

Where the Rivers Meet

Pipelines, Participatory Resource Management, and Aboriginal-State Relations in the Northwest Territories

CARLY A. DOKIS

FOREWORD BY GRAEME WYNN



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INTRODUCTION

People, Land, and Pipelines

As far back as I can remember, my ancestors have lived off of this land. It is still like that today. When we think about the pipeline we have to think about what it is going to do. We have to say something because we live off of our own land. It is our money, our food. It is who we are.

– Dene elder, author interview, 16 September 2006

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL, the Sahtu region of the Northwest Territories has been known as a rich land. Although many people imagine Canada's western Subarctic as desolate and inhospitable, the Sahtu has provided a good living for the Indigenous peoples that make it their home. After Alexander Mackenzie's 1789 expedition down the river that now bears his name in cartographic records, European merchants and traders fashioned a vision of northern prosperity that was based on fur. By the twentieth century, with fur prices declining, new commodities were sought in the oil, gas, and mineral deposits of the area. In the face of these colonial incursions, the Sahtu Dene continue to draw sustenance from their lands and to teach their young people the stories, skills, and knowledge of the elders. They have remained fundamentally engaged with a landscape that they understand as a means of survival, a principal source of identity, and a web of social and kinship relations in which human beings are merely one part.

In the 1970s, when a natural gas pipeline was first proposed to run from the Yukon through the Mackenzie Valley, the issue of Aboriginal title to the land had not yet been resolved, and there was no formalized means for Aboriginal people to participate in institutional decisions regarding the use of land and resources. Now, however, newly implemented land claim agreements have established resource co-management regimes and cooperative decision-making bodies that are intended to give Aboriginal

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peoples a place at the table. This form of participatory management, first heralded by Justice Thomas Berger in his famous inquiry, has become a hallmark of Canadian environmental management and has been praised, studied, and emulated in Canada and around the globe.

Leading a one-man inquiry from 1974 to 1977, Justice Berger held hearings in the ballrooms of Yellowknife hotels, at community centres across the North, at fishlakes and cabins, and along traplines, listening as northerners spoke about the proposed pipeline. Locals recall that, while flying over the vast expanse of trees and lakes, he spotted a Dene man at his trapline. He had the bush pilot land on the nearest lake so that he could have tea with the man and hear what he had to say. Berger's words at the community hearings in Déline (then called Fort Franklin) were emblematic of his mandate and of the seriousness with which he approached it:

I want you, the people who live here, who make the North your home, to tell me what you would say to the government of Canada, if you could tell them what was in your minds. I want to hear from anyone who wishes to speak, because you have the right to speak, to tell me what you think this proposed pipeline will mean to you, to your family, and to your life. I am here to listen to you.¹

Indeed, the inquiry was well received by many in the North, and Berger's patient demeanour and ability to listen won their trust. Dene from across the Sahtu and throughout the North came to talk to Berger and to tell him strongly that they did not want a pipeline through their lands; his published report (Berger 1977) reflected their sentiments, recommending that no pipeline be built through the Mackenzie Valley until Ottawa and the Dene could settle the issue of Aboriginal title to the land. There was a general feeling that local voices had been heard and that Berger's recommendations would encourage the establishment of a land claim in the region.²

Some thirty years later, many comprehensive land claim agreements had been reached in the Northwest Territories, and another participatory process was in place in the form of resource co-management. Though patterned after the Berger hearings, this process nonetheless differs fantastically from it. Now the hearings are technical; the "listeners" include many people, who are accompanied by an entourage of technicians, lawyers, transcribers, and experts. The casual approach – dropping in to someone's trapline to chat over tea – is a thing of the past. The process has become standardized, repeatable, technocratic, and quantifiable – in other

words, “scientific.” At the same time, the staunch resistance to the pipeline that Dene participants voiced so loudly at the Berger hearings was somehow, with this new process, translated into consent. How has this happened? In just three decades, how is it that fundamentally political statements about sovereignty and the right to decide the fate of the land have been channelled into anti-political murmurs about costs and benefits?³ This book examines how the promise of the Berger Inquiry was transformed to become the reality of bureaucratic power and governmentality. It examines how law, and the hearings and inquiries that serve as its bedfellows, enabled participatory processes to become the handmaidens of the state.

LEGITIMATION OF THE PARTICIPATORY MANAGEMENT INDUSTRY

Participatory models of natural resource management have been emphasized in the Canadian North for some time. Aboriginal involvement in decisions related to lands and resources has been secured through jurisprudence and recently created co-management structures established as part of comprehensive land claims. Through this complex constellation of co-management boards, land corporations, quasi-judicial regulatory bodies, and government agencies, local people are expected to have an increased say in the decisions that affect their land and their lives. Yet to a large extent, they are limited to an advisory role (as are the various boards that conduct the participatory process), and final authority for resource development lies beyond local or even regional jurisdictions. In other words, the state will determine whether the Mackenzie pipeline and other pipelines will be built, though certain non-essential concessions may be offered to maintain institutional legitimacy.⁴ I argue in this book that the legitimation of that authority is achieved by the appearance of public participation in the decision-making process.

It is true that, during the past thirty years, Canada has made much progress in entrenching Aboriginal land and treaty rights in its jurisprudence and national consciousness. In *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia* (2014 at paras. 73 and 76), the Supreme Court held that Aboriginal title includes “the exclusive right to decide how the land is used and the right to benefit from those uses” and that “governments and others seeking to use the land must obtain consent of the Aboriginal title holders.” However, this process has occurred only partially in Canadian law, as evident in

R. v. Sparrow (1990), *Taku River Tlingit First Nation v. British Columbia* (2004), and *Tsilhqot'in Nation* (2014). These rulings assert that constitutionally protected Aboriginal rights can be infringed as long as doing so meets a test for justification. For example, though the *Tsilhqot'in* decision outlines that the Crown must obtain consent from title-holding groups, it also finds that the Crown can undertake actions that intrude on the titled land if it “is backed by a compelling and substantial legislative objective in the public interest” (ibid. at para. 125). Thus, though the rights are accorded legal priority (are constitutionally protected), they can nonetheless be overstepped if, for example, the infringement is deemed to be in the national interest. This has significant consequences for Aboriginal people, particularly when their rights conflict with projects that the state perceives as necessary for economic development.

Prior to the mid-1970s, government and industry did little to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into decisions regarding natural resources. For example, the James Bay Hydroelectric Project, which helped galvanize Canada’s first modern land claim settlement, was announced in 1971 without consulting the James Bay Cree or the Inuit of Quebec (Mulrennan and Scott 2005). In addition, the legal duty to consult with Aboriginal peoples regarding land use and development was not established until *Sparrow*, which the Supreme Court of Canada heard in 1990. Indeed, the use of coercive state power to restrict Aboriginal involvement in resource decision making was ubiquitous in the form of imposed institutions of governance, refusal to negotiate land claim and self-government agreements, and limited state-sanctioned avenues for Aboriginal political participation (in reality, of course, Aboriginal groups did maintain some control of local resources, even if it was opaque and resistive in nature). Nonetheless, Aboriginal people continued to oppose development projects that eroded their territories, and their political organization increased throughout North America, as did international attention to Indigenous and human rights. As a result, by the mid-1970s the Canadian public no longer saw outright appropriation of Indigenous lands as an acceptable option for large multinational developers acting in partnership with the federal government. In short, the state was faced with what philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas has termed a legitimation crisis.

