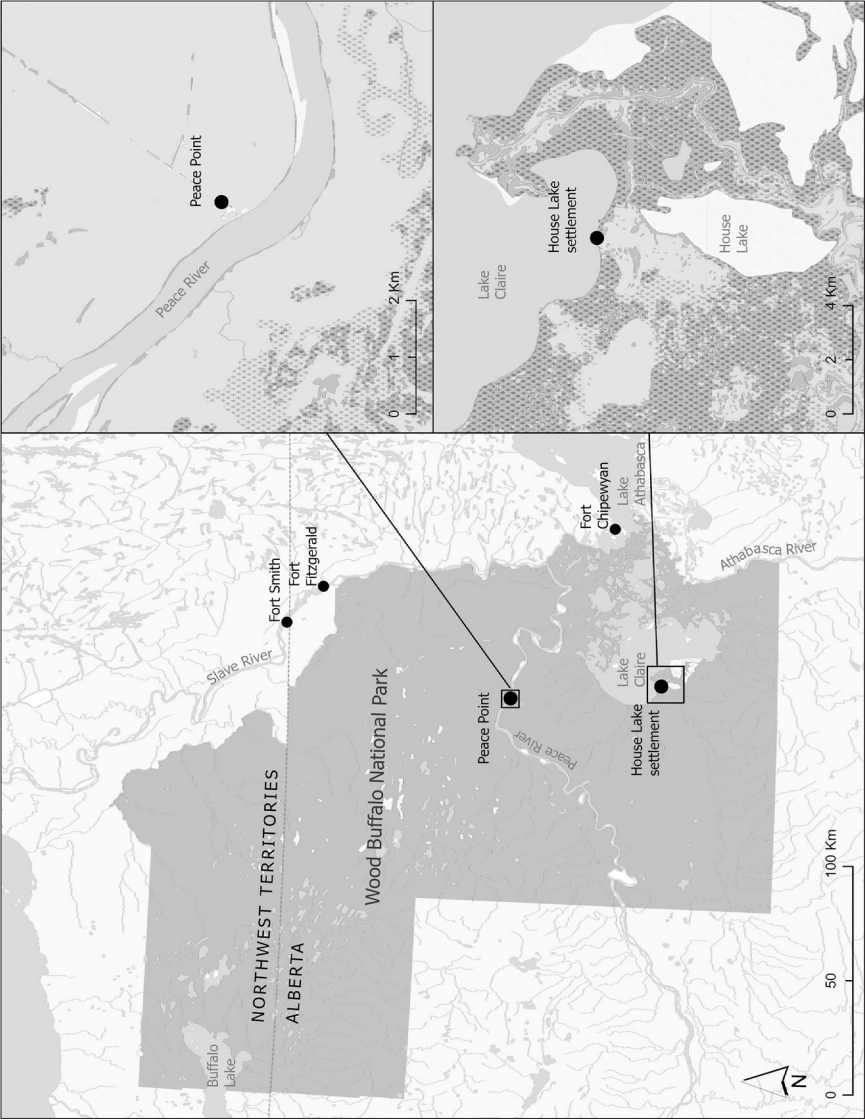


Fig. 1.2 Map of settlements at House Lake and Peace Point. Map produced by Emily Boak, Willow Springs Strategic Solutions, 2021.



Fig. 1.3 *A Dene encampment at Fort Chipewyan, pre-1921*, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary, CU1108812.

daughter, Elizabeth Flett [née Simpson]) were transferred to the Cree Band. One Simpson family member stated that Dēnesųhné people lived throughout Peace Point (along with a few Cree Band members) and had homesteads all the way up the trail to Fort Chipewyan. ACFN Elder Dora Flett recalled that her mother lived at Peace Point but was forced to move to Old Fort after the 1926 Park annex; some of her relatives even moved as far away as Saskatchewan. Dene people also established settlements, lived, traveled, harvested, and tended the land throughout other parts of what became the Park, including at Moose Island (sometimes called Carlson's Landing), Egg Lake, Lake Mamawi and Dene Lake, and at other places along the Athabasca, Birch, Gull, Peace, and Slave Rivers, along the Caribou Mountains, and as far south as the Birch Mountains, about 80 kilometres from the southeast corner of the Park. Fort McMurray Elder Ray Ladouceur explained, "Oh, they were all over back there, eh? Gull River, up the Peace River, you know. They did well for themselves, them Dene in those days, eh? Surviving on the land." He continues, "Lake Claire, Lake Mamawi, they'd fish in those areas . . . like way down the bay and all over, you know. Sweetgrass . . . it was good. It was survival, you know."



Fig. 1.4 Map of places of cultural importance taken up by the Wood Buffalo National Park. Map produced by Emily Boak and Michael Robson, Willow Springs Strategic Solutions, 2023.

