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# Where the water flows

A COMMUNITY IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES LOOKS TO ITS ANCESTRAL TEACHINGS TO GUIDE THE CONSERVATION PATH FORWARD

Way back in history, gigantic mammals roamed the earth and fed on humans – until the day Yámoríyá (pronounced ya-more-ee-uh) arrived from the west.

This is the beginning of a story, passed down from generation to generation in Dene communities across the Northwest Territories.

Yámoríyá hunted the deadly animals, including a family of large beavers that lived on the north shore of Great Bear Lake. He destroyed their lodges and killed the predators. The man-eaters were gone, and Yámoríyá had freed the people. Life went from darkness to light.

Today, the giants that terrorized the Dene people have been replaced by the symptoms of climate change: shorter ice seasons, changing weather patterns for travel, the disappearance of species, and the arrival of new ones.

But now, the people living in the remote community of Délı̨ę, NWT, aren't looking for a Yámoríyá-like saviour. Instead, they listen to the teachings of their elders and prophets for a way forward.

Each morning Michael Neyelle, Tsa' Tue' (pronounced tsah-too-ay) Stewardship Council Chair and Délı̨ę resident, wakes up on the shore of Great Bear Lake, the eighth largest freshwater body in the world. Its waters are clean, cold, and pristine. "It's the first thing that I see when I look out my window," says Neyelle.

Locals like to collect pails of water from the lake. "Tap water's fine, but water from the lake tastes so much better," says Neyelle. Aside from helping produce some of the best coffee and providing locals with food, the lake and its surrounding mossy wetlands and boreal forest supports many Arctic species, including barren ground and boreal woodland caribou, wolves, wolverines, muskoxen, grizzly bears, and several species of migratory birds, like the peregrine falcon.

From Neyelle's warm, comfortable home, the lake often appears calm, glass-like. However, he knows from experience how quickly conditions can change. "This lake is so unpredictable. It's very dangerous," he says. He speaks of whitecaps and rolling waves.

## Did you know

15 per cent of Canada's wetlands are located in the Northwest Territories? That's approximately 45 to 47 million acres (18.2 to 19 million hectares) of wetlands, making the territory an ideal spot for breeding and staging waterfowl. The Tsá Túé International Biosphere Reserve encompasses five per cent of NWT's wetlands.

In one of his earliest memories of Great Bear Lake, he was a boy in a boat with his father. The lake, so large it can produce its own weather system, was still. The pair was able to travel to a bay where stretches of soft sand, as far as his young eyes could see, had replaced rocky, pebbled shores. “It was beautiful,” recalls Neyelle.

Neyelle is a wealth of information. He knows the lake, his native language, and his community. But it’s all knowledge he’s had to regain. As a young boy, he was forced to leave home to attend residential school. When he returned to D  l  n   many years later, he’d lost his ability to live on the land and fluently speak his mother tongue. He re-immersed himself into his cultural traditions. “It was really hard, but eventually, it all came back,” says Neyelle.

Today, he sits as chair on the council and works as an interpreter. It’s a task that presents its own challenges, he says. The Saht  got’  n   language, thousands of years old, doesn’t include terms for new words like computer, iPhone – or climate change.

Great Bear Lake and its surrounding wetlands offer immense ecological and culture values. Over the last 30 years, the Indigenous people of D  l  n   have worked through various land claims with federal and territorial governments that allow them to control how the land is used.

“As Aboriginal people we always want to look after the land, the water, the environment and wildlife,” says former D  l  n   Chief Leonard Kenny. “This falls under our responsibilities as Aboriginal people.”

Kenny and other members have worked tirelessly to ensure the future of the lake is secure, so it’s pristine “for all generations,” says Kenny.

This sense of responsibility was heightened by the late Dene prophet, Louie Ayah. One of Ayah’s foretellings in particular haunts Neyelle.