In liberal capitalist states, the competitiveness of the domestic economy is ensured, to a large extent, by political means that, as Habermas (1975, 21) suggests, serve “to maintain the general conditions of production which make possible market regulated sustainability and expansion.” In writing on public involvement in liberal capitalist will-formation, Habermas has

argued that social integration is threatened when members of a society experience changes that are intolerable or incompatible with normative structures and goal values; he calls this a legitimation crisis. In the event of such a crisis, the coupling of the economic and political roles of the state is realized as an essential contradiction in the social system. That is, liberal capitalist societies are predicated on dual expectations – that some form of participatory democracy will be supported by the consent of the people and will be independent of capitalist production, and that the state will play a substantial role in expanding production and regulating markets. If social integration and mass loyalty are to be retained when the crisis arises, governing institutions must be legitimated through a political compromise in which the state gives the appearance that institutions and procedures are participatory but can also exercise sovereign administrative decisions independently of the participatory process to fulfill its economic role. The legitimation crisis cannot be adequately defused by the political system on its own. This task falls to the institutions that symbolically represent the normative structures of society; here Habermas points to public hearings, expert judgments, and judicial decisions as a mechanism to secure mass loyalty.

Thus, in the mid-1970s, during the time of the Berger Inquiry, the Canadian state revised its approach to Aboriginal involvement in resource management. It increased avenues for Aboriginal political participation in the form of comprehensive land claims, beginning with the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement in 1975 and continuing throughout northern Canada until the present day. Many of these claims include provisions for resource co-management and amplified Aboriginal community input via both institutions born out of land claims and consultation with Aboriginal communities in the form of public hearings. In the legal realm, Canadian jurisprudence, adapted through case law precedent, has increasingly invoked higher standards in the way in which governments and industry consider Aboriginal land and treaty rights in development decisions. For example, the *Haida Nation v. British Columbia* (2004) decision applied not only to lands covered by claims or treaties, but also to situations in which Aboriginal rights could potentially be infringed or a land claim could be adversely affected before it had been settled. All of this seems like a mighty step forward.

Yet in trying to mitigate its legitimation crisis, Ottawa has been reluctant to transfer any real resource decision-making authority to Aboriginal governments or cooperative bodies. For example, the Joint Review Panel (JRP) that was mandated in 2004 to consider the social, cultural, and

environmental impact of the Mackenzie Gas Project (MGP) was limited to providing recommendations to the bodies that ultimately made the real decisions. So, though the panel devoted almost two years to conducting hearings in which northerners spoke about how a pipeline would affect their lands and their lives, the government was not legally required to accept or implement its report. It was at liberty to adopt some or all of the JRP recommendations, send them back to the panel for “further consideration,” or reject them outright. The outcome of the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline, which would carry bitumen from the Alberta tar sands to the BC coast for shipment to Asian markets, will be decided in the same manner.

In *Finding Dahshaa: Self-Government, Social Suffering, and Aboriginal Policy in Canada*, Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox (2009, 7) argues that the negotiation of comprehensive land claims and self-government agreements in the Northwest Territories represents a symbolic, rather than a substantive, change in the devolution of authority to Aboriginal organizations and governments. In her words, “Land claims can be viewed as symbolic: they are settlements that return small fractions of lands, resources, and authorities to Indigenous peoples, and in that sense the settlements to a great extent cement rather than change the fundamental dominant-subordinate relationship between the state and Indigenous people.” Irlbacher-Fox sees the negotiation of claims and agreements as a move by the federal government to provide self-management opportunities that do not profoundly reconfigure its oppressive policies regarding Aboriginal people. In a compelling example, she demonstrates that Aboriginal policy decisions are often rooted in the assumption that Indigenous peoples must adapt to contemporary conditions; they must “modernize” and “develop” to escape what policy makers describe as pathologic circumstances. As Irlbacher-Fox (*ibid.*, 2) shows, this has significant consequences: by “positioning both Indigenous peoples and the injustices that they suffer as non-modern and historical, and itself as a source of social, political and material redemption, the state manages to legitimize both injustice and its ongoing colonial-based interventions into the lives of Indigenous people.” In other words, by characterizing Aboriginal communities as underdeveloped and in need of modernization, the state simultaneously legitimizes its continued intervention in Aboriginal lives, obfuscates its role in the historical and contemporary oppression of local institutions and knowledge, and effectively silences Aboriginal visions for the future.

Undeniably, specialists and experts still evaluate and transform vast domains of daily life for northerners. The role of expert judgments and

technocratic artifacts is certainly paramount in identifying and assessing the impacts of industrial projects. The creation of new co-management boards and regulatory processes has developed into a resource management industry in the Canadian North, employing hundreds of consultants, lawyers, and experts. These “experts,” and the complex apparatus and forms of discourse in which they are situated, typically subscribe to certain paradigms of thought and associated values, such as the trust placed in science and the perceived benefits of industrial development.

Even when Aboriginal people do participate in cooperative decision-making bodies, their concerns are typically reinterpreted in the language of these new institutions, and judgments are often rendered in these terms. Thus, events such as community hearings can be seen as cultural performances that reveal as much about Western conceptions of land, property, and contractual relations, and the values associated with economic development, as they do about Dene values concerning land use and relations to the environment. As legal scholar Sally Engle Merry (1991, 892) points out in an essay on law and colonialism, these cultural performances often provide authoritative interpretations of people’s life situations as “everyday events and relationships are named and defined,” and events are given meaning through a formalized and ritualized setting. In this way, eliciting Aboriginal participation in environmental management can be seen as an endeavour to rule and transform, even if it is done with the aim of “hearing” what Aboriginal people have to say.

Anthropologist Scott Rushforth (1994, 339) observes that Sahtu Dene people are often skeptical of non-local “expert” knowledge of the Subarctic because it is accompanied by “widespread lack of personal experience in the north.” In many cases, decisions regarding resource development are based on the evaluations and recommendations of individuals in the resource management industry, rather than local people. Furthermore, expert judgments limit the ability of other types of knowledge and knowledge expression to form a basis of critique or truth making. If we recognize that technocratic artifacts such as environmental impact statements are privileged forms of truth, we can consider them as one of many narratives, told alongside those of local people, about the effects of industrial development on local lives and communities. For many Dene and other Athabaskan peoples, knowledge acquired through experience (Rushforth 1992), through generations of living on the land (Brody 1981), through dreams and other mediums (Ridington 1990), and through the transmission of stories (Blondin 1990) is a valuable form of evidence. This book explores how local people who hold such knowledge, gained through generations of

living in intimate relation with the land, participate in assessment processes that are constructed around very alien technocratic forms of evidence and rationality.