Two Dënesų́né settlement sites were also built southwest of the Birch River Delta, between Lake Claire and House Lake, and along the southern shore of Lake Claire. In 2011, archaeological studies demonstrated that Dene people had settled in two places: “one near Spruce Point on Lake Claire and the other along an intermittent creek close to the north shore of House Lake.”¹³ The area was rich and abundant: “The House Lake settlements at Birch River are located in an area containing variable and plentiful resources, such as water-fowl, fish, abundant fur bearing animals and large mammals.”¹⁴ People built cabins and houses (which were later burned down by park officials) and grew gardens at these settlements. Culturally modified trees, depressions, foundations, refuse pits, and trails are all markers of longstanding Dene presence there.¹⁵ Materials uncovered at the sites included things residents would have used daily, such as lanterns, wash tubs, kitchen wares, tools, gramophones, and other household items.¹⁶ Dene people lived and harvested at these settlements until they were evicted from the Park. Oral histories and some archival sources also indicate that people were living and harvesting there well into the 1930s. For example, Supervising Park Warden M.J. Dempsey wrote in 1930 that there were Dene people still living and working in the Birch River area at that time: “there are frames for drying meat at many places and camping places are numerous.” He also noted signs of beaver, as well as the tracks of moose, deer, bear, fox, mink, and skunk and signs of hawks. The warden recommended increased surveillance because of the presence of Dene people who strongly opposed the possibility of more wardens at their settlements and rich harvesting areas.¹⁷ Some of the oral histories shared in this book relate family stories about the settlements at Birch River. Even though life was hard sometimes, people thrived and lived with joy at their settlements and surrounding homelands.

Some Elders also point to Dene graves and cemeteries throughout and beyond the boundaries of the Park. Leslie Laviolette mentions Dene sites at Moose Island (near Peace Point), and Elder Fredoline Deranger/Djeskelni points to “another small settlement at the Dene Lake, which is west of Birch River, its higher elevation, maybe fifteen, or maybe twenty miles. It’s a small lake, but . . . there’s settlements, there’s graves all over, there’s even tombstones all over the place too.”¹⁸ As Djeskelni’s oral testimony implies, graves and cemeteries help keep the Dene people connected to their homelands. The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) undertook an archaeological survey of marked and unmarked gravesites throughout RMWB in 2010.

Twenty-one gravesites were identified within the boundaries of the Park.¹⁹ Oral testimony confirms that many of these, including graves located at Lake Claire, along the Birch and Peace Rivers, at Moose Island, Lake Mamawi, and Quatre Fourches are Dene sites. The gravesites are evidence of the widespread and longstanding Dēnesų́nė presence in and beyond the lands and waterways that became part of the Park. They also commemorate the devastating history of epidemics and residential schools that ravaged Dene communities in the twentieth century.

Colonial changes and shifting relations to the land

Elder Josephine Mercredi lamented in 1998 that people were suffering because they no longer lived freely from the land. “It would be better to live like old times,” she said, “to live off the lake—the land. The children used to listen to you. We used to all pray before bed. If things were the same, my children might have been still alive, better off.”²⁰ ACFN Elder Rene Bruno explained in 2010 that, living off the land as they had always done, people had been healthy, happy and self-sufficient.

Everything was good then—the water, the land. Now everything is polluted. Lots of muskrat in the past—people had lots of money all year round from the winter trapping. Didn’t spend money foolishly. They weren’t lazy, they worked hard . . .

Years ago, the people lived off the land. They knew everything, how to survive. No one can do things the way people used to do things. Nowadays, people go to the university, but they don’t know anything about the bush life. Long ago, people knew everything, they worked hard.²¹

The changes to the way of life Josephine and Rene pointed to were combined outcomes of the many colonial processes, institutions, and policies taking shape after the signing of Treaty 8, and especially after the establishment of the Park in 1922.

As some Elders emphasized during their interviews, residential schools were central to the changes to Dene ways of life, connections to place, and sense of identity. Because children were forced into residential schools, they were unable to spend as much time on the land; for several generations, the connections to the land and intergenerational transfer of knowledge

was severed. Devastating epidemics in the 1920s and 1930s also affected these connections. The decline of the fur trade, the catastrophic effects of the W.A.C. Bennett Dam, and the combined effects of extreme extraction in Dene territories have also had significant impacts on the ways that the Dene people relate to the land and water and all life they support. The colonial conservation regime throughout the twentieth century resulted in what Cardinal-Christianson et. al. described as “cultural severance . . . an act, intentional or not, that functionally disrupts relationships between people and the land” by repressing and criminalizing Dene ways of life and stewardship practices.²² As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7, the convergence of these colonial shifts combined with Park exclusions and policies and the 1944 transfer to the Cree First Nation to radically transform Dene people’s connections to their homelands and knowledge. The way of life and prosperity of the Dënesų́hné people was further interrupted twenty-three years after Treaty 8 was signed, when the Park was created. Yet, even through great change, the Elders maintain that the Dënesų́hné people have always been resourceful and adaptive while maintaining their deep-rooted relations to the land. As Alice Rigney said, “we are very resilient people. We are still here and will still be here.”²³ Despite devastating changes and colonial attempts at eliminating the way of life in Dene territories, people continued to live as they had always done—though, as the chapters that follow will show, their lives were restricted significantly by the Park and wildlife management regulations.