Ayah died in 1940. In his lifetime, he made more than 30 prophecies. One predicted the arrival of three strange animals – and in 2008, three polar bears wandered into D  l  n  . It was a first. Marine animals generally stay close to the ocean, but these bears travelled over a thousand kilometres inland to reach the community. Another prophecy, and the one that troubles Neyelle, envisions a time when Great Bear Lake will be the final source of fresh water.

“My elders and ancestors have predicted that this will be the last lake to provide in this world, when the world gets into all these problems with food, water and, everything. Just that prediction alone makes me want to try hard to do whatever I can,” says Neyelle. “It’s something that is on my mind all the time.”

Outside the late Ayah’s home on the shore of Great Bear Lake, on a mid-August day in D  l  n  , the sky is overcast and people wear rain coats. While rain isn’t new to the Northwest Territories, it’s becoming more common. And according to research published by the territory’s Department of Environment and Natural Resources, it’s likely to remain, as the North continues to warm.

Inside the D  l  n   community centre, Neyelle listens intently to dignitaries from various organizations deliver speeches. He translates their words to Saht  got’  n  , the language of his ancestors. People from across Canada, and beyond, have travelled by plane to the remote community to celebrate.



Drummers perform inside the late prophet Louie Ayah’s home. “Being Dene is what you do, what we all share. One of the key elements is we have to protect nature,” says D  l  n   resident Peter Menacho.



A moment of reverence inside the late prophet’s home.



On March 19, in Lima, Peru – more than 9,400 kilometres away – Délıne was recognized for its commitment to safeguarding the land and water, with a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) International Biosphere Reserve Designation.

Described as an award of excellence, the designation recognizes a geographical area (23,058,144 acres, or 9,331,300 hectares) of land and water, where there is a balance between humans and nature. The biosphere reserve, Tsá Tué, is named for the giant beavers (tsá) Yámoriyá once chased.

Danika Littlechild, vice president of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, is at the August celebration in Délıne. As the first Indigenous woman to hold her post within the UN, Littlechild applauds the conservation work by the community of Délıne. “What you have done here will have ripple effects far beyond what you can see,” she says.

How did a community of approximately 600 people garner the attention of the United Nations? According to Neyelle, there were two key ingredients: a reverence for the teachings of elders, and co-operation.

“We’ve grown up to respect our elders and when they speak, we listen,” says Neyelle.

And when it comes to co-operation, the community of Délıne doesn’t just work together; they work with others outside the community, like the International Boreal Conservation Campaign (IBCC).

IBCC is an initiative that teams together resources and staff from The Pew Charitable Trusts, Ducks Unlimited and other partners to conserve the boreal forest – an important breeding area for North American waterfowl.

The partner members of IBCC supported Délıne’s bid for the UNESCO designation.

According to Les Bogdan, Ducks Unlimited Canada’s (DUC) director of regional operations, British Columbia/ boreal region – who sits as a member on the IBCC board – the partnership between residents in Délıne and DUC signals a more inclusive style of conservation work.

“People tend to envision conservation taking place through science and technical reports, or in the field doing restoration work,” says Bogden. “But often it’s about forming partnerships. To conserve important lands in the boreal forest, we must work with Indigenous groups, just as we have in the community of Délıne,” he says, adding that DUC provided the community with an online mapping application to support them in their land-use management.

Accessible by plane and boat, and ice roads in winter, Délıne is providing a model for Indigenous-led land management. The Dene people hope their land and lake comes up in conversations of those living elsewhere in Canada and around the world.

On this summer evening, young and old Dene men beat æexele (pronounced ex-ell-eh), and people join together to dance and celebrate as one. The Dene have accepted a Yámoriyá-like task to safeguard the natural environment...for everyone.

“What we’re doing is for all Canadians, and for all youth of the world,” says Neyelle.



Top: Michael Neyelle, Tsá' Tue' Stewardship Council Chair.

Below: The small town of Délıne is nestled on the shores of Great Bear Lake, the eighth largest freshwater lake in the world.



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