ENCOUNTERS AT THE INTERFACE

Most simply, the aim of regulatory and environmental assessment boards established as a result of comprehensive land claims is to integrate the perspectives and interests of federal and territorial governments with those of Aboriginal organizations, and to provide a mechanism through which Aboriginal people have an increased say in resource development and management. Several observers have cited the Mackenzie Valley regulatory process as one of the more successful examples of collaborative decision making, with clear requirements for Aboriginal participation as well as the integration of multiple forms of knowledge. Geographer Derek Armitage (2005, 246) argues that new environmental assessment practices in the Northwest Territories have moved away from their technical orientation to incorporate what he calls “double-loop” learning, or collaborative processes that have reconfigured government-driven environmental management and decision making. Julia Christensen and Miriam Grant (2007) go even farther to suggest that the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and political representation in land management wrests power away from the federal realm into more localized sources, though they concede that Ottawa’s authority impedes the genuine integration of local knowledge. Indeed, a major contribution of the regulatory regime in the Mackenzie Valley is the acceptance of evidence presented by community members at public hearings. Hearings are intended to encourage local participation in the assessment and regulation of proposed projects where public or community concern is deemed to exist. Yet, though hearings have certainly elicited Aboriginal input in the Northwest Territories, neither Armitage nor Christensen and Grant establish that they have increased local authority in resource decision making. Complications in the attempted integration of differing epistemological foundations, linguistic and conceptual translation, and ways of viewing the land have elsewhere given rise to serious questions concerning the extent to which institutionalized joint decision making (particularly when grounded in legalistic proceedings, technocratic discourses, and non-local assumptions about the nature of the world and the inevitability of industrialism) can ever truly reflect Aboriginal views, even where traditional and land-based knowledge is

genuinely considered (see Nadasdy 2005; White 2006). For example, it has been well established that the intimate connection between Aboriginal people and their environment encompasses a host of cultural, spiritual, and cosmological relationships that are not easily translated into quantifiable techno-rational categories (Stevenson 1996; Ellis 2005). Julie Cruikshank (1995, 57), for instance, illustrates how stories, and the knowledge contained therein, provide a kind of “cultural scaffolding” through which people “interpret and connect a range of events that might otherwise seem unrelated.” Similarly, legal discussions of Aboriginal rights, title, and governance typically rest in Euro-American discourses of property, ownership, and long-standing beliefs about human and societal development that may not coincide with Aboriginal views (see Venne 1997; Culhane 1998; Seed 2001).

Participation in resource decision making is not simply a matter of showing up for a hearing. It rests in deeply embedded ways of thinking about the world, in the constitution of community members’ knowledge, and in ideas about appropriate human conduct. Resource decision-making forums offer what anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2005), borrowing from Norman Long (1989), calls “encounters at the interface.” These can enable a systematic analysis of the interactions between members of differing cultures, where “agents who not only have different resources, but also play the games according to different rules, confront each other” (Olivier de Sardan 2005, 102). At the same time, because community hearings also exist within relationships of power, they can provide a frame to analyze interactions between local people and representatives of abstract systems such as various levels of government with diverse organizational roles.

This book examines how participation in resource decision making is shaped by very specific cultural practices and the social construction and evaluation of the associated impacts. Indeed, local discourses regarding the impacts and benefits of non-renewable resource extraction do sometimes conflict with environmental assessments that attempt to predict the effects of large-scale industrial projects. In the Sahtu, this conflict exists even when newly created environmental assessment regimes, established under comprehensive land claim agreements, fall under the rubric of resource co-management.

As a result of their interaction with bureaucratic institutions under land claim agreements, and recent case law upholding Canada’s fiduciary duty to consult with Aboriginal peoples regarding development decisions, the Sahtu Dene have had to adopt new and perhaps uncharacteristic ways of speaking, making decisions, and organizing to deal with corporations and

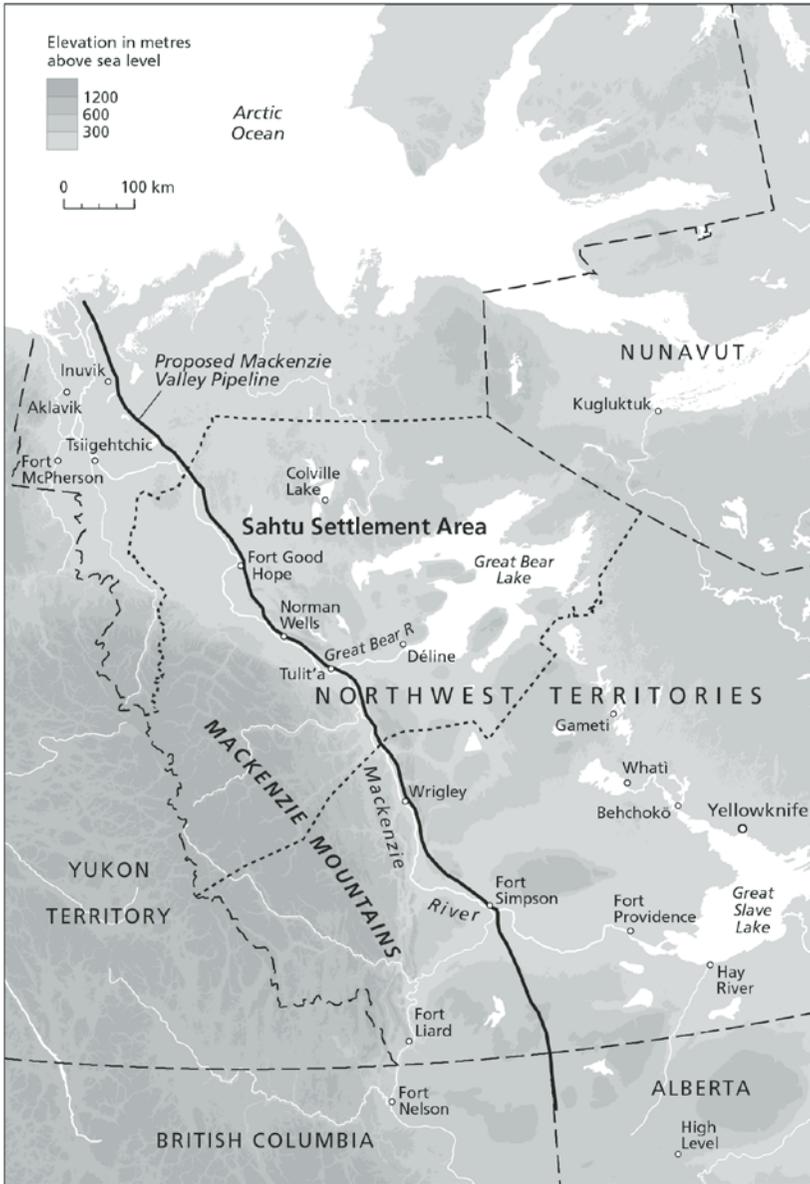
government. Ways in which decisions are made, and how positions are taken on resource development, are influenced by multiple and complex factors that are neither wholly novel nor wholly traditional. This weaving of the traditional and the novel allows interaction between Aboriginal communities, government, and industry to be sites of creativity and contestation, continually redefining conceptions of knowledge, industrial impacts, rights, governances, and models of appropriate development. Yet all these redefinitions are negotiated on unequal fields of power. This book starts from these encounters, exploring their ideas about the harms and benefits of the proposed pipeline, their power struggles between local communities and trans-local corporations, and also their ingenious use by local people to assert their own conceptions of the world.