Conclusion

Living seasonally on the land, moving freely throughout a vast and rich territory, adapting to change over time, and sharing and taking care of the land and each other, the Dënesų́hné were affluent, healthy, and happy until the Park was created in 1922.²⁴ Marie Josephine Mercredi explained in 1998, “I barely remember how happy the people used to be, enjoying our livelihood. The babies did not cry. [We] would all get together in one place and tell stories, jokes and have a great time, everyone was happy.”²⁵

Wood Buffalo National Park takes up a substantive area in the massive homelands of the Dënesų́hné. Its boundaries and harvesting rules have impeded Dene people’s ways of life, interrupted relations to the land, water, and stewardship practices, and eroded Dene sovereignty. In addition, evictions from settlements within the Park have had a significant impact on the community. Some Dënesų́hné families residing along the Birch River, at the

House Lake and Peace Point settlements, and harvesting elsewhere in the Park, lost access to their family homes, gravesites, spiritual and cultural sites, gardens, and harvesting areas. As Elder Alice Rigney emphasized when reviewing a draft of this book, the Dene people of the Peace-Athabasca Delta region lived a vibrant, healthy, and mobile lifestyle prior to colonization and the Park's establishment.

The oral histories and testimony shared in this chapter reflect on Dënesųłné relations to the land, water and sentient and non-sentient relatives, as well as the ways in which these relations have shifted over time. ACFN members and Elders tell about seasonality and stewardship, people's movements throughout the wider territory, harvesting practices, kinship connections, Dene laws, and senses of belonging and identity. The oral history and testimony shared here underline the importance of maintaining strong and fluid connections to Dene homelands and ways life. They also help us understand the profound implications of Wood Buffalo National Park on those connections, which have been undermined and interrupted through the Park's creation, expansion, and management.

ORAL HISTORY

Alec Bruno and Charlie Mercredi (2015)

During this interview for ACFN's Dene Laws Project, Charlie Mercredi shared his oral history in Dene. In the written transcription that follows, Alec Bruno translates Charlie Mercredi's message. A digital audio recording of Charlie Mercredi's oral history in Dene is available online.²⁶



Alec: What Charlie is saying is we, the three of us here, we live off the land and because when you live out on the land and not in town here, you do things for yourself, everything. You learned to hunt, fish, and anything for your way of life out on the land. You don't have much time to have fun. Not too much. The only time we shared our time together was in the evening. One place we sit and, you know have fun, tell jokes and stuff. That's the only time. In the daytime we were doing something.

What he is saying is that because we've done it that way, we knew how to survive out on the land. Today kids are not like that because they live in town, and they don't go out on to the land too often. Last fall there was a couple of boys who went boating and they were lost for two or three days I think, and we had to go looking for them, and all this time they just ran out of gas. They didn't take enough gas, I guess. They had to go look for them and brought them back. Stuff like that. Nothing like that ever happened to us when we were out on the land. We knew where we had to go. That's the difference today and fifty years ago. This is what we found. So, his [Charlie Mercredi's] story, when you hear his story, it will be pretty well all the same. I trapped in a different area than him. Rene trapped in a different area than him, but at the end of the day it's all the same thing. Over and over, we hunt, we trap, we fish, and you know, we did everything that you have to do on the land.

So with that, when I first started trapping with my dad, I was fifteen, and when we got out on the land, on the trap line, he said 'one day, my son, you have to watch everything I do. If you're not sure, ask me any question but not too many questions. If you watch me, you will learn, and you won't have to talk too much.' That's the way he taught me, and the first thing you do when you're on the land, he said, everything you see around you—trees, lakes, rivers, ice, snow—whatever is there, you have to use it all to survive out here

on the land and you have to respect it. The first thing you do is respect the land. Take care of the land and the land will take care of you. This is the way he put it to me. I always followed that. Always remembered his words when I started travelling by myself. And when I had my two boys, I started taking them out. I took them out of school and to the lake. It's about 100 kilometers away from here, in the middle of the winter. It wasn't easy for them but they both did well, and I didn't take them both at the same time. Only one boy at a time. They learned lots from that. I taught them what my dad taught me. How to hunt, how to trap and also, I told them about respect for the land and also respect the animals that you are hunting. It's just that the way life that was meant for you was to use the land, animals, everything, and you have to respect everything. Always thank it. My dad used to say when you kill a moose or a caribou, always thank the land for providing you with this animal. You killed it, he offered his life to feed you. That's why you killed it.

And that's how it is for everything for life out on the land, and you always watch everything you do, even when you're travelling. You hit a lake you've never been on before, or you were there last winter, this winter could be thin ice or something, you run out there and check the ice and make sure it's safe before you cross, same with the river. Everything you do, you have to think before you do it. Especially cutting wood. You cut wood with an ax. We didn't have power back then, all we had is an ax and if you didn't take care of that ax, you could chop yourself and hurt yourself pretty bad. And if you were that many miles back, then by yourself, it's not easy. When we had dog teams it was different. Dog team would take you home. Skidoo—no. Skidoo is fast but if you break down that far back and you have no parts what are you gonna do? You're going to have to walk. And if you got sick or cut yourself, what you going to do? You know, things like that, you have to learn before you do it so it doesn't happen. Those are the things that my dad taught me.