These days, resource development projects and their assessment and regulation are not simply imposed on Sahtu Dene people without their agreement. However, the projects and their associated regulatory and conceptual apparatuses have significant effects, not only ecologically but socially and politically as well. It is no longer the case (if it ever was) that everyone in the Sahtu is opposed to industrial development, and it is important to remember that the Sahtu Dene have been proponents of industrial projects on their own lands. The ways in which people manoeuvre the economic, social, and political opportunities and constraints available to them in the face of large-scale industrial projects form an important component of decisions about land use and resource extraction.

Nevertheless, some commonalities do exist in the participatory practices of Sahtu Dene people, and important relationships and fields of power are embedded in participatory structures, which I will discuss throughout this book. Statements made in the context of public participation processes contain multiple and shifting meanings that are rooted in particular histories, past events, experiences with the state, and cultural values. In other words, they are not only deeply felt articulations of concern regarding industrial impacts or struggles to influence power structures (though these are certainly evident as well), but they are also expressions about what it means to be Dene and to pursue a way of life that is good, fitting, and proper.

THE SAHTU

A majority of the Indigenous peoples living in the Mackenzie River Valley call themselves Dene, meaning “people” in the closely related Athabaskan



MAP 1 The Sahtu region and the proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline.
By Eric Leinberger

languages that are spoken up and down the river. The Dene have been living on these lands longer than anyone can remember; they argue that they have lived there since the beginning of the world. Their stories tell of how the world was created and of how human beings ought to conduct themselves to maintain the world as it is now. Their vast and intimate knowledge of their territory allows them to thrive in one of the coldest climates on Earth and to derive sustenance from the land.

For the past two hundred years, the Dene people of the Sahtu region have witnessed enormous changes in their landscape and their lives. As a result of the fur trade, an influx of non-Dene trappers and traders moved into their territory, and though most returned to the South after seeking their fortunes, some stayed, married, and settled in the region. They brought new goods, languages, and diseases, transforming Dene life in both positive and destructive ways. The Sahtu Dene have seen prospectors, oil companies, and miners invade their lands, and have witnessed the building of roads, pipelines, airstrips, and mine shafts to support their expansive projects. Most projects were undertaken without consultation with the Dene, and all were conducted without their consent.

What became known as the Sahtu Settlement Area (SSA) after the signing of the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement in 1993 encompasses a large part of the central Mackenzie Valley, including Great Bear Lake, a section of the Mackenzie River, and part of the Mackenzie Mountains. Winter temperatures in the Sahtu can drop below -40 degrees Celsius. Winter is also remarkably dark, with mornings and evenings shrouded in twilight and only about three and a half hours of direct daylight. Conversely, summers are relatively bright, with almost twenty-four-hour light. Vegetation and ecozones vary in the Sahtu, but vegetation consists largely of black spruce, dwarf birch and willow, tamarack, cottongrass, lichen, moss, and some white spruce and the occasional aspen. The Sahtu has thirty watershed regions (Auld and Kershaw 2005, 37), with most waterways freezing by late November and breaking up again between May and July.

The Sahtu is home to the communities of Colville Lake, Déline, Fort Good Hope, Norman Wells, and Tuli't'a, whose populations range from about 125 to 800. Except for Norman Wells, which was established largely as a result of oil fields operated by Imperial Oil, they are 91 percent or more Dene or Metis.⁵ All are accessible by aircraft year-round. A daily flight links Norman Wells to Yellowknife, and air service from Norman Wells to the outlying communities is very regular: a flight goes to Déline, Tuli't'a, and Fort Good Hope every day except Sunday, and the Colville

Lake flight goes on weekdays. The communities can also be reached by winter road from about the end of December to mid-April, and except for Colville Lake, they can be accessed by boat when the waterways are clear of ice.

Dene people in the Sahtu region have experienced the transition from life on the land, with perhaps intermittent visits to trading posts, to a life lived mostly in permanent communities. They can now buy their food in the Northern Store (though it can be prohibitively expensive), they can get *American Idol*, *Deal or No Deal*, and all the other new shows on satellite television, and they can even access the Internet, though most do so at the band or land corporation office because many homes do not yet have high-speed service.⁶ When I stayed with Sahtu families, I noticed that their teenagers listened to the same songs as teenagers in the South.

Like most Aboriginal communities in the Canadian North, those of the Sahtu are characterized by a mixed economy, in which basic needs are supplied through various sources including domestic production, wage labour, transfers, and tourism and other forms of private enterprise. Peter Elias (1997), who has written extensively on mixed economies in northern Aboriginal communities, notes that most Aboriginal people in the North continue to occupy and use their traditional territories, and that a land-based economy remains a fundamental component of their lives, despite predictions that it would eventually decline in importance. Hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering help to offset the high cost of living in the North, but they also enable people to pass on vital elements of culture and identities (Asch 1984; Hunn 1999; Adelson 2000). As Rauna Kuokkanen (2011, 217) states about mixed economies elsewhere, “Indigenous economies such as household production and subsistence activities extend beyond the economic sphere: they are at the heart of who people are culturally and socially.”

Yet, the very nature of a mixed economy means that household needs cannot be met through domestic production alone and that other economic sectors also play a vital role in generating income. The degree to which northern Aboriginal communities engage in differing economic sectors is quite varied (see Elias 1997), and some scholars have pointed out that due to the interrelated nature of mixed economies, separating distinct spheres of economic activity is often futile (Brody 1981). Claudia Notzke (1999), for example, has documented that the income generated in wage labour is often used to support land-based activities, and numerous studies show that many sectors in northern mixed economies are in fact mutually supportive (Usher 1982; Elias 1997). What is clear is that the domestic economy

continues to contribute significantly to the diets and the social, cultural, and economic well-being of northern Aboriginal communities (see Berkes et al. 1994), in spite of predictions that it would be subsumed under capitalism. As Scott Rushforth (1977) notes about his work in the Sahtu in the 1970s, engaging in a resource-based capitalist economy was acceptable only after provisions for securing the domestic economy were accomplished. Some thirty years later, this remains largely true, as a Sahtu Dene person stated during an interview with me: “This will be the last place; we are happy with one another because we can go out and get fish, we can go out and get everything from the land. We do not need money. We cannot eat money.”⁷

Although Sahtu Dene people maintain fundamental physical, social, and moral relationships with their land, they are likewise engaged in regional and global markets and forms of exchange that require participation in commodity markets and resource production. Since about 1996, they have experienced a significant increase in oil and gas activities in their territory. For many local people, the establishment of a hydrocarbon-based economy offers opportunities for direct and indirect employment, the procurement of business contracts and partnerships, and increased revenue via access and benefits agreements.⁸ For others, however, it brings significant and irreversible changes in local lifeways, including the disruption of animal-human relationships and the ability to spend time on the land. This tension between protecting an ancient and valued subsistence way of life, and fostering a growing petro-economy exists both within and between people in the Sahtu, contributing to shifting community dynamics, governance structures, and new forms of power over nature and bodies.

Yet, even with these changes, Sahtu Dene people retain many distinctly Dene elements of their lives. This is despite intensified pressure by outside forces to gain access to their lands and for the Dene themselves to assimilate into so-called mainstream Canadian educational, religious, legal, economic, political, and social institutions. Since the first contact with those who came north in search of monetary gain, Dene people have struggled to preserve and defend the life that they want for themselves and their children, often in the face of great obstacles.

In most Sahtu communities, as in other northern mixed economies, the household, and to a lesser extent a network of households connected through kinship ties, is the basic unit of production and distribution. Anthropologist Michael Asch (1984, 19) recognizes the extended household as a means of retaining a band-oriented form of production that has mediated the “individualized, self-sufficient nuclear orientation of mainstream Canadian society.” In the Sahtu, members of extended households engage

to different degrees in domestic production and wage labour, depending on the opportunities available in the related economic spheres, each calling on the other to provide cash or food when needed; cash and food circulate freely within and between connected households. Although cash is required to pay bills and buy services, food, gas, clothing, and other supplies (including those to engage in harvesting), it is often less valued than resources obtained and circulated in the domestic economy. For example, locals often see saving cash as a futile exercise, one that demonstrates a lack of trust that the land and Creator will provide, and that runs contrary to ideas that people have of themselves as generous and giving. Excess cash, like products of domestic production, is redistributed throughout the community through borrowing, gifting, or bingo and card games, thus creating networks of responsibility and obligation. Spending money on games such as bingo or cards demonstrates not only generosity, but can provide evidence of medicine power if one should win. Resources obtained through hunting, fishing, gathering, or trapping are not often sold between members of extended households (though they are sold to tourists and short-term residents), but are traded for items of similar value or for assurances of reciprocity in the future.

I worked mostly in the communities of Déline, Tulit'a, and Colville Lake. Déline lies on the northwestern shore of Keith Arm, on Great Bear Lake, near the head of the Great Bear River. One of the largest communities in the Sahtu, it has a population of 524, of whom 495 identify as Aboriginal (Statistics Canada 2006). Its layout along the shoreline reflects the importance of the lake to its daily activities. In summer, people keep boats at the shoreline, and in the winter the frozen lake provides an effective roadway for both cars and snowmobiles. Although all Déline residents live in fairly modern housing, many maintain teepees or other shelters for smoking and preparing fish, meat, and hides. Most homes rely on diesel furnaces and woodstoves for heat. Native-language retention rates are high in Déline, with 95.8 percent of Dene residents reporting in 2004 that they spoke Slavey (GNWT 2010b) and 58.0 percent reporting that they spoke Slavey as their primary language at home (Statistics Canada 2006).

The main employment sectors in Déline are government, health, social services, and education, and during my fieldwork, the average personal income was about \$30,754 (GNWT 2010b). The Déline Land Corporation owns the Grey Goose Lodge, located at the edge of town, which caters to the few tourists and fishermen who visit, and more often to government dignitaries and bureaucrats. Déline also has a few private businesses, such as a chip stand and general contractors. Its infrastructure includes an airstrip



On the shore of Great Bear Lake in Déline. This photograph shows homes and the Great Bear Co-op overlooking sheds and boats that hug the lakeshore.



Tulit'a in February. Looking out over the old church and houses on the bank of the Mackenzie River.

and small airport, a dump, a power generation station, government offices, post office, school, community hall, hockey arena, health centre, community dock, community learning centre, and an RCMP detachment. Twice a week, water is trucked in to holding tanks in private dwellings, and sewage is removed from holding tanks twice weekly as well. Déline has two grocery stores, the Northern Store and the Great Bear Co-op, both of which sell a variety of goods, including groceries, gear, supplies, and some clothing, all at high northern prices.

Tulit'a lies at the intersection of the Mackenzie and Great Bear Rivers. Meaning "where the rivers meet" in Slavey, it sits just beneath Bear Rock, a significant place in Dene oral history and teachings. Slightly smaller than Déline, it has a population of 505, 460 of whom identify as Aboriginal (Statistics Canada 2006). Again, its layout indicates the importance of the two rivers, and most of Tulit'a is built high on the bank of the Mackenzie. The Mackenzie Mountains are visible far to the west, an important harvesting area for the Mountain Dene. The Great Bear River provides fairly easy passage to Déline and Kelly Lake, Willow (Brackett) Lake, and Lennie Lake. In years past, Tulit'a served as a summer gathering place for Dene from all over Denendeh, a Slavey language term roughly translated to mean "our land" or "land of the Dene," with people travelling to meet in the fairly centralized location. Today, the winter road connects Tulit'a to Déline, Norman Wells, and Wrigley. Language retention in Tulit'a is not as high as in Déline, perhaps due to its long history of contact with Euro-Canadian traders on the Mackenzie River.

As in Déline, the main employment sectors at Tulit'a are government, health, social services, and education. However, Tulit'a has three general contracting and slashing companies who receive contracts to clear lands to make room for the operation of extractive industries, as well as some businesses, including Mackay Range Oilfield Services, that provide various services to oil and gas industries. The Tulit'a Hotel is owned by the Tulit'a Dene Band, and there is a privately owned bed and breakfast. At the time of my fieldwork, the average personal income was \$33,045 (GNWT 2010c). The infrastructure in Tulit'a is the same as that of Déline, though there is no community dock, and the new school was built in 2007. As in Déline, water is trucked in and sewage is trucked out twice a week. The new Northern Store was completed in 2006, and though Tulit'a has no Co-op store, goods in its Northern Store tend to be slightly cheaper than in the Déline outlet.

The Tulit'a District has a long experience with oil and gas exploration and production, beginning with the Norman Wells oil field in 1921. After

Imperial Oil and the federal government signed the Norman Wells Proven Area Agreement in 1944. Imperial Oil attained the exclusive right to drill for petroleum and natural gas on the agreement lands; as a partner in the project, the federal government receives a percentage of the overall production. In 1985, Interprovincial Pipeline (now Enbridge) built a pipeline from Norman Wells to Zama, Alberta. Although Imperial Oil's field is located in and around Norman Wells, some seventy-two kilometres north of Tuli't'a, the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement places it within the Tuli't'a District. In addition to Imperial Oil, several other companies have been active near Tuli't'a, including Husky Oil, International Frontier, Northrock Resources, and EnCana Corporation. Husky's (and Northrock's) Summit Creek activity has drilled several successful exploration wells, and the Summit Creek reserve, about fifty-five kilometres southwest of Tuli't'a, is reported to be a significant discovery. In fact, in June 2011 Husky Oil paid a record high price of \$376 million for two drilling licences near the Summit Creek reserve. Several mining prospecting companies are also active in the Mackenzie Mountains and downstream of Tuli't'a at a location known by locals as the "smokes," a burning coal seam on the west side of the river.

Many locals describe Colville Lake as the most "traditional" community in the Sahtu. Although it was not officially established until 1962, when Oblate missionary Bern Will Brown built a mission at the present-day townsite and several families moved there to re-establish a trapping economy, it has always been an important Dene fishing and ptarmigan-hunting site. Its Dene name, K'áhbanitúé (ptarmigan net), reflects this fact. It is also the smallest community in the Sahtu, with a 2006 population of 126, 115 of whom identify as Aboriginal (Statistics Canada 2006). It nestles on a bay on the south side of the lake from which it takes its name, on a stretch of land that separates the lake from Lake Beloit. Much of it hugs the shoreline, again reflecting the importance of the lake as a travel route, for fishing, and for collecting water. Language retention in Colville Lake is less than in Déline but higher than in Tuli't'a, with 65.3 percent of residents reporting that they speak Slavey (GNWT 2010a).