And the best thing, I always remember, always look after the land with respect and everything should be good for you and that's the law of the land. That I learned from him. Today, Western science, don't understand our laws and they don't record it, but I think we should be listened to by you guys and learn where we are coming from and where we would like to take this story to one day down the road. That's what I want from this interview thing . . . That way everybody will understand the Dene law. Dene law is not so much in words. All you could say is Dene law is to live off the land and take care of the

land and take care of yourself and respect the animals and everything, other than that what more can I tell you?

Alec Bruno

During an interview for the 2015 Dene Laws project, Elders Alec Bruno and Rene Bruno discussed living off the land and Dene ways of life in the Dene language. A digital audio recording of their conversation in Dene is available online.²⁷



Another story my mom used to tell me: Long ago, this was before the white man came to this world, everybody used to live on the land, summer and winter. And there was one old man who used to live with his people and told the people before he died, ‘we’re lucky, everything is good on the land right now. Lots of caribous, moose, fish, and all these things, you know.’ But he said—I could see he was the kind of person who foresees the future—he told people, ‘I see,’ he said, ‘down the road, many years from now, the food that we eat off the land, that same food will kill us.’

And that’s what’s happening now. See how these people can predict things like that, foresee things. We never had that kind of knowledge cause already things were changing. How did they know these things? I don’t know. I used to ask my dad about it, and he said well, that’s the way people were long ago, they lived off the land, they lived on the land, they’re out there hunting the animals and they are living with the animals, that’s what they are. That’s how we address Dene people, they are living just like animals themselves, living on the land. You never see white people or nothing, never got food by the store. Just eat meat, fish, whatever. Yeah, that was a long time ago and then when the Creator started coming in and started creating food and everything, everything changed. Totally everything changed, then the guns came along and everything.

Long ago, they just used arrows and spears to kill. See how tough life was? But they were happy because they had a lot of animals to eat. For them, they know how to eat. Today, now, [if] you have to go into the bush to kill a moose with a spear—you’ll never eat. That’s the difference I think, the way I understand the people back then, years ago, and today. What changed the people was the Western science.

Fredoline Deranger/Djeskelni (19 March 2021)

There was a settlement in Birch River and there was also another small settlement at the Dene Lake, which is west of Birch River. It's higher elevation, maybe fifteen, or maybe twenty miles. It's a small lake, but if you Google it, it will come up as Dene on that lake. And there's settlements, there's graves all over, there's even tombstones all over the place too.

We were all over. I talked to an Elder about Quatre Fourches when he was just a little guy. He said he went there to look after dogs after breakup, in June, I think. And he said it was only Dënesųłné there, nobody else. Dënesųłné came from the north, south, east, and west. They all came to the Delta. And they spend the summer in the Delta hunting, visiting, and preparing for the winter . . . I'm interested in the Dene names who were living there. Not living there but who were there because the Dene did not live anywhere – they lived on the whole land. They traveled and lived on the land from season to season.

Jimmy Deranger (24 March 2021).

During his interview, Jimmy Deranger shared the following oral history in Dene and then translated it into English. A digital audio recording of this oral history in Dene, with the English translation (which is transcribed below), is available online.²⁸



When the land was there 15,000 years ago, there was the Barrenland Dene who was using the land right at the tree line. And they would go to the Northwest Territories, into the tundra. And then they would go back in the tree line—that's where they lived. That's where they were. And then they went further south. There was Dene that lived in the bush. They were the Dene [of] the Bush. And that's where they lived. And then there was other Dene that lived around the lakes, way up in the Northwest Territories and also Lake Athabasca and around Hatchet Lake [Saskatchewan] and Haylong Lake and Head Lake. All the Dënesųłné that lived around those big lakes. And then there were Great River Dene people. Like the Slave River, Athabasca River, Fond du Lac River, Stony Rapids River, those are big rivers that the Dene used to live around at those shores, at those lakes too. And then there's Birch Mountain Dene who live around the Birch Mountain area. So, there were five groups of Dene people living in these areas and then on the land which was

northern BC, Alberta, northern Alberta and northern Manitoba. And then there's southern Inuit which was, some years ago, was Northwest Territories but now it's Inuit. Then Northwest Territories, some in Northwest Territories.

So that land is a huge, huge land, and it was Dënesų́łné land. And the Dënesų́łné people then, wherever they were, when people died, that's where they buried them, on the land. There's graves all over that land. And others at that time was saying even to this very day, to quite recent like in the late 1990s, the Elders were saying that the land was made with Dene blood. And so, we asked how? They said, wherever the Dene were travelling, wherever they died, they buried the people, and that blood went back into the land. That's how the Dene land is recognized today. Because it was made by Dene blood. Wherever the blood went back into the land, all over the land. And they were saying that the people, the caribou, and the wolf are one—are one person. And that's how the Dene people recognize themselves today in Dene lands. That's why they have a strong attachment to the land. There's so many things I heard in the Dene language, I'll probably be the last person that ever heard it . . .