Land-locked and inaccessible by boat or barge, Colville Lake is one of the most isolated communities in the Northwest Territories. Food, fuel, and other supplies must either be flown in or transported via the winter road, which is open from late December until mid-April. Whereas most people now fly in and out of the community, they also travel by vehicle or occasionally by snowmobile on the winter road between Colville Lake and Fort Good Hope. Flying in and out of Colville Lake during the autumn



Colville Lake – the community docks, the church, and houses gathered on the shoreline, 12 October 2007.

is often problematic due to dense fog, produced because the two lakes, Colville and Beloit, are of unequal depths and therefore freeze at different times. Indeed, one late October I was scheduled to fly out on a Thursday but could not do so until the following Tuesday.

As in Déline and Tuli't'a, the main employment sectors in Colville Lake are government, health, social services, and education. It has a small hotel that is owned and operated by Behdzi Ahda First Nation, and the late Bern Will Brown operated a lodge aimed at sports hunting and fishing. Some local people have managed to find seasonal oil- and gas-related work as environmental monitors or slashers on seismic lines – cutlines used in the exploration for oil and gas – and at drilling locations.

Colville Lake's infrastructure mirrors its size and location. The band and land corporation offices share a building, and a smaller structure houses the offices of the territorial government. An airport was built in 2012, and

there is a small airstrip, a dump, power generation station, arena, learning centre, wireless Internet access, and a school. Bern Will Brown operated a small museum and a church, but these are seldom used by locals. Colville Lake has no police detachment, but RCMP officers use a small log cabin when they fly in from Fort Good Hope.

A striking feature of Colville Lake is its lack of water delivery or sewage removal services. Residents rely on the lake for all their water needs. Sewage is deposited in thick garbage bags that line toilets, are put out once a week for pickup by a band employee on ATV or skidoo, and then hauled to the dump. Many locals emphatically state that they prefer this system. As a community leader suggested during my interview with him, “It keeps us independent. If we rely on the government to get our water for us, then what else will we have to rely on them for? Besides,” he added, “you are the only mola [Euro-Canadian] I know that would haul their own water, so it keeps our community Dene.”⁹

Colville Lake’s Co-op sells groceries and other supplies, and houses the post office. Due to its remoteness, groceries cost significantly more in Colville Lake than elsewhere in the Sahtu (in October 2007, I paid just over seventeen dollars for a one-litre bottle of water, a dozen eggs, and a can of Carnation condensed milk). Consequently, most residents depend heavily on meat, fish, and other items from the land to offset the high cost of groceries.

Like Tulit’a, Colville Lake has extensive experience with oil and gas activities. There are currently four gas fields in the Colville Hills, including Tweed Lake, Tedji Lake, Bele, and Nogha; additional exploration is under way at Turton and Tate Lakes. Petro Canada, Paramount Resources, Apache Canada, AEC West, Devlan Exploration, and Canadian Natural Resources Limited conduct exploration drilling in the area. Importantly, companies active near Colville Lake are exploring on both Crown lands and those where the subsurface rights are owned by the K’asho Got’ine District Land Corporation under the Sahtu Dene and Metis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement. This means that the K’asho Got’ine District and thus Colville Lake could generate a substantial income from subsurface royalties, should any exploratory wells on Sahtu private lands come on-line. This places Colville Lake in the interesting position of having the highest percentage of residents who engage in hunting and trapping while at the same time standing to benefit the most from the establishment of pipeline infrastructure.

Indeed, the central Mackenzie Valley, along with the Mackenzie Delta and the Cameron Hills, has become a major area of interest for oil and

gas ventures. Since 1996, the Sahtu has seen an increased interest in exploratory oil and gas activities, with the number of exploratory wells expanding from one in 1996-97 to a peak of seven in the 2003-04 drilling season (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2004). This reflects the belief that the Canadian North is a significant oil and gas basin, with the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and the Arctic Islands estimated to hold 33 percent of the country's remaining conventional recoverable natural gas and 35 percent of the remaining recoverable light crude oil; approximately half of these reserves is thought to be in the Western Arctic (*ibid.*, 8). However, as mentioned above, logistical, cost, and transportation challenges have limited oil and gas projects in the Canadian North. Exploration is a high-stakes endeavour, with company expenditures estimated at \$184 million in 2004 alone (*ibid.*, 17). And a return on this investment will not be realized until oil and gas can be shipped to southern markets.¹⁰ Although investments in exploration and drilling remain dependent on world market prices for oil and gas, it is reasonable to predict that interest in the hydrocarbon resources of the Canadian North will remain high as long as market demand persists and particularly as more conventional reserves become depleted.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN THE SAHTU: LEARNING TO HEAR APPROPRIATELY

I began my research in the Sahtu on a sunny day in March 2006. I had travelled to the region to attend a series of public hearings, which were held as part of the Joint Review Panel (JRP) environmental impact assessment. Getting to the Sahtu and finding affordable accommodation was not easy. With the help of a mentor who was also conducting work in Déline (and a little luck), I managed to book flights on the small airline that serviced the communities, and more importantly, to find families with whom I could stay. I would quickly learn that Sahtu people were tremendously generous, often graciously opening their homes to travellers, students, and researchers.

My primary instruction in learning to hear appropriately came from living with families in the host communities. I was very fortunate to be welcomed into the homes and lives of three gracious (and patient) households. I learned to hear via the everyday tasks of making meals and having tea, and through spending time with people on the land. For Sahtu Dene people, the land remains a significant source of dietary and economic

subsistence, and cultivating its sustenance is also a vital part of what it means to be Dene. “Going out on the land” enables the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills as well as the preservation of cultural, community, and family ties. Indeed, spending time on the land, eating country foods, maintaining proper relationships with human and other-than-human dimensions of the landscape, and knowing how to work in the bush are strongly associated with Sahtu Dene conceptions of well-being.

Learning to hear was not always easy, especially at first, and it remained an ongoing exercise. It involved listening and taking seriously what people had to say in formal interviews, in conversations over tea, and in the context of their everyday lives. But it also involved witnessing their everyday engagement with each other and with their land. On one of my first days in Colville Lake, Thomas, a community leader and son of my host family, came by the house and said to me, “Well, if you are going to stay here, you better learn how to check fishnets.”¹¹ Later that day, Thomas, his daughter, and I went out to check the nets, crossing the lake by snowmobile. Though the temperature was -40 Celsius, Thomas removed his gloves, working confidently and proficiently as he pulled the nets and their contents to the surface. Having read several ethnographies about Colville Lake, I knew that touching fishnets and other items could be inappropriate for a woman, so I said, rather awkwardly, “Just let me know if I can be of any help.” To which Thomas replied, “Well, you can take this stick and when I pull the fish out, you can hit them on the head with it until they are dead.” Soon, I had managed to club nine whitefish and six trout to death with my stick. Thomas threw them into a sled that was attached to the snowmobile, and the fish and I went on a rather sloppy ride back to the village. On our return, Thomas looked at me, covered in fish guts, blood, and scales, and said, “Well, you did alright. You can stay. But if I find out you are with Greenpeace, I will kill you.”¹² Thomas turned out to be one of my greatest teachers and friends.

In Déline, Tulit’a, and Colville Lake, working alongside various local agencies, I undertook research that was mutually beneficial to the communities and myself. In Déline, the leadership asked me to review the traditional knowledge studies that had been conducted for licensing and permitting processes. After doing so, I submitted a report to the Déline Land Corporation in October 2006, which outlined the current status and content of the studies and how they could be improved. In Tulit’a, a number of community agencies asked me to produce a semi-formal study on community perspectives regarding consultation processes, an analysis

of how community members felt they might be bettered, and a community-driven consultation plan and protocol. In February 2007, I delivered a community consultation report and recommended consultation plan and protocol to the Dene and Metis land corporations in Tuli't'a and to the Tuli't'a Band Chief and Council. The Colville Lake leadership wished to use my preliminary research findings to support its final submission to the JRP hearings. After reviewing my findings with the community at large, I drafted a report for the Ayoni Keh Land Corporation and the Behdzi Ahda First Nation in October 2007, for incorporation into their JRP submission. My research was conducted in accordance with the Northwest Territories Scientists Act, and the Aurora Research Institute issued three Northwest Territories research licences for it (licences 14063, 14103, and 14250).

During my time in the Sahtu, I employed traditional anthropological research methodology in the form of participant observation, and I used a field journal to record detailed notes of my daily experiences, thoughts, observations, and conversations. In each community, I also conducted informal interviews with governing officials, elders, local land users, teachers, youth workers, members of resource management boards including renewable resource councils, and others. I interviewed both men and women to address any potential gendered experiences or perceptions of industrial impacts, and to gain a further understanding of the gendered nature of land use and the division of labour. Prior to the interview, I obtained informed consent from participants and asked whether I could record our conversation. Many people agreed to this, and they were given copies of the recording, as were their families on request. I also received permission from the local leadership to attend gatherings and meetings such as consultation sessions with oil and gas or mining companies, and other community decision-making forums. I was permitted to attend the September 2006 Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated General Assembly in Déline. Because many consultation sessions, access and benefits negotiations, and industry trade shows were held in Calgary or Edmonton, I often met and interviewed Sahtu people there. I commonly drove them to and from the airport, and I became very familiar with their preferred places to stay and eat in the “big city.”

As part of this research, I attended all the JRP hearings held in the Sahtu in March and April 2006. I employ material from the hearings and my fieldwork to demonstrate Sahtu Dene experiences and expressions of the impact of non-renewable resource extraction, both locally and on a cumulative scale, and what Sahtu Dene people say about the way in which land

use decisions should be made. Their statements, made during the JRP hearings, are contextualized against a background of local norms and expectations regarding how people come to know the things they know, how their knowledge comes to be regarded as true, how knowledge should be communicated to and considered by others, and how these variables intersect with current land use planning and environmental assessment institutional practices.

Because my research examines current environmental assessment, which employs very specific cultural practices in constructing and analyzing industrial impacts, I also engage Sahtu Dene environmental assessment discourses and explore the ways in which local experiences and expressions of industrial impacts reflect the complex physical, social, and moral relationships between the people and their land. My understanding of the relationship between Sahtu Dene people and their land, and of how they participate in environmental assessment processes, stems from witnessing what they do on the land: how they talk about their relationships with it in the context of everyday life and in the face of increased non-renewable resource extraction, and how these discourses can sometimes conflict with environmental assessments that attempt to predict the associated environmental effects. I ultimately argue that the present form of environmental impact assessment fails to appropriately consider Sahtu Dene perspectives of ecological and socio-cultural impacts, and that reconfiguring environmental impacts as sickness may have more relevance to the experiences of local people.

SAHTU DENE DECISION MAKING:
THE TULIT'A HAND GAME TOURNAMENT

Life in the Sahtu taught me that one should never make travel plans or count on the plans of others. Of course, this statement is not a comment on the planning ability of Sahtu people or a minimization of their preparedness to travel; rather, it is quite simply that the land (rather than a human being) determines when and where one can travel. This occurred when a group of us planned to go by jet boat from Déline to Tulit'a to attend the Tulit'a Hand Game Tournament. On the evening before our departure, we were expecting the arrival of Jimmy, an experienced bushman from Tulit'a who had agreed to come up the Great Bear River to Déline, collect us, and take us downriver to Tulit'a. Just as night was falling, Jimmy called from a satellite phone to tell us that he was nearby but was

stranded on the other side of Great Bear Lake. The whitecaps were too rough, he said, and because he was a “river” person, not a “lake” person, he was wondering if someone from Déline (who had more experience on the lake) could come and guide him over. After much debate about whether he should camp overnight where he was, or whether someone should go and get him, Jimmy decided to cross the lake himself and made it safely to Déline shortly after eleven o’clock.

At six next morning, sixteen of us gathered at the Little Lake near Déline to start our journey to Tuli’t’a. There were two boats, one driven by Jimmy, and after the drivers checked the gas and supplies and debated the conditions on the lake, they decided to set out, so we loaded up and motored across the Little Lake to the small mouth where it opens into Great Bear Lake. This looked calm as we approached it, but massive five-foot waves were soon battering the boats back and forth, and sometimes taking good solid shots at the hull. It is impossible to describe the height and ferocity of the waves. Water cascaded over us, and by the time we reached the other side, many of us were drenched. Once we were on the Great Bear River, the wind died down and the waves subsided.

The Great Bear River is beautiful – often glassy, sometimes with swirling pools and currents that run an amazing blue-green. I am told that it can be very shallow in places and that its safe navigation requires the ability to “read the river.” Jimmy, it was explained, was one of the best river readers around, and he had travelled the river all his life. Along the banks, willows, spruce, and other vegetation were beginning to turn every shade of red, purple, orange, and yellow as fall came to the Sahtu. A woman pointed out the remnants of an old camp – it had spruce trees laid out as a drying rack – and said that a previous researcher had once stayed there during a medicine camp. About halfway down the river, we reached what people call the Rapids and the old site of Bennet Field. Now abandoned, Bennet Field once served as an airstrip and the landing place for many of the boats that carried uranium ore from Port Radium down the Great Bear River to the Mackenzie. Its old dock and the road leading from the water to the airstrip still remain. Jimmy pointed out the portage trail that Dene people once used to circumvent the Rapids when they voyaged by canoe and said that people whose boats were fitted with outboard motors were obliged to follow suit. We, however, were in a jet boat, he said smiling, so we did not need to portage.

Jimmy navigated easily through the Rapids, passed the Norman Mountain range, and got us to Tuli’t’a at just after one. People waited to take us to our accommodation for the next four days. As I stepped onto the dock,

I saw four butchered caribou and a moose that had been brought in from Stewart Lake, a preferred Mountain Dene harvesting area near Tuli't'a. I suspected that they would feed the people who would gather in Tuli't'a over the weekend.

Dene hand games involve two teams, in which every player conceals an object in one hand or the other, and opposing players must determine which hand holds the item. Any small object is suitable, and some people use coins, whereas others choose things of personal or spiritual significance. In these complex social practices, teams employ a series of elaborate hand gestures as they use their power to “know” which hand is the right one. If a team chooses correctly, it will be awarded a stick, and the ultimate goal of the game is to collect every stick. Drums and songs assist people with their power to choose correctly. In the past, Dene hand games were played spontaneously, often when groups met on the land or when neighbouring groups visited each other (Graville 1985; Heine 1999), and their purpose ranged from redistribution of wealth to amusement – not unlike the tournament that I attended. Although some hand games have been standardized and codified, largely to allow for uniform competition at sporting events such as the Arctic Winter Games (see Giles 2004, 2005a), they remain important aspects of community and intercommunity gatherings, and in the Sahtu at least, they are relatively spontaneous. For example, on several occasions during my fieldwork, an impromptu hand game was organized after locals learned that a delegation of people was visiting from outside the community.