And even though there were five groups of Dene people, the ones that [were] really up north – Barrenland Dene and Bush Dene, and the Great Lakes Dene, and the Great Rivers Dene, and the Birch Mountain Dene, they travelled. They always did meet each other, somewhere on Dene lands to exchange information about how they are living, about hunting, trapping, and where their food is and where other people have met other people. So, there was always interaction between them over the centuries. They always have been there. The only person that were new were the traders that came into the region, to Hudson Bay. And then the Hudson Bay traders just allowed us to be on our land as owners of the land. They recognized that we were the owners of the land. And then the missionaries came after. And then geologists came after. And then the settlers came after. Each group had a different view of land. But the Dene people always had their same view.

Dora Flett (19 March 2021)

I never heard of anyone going hungry. Long ago, there was no border. You could go anywhere you want. Nobody says, “you're there, you're there, you're there.” You're just free going, no border, nothing.

My dad made a sleigh out of birch trees. You would get a big piece of birch, about five inches, a big piece. Take three like that that are two inches,

and then he put them in the water for one week so he could bend it. The head of the sleigh, to bend it. They made everything their own.

It was good; we lived off the land long ago. Nobody really had a house, they lived in a tent. Some of them lived in a tent all year round. They had dog teams in the winter. In the summer we could go by boat all over, but in the winter, we used dog teams. We could kill moose and make dry meat, or we could catch fish and make dry fish. There was no fridge in the bush.

Scott Flett (17 March 2021)

That whole area was like, they signed a treaty, like I said—Birch River, Gull River, south of Lake Claire also. The whole side of the south of Lake Athabasca and Lake Claire and stuff, that was all Dene territory, eh. It's all Dene.

Well, they were kind of nomads back in the day, yeah? They just moved around, they didn't stay in one area. They probably went to places where they could spend the winters and stuff. Like where there's food you know, there's fish, abundance of the wildlife. They moved around, eh? Like they're all relatives, right?

Yeah, there were [seasonal] cycles. Like this is the fur hub, used to be the fur hub of the country. This Fort Chip, all the rats, muskrats, just everything comes out to here, pretty plentiful. That's why probably Fort Chipewyan was established because of the fur trade. But, yeah, like I said, I think [19]74 there was a big flood in the spring and then [19]78 I think it was a couple of times it flooded in certain areas. But last year the whole thing flooded and now we have to start over cause everything all flooded so, all those little surviving things, the cycle for say, the little mice and stuff. A lot of animals will depend on mice to eat. Foxes and martens and all this, wolves. So those are gone. Yeah, the Delta here is even migratory birds like in the springtime, man, used to fly, lots used to fly through here in the Spring and that's when people harvested most of all their birds for the summer and for the whole winter, eh? Geese and stuff. And then last year was the, the flyways are changing. Their migratory routes are changing. I don't know where they're going, I think somebody said they're going more up Lake Athabasca, and they're probably coming in from Saskatchewan, coming up that way. So, they're coming through Alberta and a lot of people said it's the oil sands, all the smog from the oil sands and stuff. They're not flying through; they're going around it.

There's lots [of ACFN Ancestors and relatives] buried in and around the Park. I think there's a cemetery at the Moose [Island] or something over

there, too, with Dene people. They found a gravesite, like graveyard. Yeah, there was a lot of people, Dene people's thing in that area and stuff. And there was lots of people, they moved around here and there all over the place, but a lot of people stayed right there. Back in the day there was no TV or communication. Maybe they had a radio back in the day but there was nothing to inform about.

Ray Ladouceur (18 March 2021)

Oh, they were all over back there, eh? The Gull River, up the Peace River, you know, they did well for themselves, them Dene in those days, eh? Surviving on the land. And there were some in our part of the country, in Old Fort, there's Dene. You go [to] Old Fort and then Jackfish [is a] Dene place, and there's Dene there. They survived, you know. . . .

I can't kick on the life of the past you know, there was a little hardship, but we survived. Especially, they'd help one another, the Dene and the Crees there, and the Métis, you know. They helped one another. Nobody goes hungry. If somebody goes by, somebody who's got no meat, they fed him. That I've seen myself. One time there's an old man there and hardly any food. My dad and I were going out hunting inland, I was sixteen years old. I camped there. On the way back, I brought him one caribou. One caribou, one dog team. Holy man, was he ever happy. He had meat now, you know. Yeah, that's the way we did. We helped one another. You don't go by a place with people going hungry, you give them meat. People used to be happy, some of those old Dene, because we always helped one another. Going hungry? Somebody'd feed us. Especially the Elders. They used to be real good hunters. Now, when they're old they couldn't hunt, they couldn't do nothing for themselves. There's people out there helping one another, the Dene helped those Elders. Go hunt for them, cut wood for them—for survival. And those people used to be a hell of a good hunters, but as you get old what are you going to do?

Leslie Laviolette (22 March 2021)

We just took what we needed. And if we got more, well, we'd pass it on to our Elders. That guided us in our day, how to hunt, and gotta feed back to other people. You know, the sharing part is we take what we need, and if we have too much, we go give [to] our Elders that taught us all these tools.

Big John Marcel (18 March 2021)

JM: Well, as far as I know, it was all in that area because there used to be lots of muskrats and stuff at that time in that area, so everybody was trapping rats.

When I was younger and when we were living in Jackfish Lake, we did a lot of trapping. When I was young, this area was my bank. When I was young, whenever I was broke, I would hitch up my dogs and I'd go to our reserve and I'd set traps and I killed a couple hundred rats and I come back in town and sell it to buy the stuff that I need, and it was my bank for me. That's the way I always had it. You know, I was young, that was my bank for me.

ST: So did you catch a lot?

JM: Oh, yeah. Well, we used to go out when they had open season and the best season at that time was in May. We usually go out in May, and we don't come back till open water eh, back to Chip.

ST: Did you go hunting, as well?

JM: Well, of course! You know that's how we did [it] a long time ago.

ST: Yeah.

JM: Well, yeah, we hunt all the time. Either we'll get some moose, or we get some birds when they first come in. You know, that was our lives.

ST: So, what about when they made all the rules about hunting, did that change things when they made the park?

JM: Well, in the parks it sure did, but our area, we trapped there at all times. That was our area. You know, used to be all, mostly all, the families that lived around the area. They had their own trapline, and you know everybody helped each other.

Marie Josephine Mercredi (1998)

It would be better to live like old times, live off the lake—the land. The children used to listen to you. We used to all pray before bed. If things were the same, my children might have been still alive, better off.

We used to live pretty good. People used to travel out on the land. The babies were carried on the back of women, in a papoose. They would make warm blankets to wrap the baby in when they traveled. You could hear the babies breathing. Babies must have been tough. The people were nomadic, where they went to camp, they would scrape snow to set up camps, teepees. They would stand the baby against a tree and pitch tents; some were hung in

a tree off a branch. The babies were good. They were so quiet; they would sit and watch the people set up camp.

I barely remember how happy the people used to be, enjoying our livelihood. The babies did not cry. They would all get together in one place and tell stories, jokes and have a great time. Everyone was very happy.

Traders would come from Fort McMurray to bring supplies; mail was brought by dog team or horses. Dog team and horses traveled the same pace; this same method was probably used between Edmonton and Fort McMurray. A dance would be held along the Athabasca River, wherever the traders stopped to camp when they hauled freight, between Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan.

Victorine Mercredi (1998)

The land was their land, nobody was chief—they lived the way they wanted. There was no such thing as chiefs. Men were equal. Usually, a woman was chosen to be the leader of a group that traveled together. The one picked usually was most knowledgeable about the land. The group would combine their food and eat together. If someone did not have something they shared. People helped one another.

Keltie Paul (25 November 2020)

But where the people used to live and hunt, on the Peace River side, it was mostly the Cree who were in there but there were Chipewyan coming in and out. And before the park, there weren't registered traplines. So, they'd come in and choose a trap line or hook up with some distant relative, or if they saw smoke from a cabin, they knew that they couldn't trap in that area, so they'd move on to another area. So, often down there, there was a mixture of people coming in and out because there was really a global economy that they were involved in, basically the Hudson's Bay Company.

And the area that we're looking at is really a shopping cart for pharmaceuticals. It is also the most extensive, outside of the northwest coast, bio-diverse area in Canada. It had geese, and moose, and woodland caribou, barren caribou, you name it, it's in there. So, this was a place that people had access to quite a bit of food. There was always bison to hunt, snowshoe hare was a particularly large part of the diet.

And the cultural and spiritual significance of the land—that was their land. That was their ancestral land. That was the land they were born on. And

you and I know what it's like to be born on something, born on a farm or born into a community. That's what it means to us. You can imagine what it would have meant to people who were actually living off the land, who saw spirits into all kinds of things like the water, the mighty Peace [River], the Athabasca [River]. And to have things happen like that, and being kicked out of their own land, it's akin to what happened with the Israelis and the Palestinians quite frankly, and I think that's disgusting. So, they really uprooted an entire culture and took them from everything. Landscape is important to people. It's important to you and me. When people go through a tornado, they come out and the landscape is gone, they go into shock. They just wander around the community, just shocking. And that's what it means to all people, is the landscape matters, the fish matter, the frog matters, everything matters because that's what we are familiar with. We love that. We're so connected too, and if someone comes and steals that from us, then I mean, that's going to shock us for generations and generations because they've stolen. They've stolen, really, paradise. They've stolen Eden from those people who had been there, I don't know, long, long, long, long, long, long ago—eons.