The teams at the Tuli't'a Hand Game Tournament came from various communities (both Déline and Tuli't'a had two teams, and Norman Wells, Meander and Bushe Rivers in northern Alberta, and Whatì and Wekweetì in the Tlicho region each had one). I was told that people were not supposed to cheer for any particular team and that drummers were supposed to drum for everyone. The tournament was no small matter, and the stakes were significant – that year, the winning team went home with \$50,000 in prize money.

Dene hand games have been well documented by anthropologists and others working with Athabaskan peoples from the Northwest Territories, northern Alberta, northeastern British Columbia, and the Yukon (see Goulet 1998; Helm 2000; Abel 1993; Giles 2005a, 2005b). Before the time of contact with European traders, they were a fundamental part of many collective gatherings. Several elders told me that, long ago, people played the games for goods such as food, clothing, and other supplies

rather than for money. In fact, the Tuli't'a tournament was revived in 2001 as a traditional end-of-summer gathering. Back in the old days, I was told, people travelled from their winter and spring hunting places in the Mackenzie Mountains or at Great Bear Lake, gathering in Tuli't'a at the end of summer to trade their furs and get provisions before returning to their winter hunting grounds. They walked or came in moosehide boats, and reaching Tuli't'a could take more than a month. Once arrived, they rekindled family ties, made new friends, traded goods, and played hand games. In those days, powerful medicine men would meet to use their power in the hand game, and the more power they had, the better they did. Occasionally, the games became too powerful and someone would be killed. One community leader from Tuli't'a expressed his concern at the size of the tournament winnings: "\$50,000 is too much," he said. "People might bring too much power and then something could go wrong."¹³ In contemporary times, the games are played for both sport and money.

Yet even today, Sahtu participation in traditional Dene hand games involves a strengthening of family and collective ties, a formation of identity through cultural practice, and in a subtle way, a certain drawing of particular lines of authority and power. After all, those who possess power (acquired through land-based activities and conducting themselves in an appropriate manner) may be able to use it to transform the outcome of the game, just as they may apply it in other facets of daily life. David Smith (1998, 412) notes that for Chipewyan people, survival and success in life is dependent on understanding the interrelationships between human beings and the gifts of animal persons, which can be known only through a combination of practical first-hand knowledge and "supraempirical knowledge which comes mostly in dreams, but also requires being active in the bush." Working in the Sahtu during the 1970s, Scott Rushforth demonstrates Sahtu Dene associations between authority and primary knowledge acquired through personal experience. As Rushforth (1994, 336) states, "The power to inspire justifiable belief (knowledge) in others and the power to influence or determine others' conduct (having control over the actions of others) both require primary knowledge." For Rushforth, primary knowledge about the land and its resources has not been eroded by the political and economic incursion of settler states. As he (*ibid.*, 343) argues, "Dene still control local knowledge, including primary knowledge of the land and the animals that occupy it," and consequently, associated power. At a September 2006 session of the territorial legislature that was held in Déline, the chief of Déline suggested to the premier that Déline

and the government ought to “play a hand game for the land.”¹⁴ Of course, the premier took this as a joke. I, however, was not so sure that it wasn't a challenge.

The Tulit'a Hand Game Tournament began with an opening ceremony, which included a feeding of the fire, prayers, and drum songs. Following a feast, the games began in all their fury. Each team consisted of eight to ten men (unlike in other areas of the North, women do not play hand games in the Sahtu), and countless drummers created an atmosphere of excitement and sacredness as the games went on for hours. On this particular night, the matches did not conclude until one in the morning. At that point, a drum dance began. Sahtu drum dances involve a series of drummers who drum and sing particular songs. Many of these have been handed down in dreams or other prophecies; others have to do with specific peoples or places. People dance to the songs in a circle, and even the very young and the very old participate in the dancing. Drummers and dancers encourage and sometimes vie with each other as the night wears on: if the dancers begin to flag, the drummers hearten them with more songs, and if the drummers tire, the dancers keep dancing and call out for more songs. Thus, drum dances often last until the early morning, and most people stay until they end.

In the Sahtu, the events that surround hand games are as important as the games themselves. In the past, the games occurred when people from diverse groupings came together, and they are still played in that context today. Historically, Sahtu Dene social groups were flexible, and single families sometimes set off on their own to hunt or fish. At other times, multiple families might group themselves around a successful hunter or person with power who could provide food or other necessities (Abel 1993). Leadership was likewise flexible, and though recognized leaders acquired authority, they could not impose their will on others. Anyone who did not agree with the leadership (or who simply wanted to pursue different aims) was free to leave the group (Roderick Wilson 1986). As a result, decision making typically relied on persuasiveness and lengthy sifting of the issues. It was often conducted at communal gatherings such as hand games.¹⁵ Thus, the games and their associated events were political, serving as a social space in which people made decisions about their lives and futures. Most often, the results of these decisions were non-invasive in that land use activities were not intensive, and the decisions typically did not interfere with the ability of other group members to use the land as they saw fit. Today, formal decisions affecting communities are made in band offices or land corporation boardrooms, and they can permeate

every aspect of life; indeed, the decisions facing community governance bodies regarding oil and gas development on Sahtu lands have the potential to change the land and community dynamics in very profound ways.

The Tuli't'a Hand Game Tournament lasted for four days. Every day, Tuli't'a hosted a morning and an evening feast, and the games began at nine in the morning and continued until well after midnight. There was little opportunity for sleep, and people who were not playing hand games spent most of their time watching the games and visiting and reacquainting themselves with people who had come to Tuli't'a. The final game was followed by another drum dance. This time, however, as the tournament drew to a close, a respected elder and spiritual leader from Déline addressed the crowd with a long oration, saying that the focus of the tournament was the rekindling of social ties, not the importance of money. "Even sometimes it is important to weep when we are happy," he said, "and when we meet again to show our joy."¹⁶ Next, the grand chief of the Tlicho rose and spoke about the power of people when they come together and practise the ways of the Dene. He said that Dene culture and identity were important in keeping people strong in their struggle for self-government agreements and in ongoing land claim negotiations. In this way, speakers were engaging in the political processes of their ancestors: they were not following Robert's Rules of Order; they were talking about what people should do to be good human beings, to build strong communities, to be Dene. Several other people spoke, all of whom shared their knowledge without being asked, and the drumming began again; the Tuli't'a drummers were followed by the Dogrib, the Meander, and finally the drummers from Déline. Everyone danced and sang loudly, and I was reminded of Émile Durkheim's (1915) concept of collective effervescence as the power of the drums and the singing seemed to take us to another place. Many people danced late into the night, and when the drummers tired at about three, they continued to dance, using their voices and songs to keep time. A local whispered to me, "Many people now come together only for meetings or other serious events. Decisions and other important things should be made during the contexts of celebrations, in traditional ways, rather than in boardrooms."¹⁷ This comment made me think about how far removed the tournament was from the JRP hearings, held in this very space.