And the pharmaceuticals—I don't know if you know, but there's a massive study of pharmaceuticals that were used at that time in the North. It's huge. And it's a really great thing. And I mean, those were things that were the comfort of the people. The things that would comfort the sore throat, to fix the body, fix the hematoma. My mother-in-law, Edouard's mother,²⁹ was an expert in that. I used to follow her around whenever she went to get stuff because Edouard has all sorts of colitis, so she needed things to fix him when he was in the hospital. And, I mean, the way that she moved through the forest, through the muskeg, to everything, to bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, picking up all of these things that would be able to make him better, to cure him. I mean, can you imagine if you were kicked out and didn't have any pharmacy? That's outrageous.

Alice Rigney (16 March 2021)

In this passage, Alice discusses her granny, Ester Piche, who was born, raised, and married at one of the Birch River settlements. Her family was forced to relocate after the 1944 band membership transfer (see Chapter 4). Alice's memories of her granny are about time spent at Jackfish Lake.



Fig. 1.5 Ester Adam (*née Piché*), *Drying Fish, Trap-line, Ft. Chipewyan, summer 1952*. Provincial Archives of Alberta, A17153.

If I was to put myself in my granny's shoes, she had to make clothes for her children. She used rabbit skin to make jackets and caribou hides to make clothing, moose hides for moccasins, because you couldn't go buy these things. So, she utilized the land wherever she was. . . .

Yeah, you know, my granny died when I was still a young woman and I never really got to—she used to tell me stories when I was little. And she spoke only Dene, and I understood but I didn't speak it, so I lost her stories. But she probably was telling me stories about how strong she was because she only had two daughters and my mom from a first marriage. And then her husband died, and she remarried and had another daughter and her husband died. And so, she raised her daughters and trapped, and there's talk about [how] she was a midwife. She was fairly tall, and she was the matriarch. I mean if you slouched over, she would make you sit up straight .

She was always busy. She loved, in the summertime, when I stayed with her. She would have a little tent set up. And in the morning, she'd make a little fire outside and sit by the fire and make her tea and would have tea and bannock for breakfast. And she made dry fish. She made my mum and my aunt very skillful sewers, and she was a good provider. There's stories of mum saying that they used to go pick cranberries in the fall time till the berries were just about frozen. But granny would take them out and build a fire and warm her hands, and just pick because that was the food. We didn't have a store like now to go and get what we need. And so, she used her medicines

and made her medicines, and passed all this knowledge on, and some of that knowledge is passed on to me.

You know, regardless of whether you're Cree or Dene or wherever you live, you utilize the natural resources to sustain you for the year. So, you'd pick your medicines towards fall, you know, all your berries, and then you'd have a garden—because my parents always gardened, and I'm sure my granny was like that too. And, in those days after she left House [Lake] and she moved to Old Fort, to Poplar Point, the caribou still needs to come into this area from Northern Saskatchewan. And she would be able to harvest, my mom and my aunt would harvest the caribou and my granny would cut it all up, and there's all this sharing and then tanning the hides or drying it for rugs and, yes, she was a busy woman.

Every year they had a big, huge garden and my dad was an awesome hunter, and fisherman, and trapper. Him too, he never had any formal education, but he knew the land like the back of his hand. And his stories, you know, and then my oldest son followed. My dad and my brothers taught him how to become a land user, a trapper, and hunter. And so that tradition still continues.

Lori Stevens (25 May 2021)

I did have an Elder actually, she came to visit me, and she was talking about how at the Embarras River and then going up towards the Peace, they [the Dene] all had that portion for where they would hunt beavers and whatnot. And, when they were pushed out, that's why everybody went to Jackfish. That was her interpretation of it. So, she definitely did tell me that they used to go before the Park was created in the 1920s, that was all the area. It wasn't just one specific Nation was allowed to hunt there, everybody went there and more specifically for the beavers because the Dene people did eat a lot of it. So yeah, she said mostly Embarras, that area, like Lake Claire, like that. But she said up towards, following the Peace and the Slave. . . .

I know they used the waterways in the winter. There's history of when the fur trade first started that they would guide the fur traders and they knew the whole area. My Papa Isidore, it's my great-grandfather Isidore Voyageur. He was a kind of like—not a scout but a guide. He was a guide for Uranium City³⁰ and all that area on the other side, to the Park. But he also did work on this, he guided people. So, I would say that because of my family's histories, and his as a guide, he would take them. And we had family in Fort Fitzgerald, the

Dene people there—our families are all connected, but kind of split up now because of the Park.

Edouard Trippe de Roche (25 November 2020)

ET: My mum and dad used to trap, and my grandparents used to trap in Wood Buffalo Park. I heard stories of them traveling in the park, trapping in the park in the spring and winter seasons. And I also have siblings buried there, at a graveyard in the Park.

ST: Oh, do you know when your grandparents were trapping in there?

ET: Well way before 1930 cause my mum and dad married 1930. And my mother was probably a young teenage girl then when they were going up to Peace River. And she's talking about my grandfather having an outboard motor, three horse. And they had a big boat for going through the rapids somewhere up there.

ST: So, if they were trapping in there before the 1930s, were they kicked out afterward at any point, or did they have permits later on?

ET: They never had permits. Because they were—I really don't know—because my mom said—they must have lived in a park at some point or another because I know of two siblings buried in what is now called Moose Island. And so, in order for two people, two of my siblings to die, they don't die in just one day. So, they must've lived there for a little while. . . .

When I was in residential school, they took me from Fort McMurray all the way to Fort Chip. And then eventually, we moved. My mom and dad moved to Fort Chip, so they'd be closer to us. Anyways, being in residential school, all the kids that I grew up with in residential school, June was the longest month of the year cause everybody wanted to get out of the mission. We called it the mission. We wanted to go back to the land. We'd go, when we left Chip [where Holy Angels Residential School was located], we used to go to Jackfish Lake to the reserve. We lived there all summer in a tent, and we'd make dried foods, make dry meat in the bush, go for a swim in the swamp. You know, doing stuff like that. And, I don't know, well, Fort Chip was a ghost town in the summer. Because everybody was in the bush. It didn't matter where you went—to the Park or to the reserve. Anywhere as long as it's in the bush. Pickin' berries. Eating fish. No store-bought meat, you know. This was the life we all wanted, and we were taken away from it. That's the retreat we'd get after ten months in the residential school.

Leslie Wiltzen (21 January 2021)

I mean you can go to the store and buy a turkey. You could go out and get ten turkeys and have a deep-freeze full of turkeys where you could eat turkey once a month. Right now, you know that our geese, our turkeys, our ducks are your chickens. That's the equivalent. The superstore. We don't have the big supermarkets. You look at Fort Chip where prices of food is, they were outrageous up to the point where the Northern Market was put in place. I mean, you look at meat, it's expensive. So, you have to supplement that somehow to make a living, to feed a family. I mean, if you have a large family, imagine what one pound of hamburger does for you. Not very much. So, to be able to supplement that, those resources. And the Aboriginal people have always, always supplemented their resources by depending on what's on the land. Not abusing it—but depending on what's on the land, whether it be a small grouse, a rabbit, or duck, a goose, moose, deer, whatever it might be, they supplemented their diets with traditional foods.

Anonymous Fort Chipewyan Elder (1974)

Since we are the original inhabitants of the land, we have the Aboriginal rights to the land. The land was inhabited by Chipewyans and Crees. The Indians did not go beyond the imaginative boundaries. They trapped, hunted, and fished in the area that they were quite familiar with.

Yes, they lived at the Catfish camping site. They had lived in two other areas also, Little Rapids and Sweetgrass, which is in the Wood Buffalo National Park before the Park was even there. As a young man, I had hunted ducks and fished for a living. Then there were no buffaloes and white men. Where at the present time Snowbird lives along in a southwesterly direction from the community of Fort Chipewyan approximately 35 miles.

The people had trapped, hunted, and fished around Lake Claire and Mamawi as far back into the interior to the Birch Mountains. The people who lived at Little Rapids had also trapped, hunted, and fished around Lake Claire back into the interior as far back to the Birch Mountain and Birch River.

We lived at Jackfish Creek. We hunted, trapped and fished up to the Caribou Mountains. Also from Peace Point, we trapped and hunted to the Caribou Mountains.

Some of the people living around Peace Point and Jackfish Creek had trapped and hunted and fished in a northerly direction as far as Fort Smith.

The people from Fort Smith had also hunted, trapped and fished in a southerly direction. The two groups had at times met each other in the wilderness. I must also mention the fact that the people from Fort Smith had also trapped and hunted in a westerly direction as far as Caribou Mountains.

What I have told you was mentioned to me by my father. Other than that, we considered as important, I can't think of any. But how I raised my children was by means of trapping, hunting, and fishing. My youngest boy is now nineteen years old. I have raised him by means of hunting, trapping, and fishing till he was eleven years of age. There was no welfare at that time. I had raised my family by means of trapping, hunting, and fishing. Many families have also raised their family the same way I did.

Therefore, the land that we inhabit is rightfully ours. It doesn't belong to the buffalo, and it doesn't belong to the white people since we are the original inhabitants of the land. We have the Aboriginal rights of the land to claim as ours. It belongs to both the Cree tribe and the Chipewyan tribe.

Anonymous ACFN Elder (2015)

Well, my Elders, what they usually do, they go easy on the land. They don't play around on the land, with the animals or anything. They don't want to damage the land. I know some old-timers said to us they stayed there for winter, where they were, or where they lived in the spring, they put something [there]. They paid the land, they put something there, whatever they have. Or wherever they go, the first time they've been there, they see a lake or something, first time before they go in there, they pay them too. They don't have anything, they pray to the water, the river or the lakes. Even the animals and—when you skin them, you don't just—what do you call it—you hang it up, you don't just throw it over there. You hang it up. You don't throw around, even the bones. Most bones like the caribou, you don't play around with. You don't play around with the land.

