

Research Bulletin

NWT Cumulative Impact Monitoring Program

“What Would Our Grandparents Do?”: Bringing Forward Déljnē’s Connection to Fish to Protect the Sahtú Ecosystem

Summary

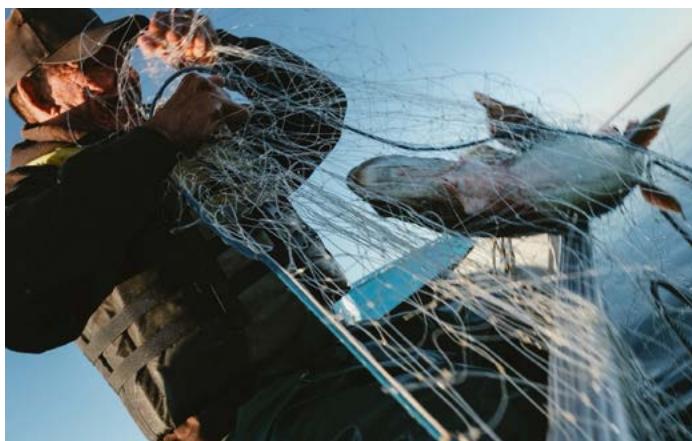
Sahtúgot’jne (Dene of Great Bear Lake) in Déljnē have a deep cultural and spiritual connection to the Sahtú (Great Bear Lake) ecosystem, but this relationship is threatened by human pressures and climate change. This community-led project recorded Sahtúgot’jne views on how they relate to fish and the Sahtú ecosystem and the changes they’ve experienced over time. The community created an online map to share knowledge and support their continued care for the ecosystem. Dene ts’lı (cultural identity connected to the land and water) and Dene ɂęɂa (cultural laws or principles for being a good human and respecting the ecosystem) are key to facing growing challenges and should guide how the land and water are protected.

Why is This Important?

Déljnē prophets and Elders have long spoken about how the health of the Sahtú depends on the principles of Dene stewardship, which in turn provides a reliable and high-quality food source (Dene béré) for Sahtúgot’jne.

What Did We Do?

Guided by Elders, we created spaces for Déljnē community members to share their spiritual and cultural connections to fish. They spoke about harvesting, preparing, sharing, and eating fish and the threats to these practices. We built a community-owned online map (Déljnē Atlas) that documents disruptions to fishing practices, access to traditional locations and travelling conditions and assesses cumulative impacts affecting people’s relationships with the land and with fish. To support ongoing learning, we then helped community members learn to use the Déljnē Atlas and add new information.



Déljnē Elder, George Kenny, harvests Sahba (Lake Trout) from Sahtú.
(Credit: J. Strube)

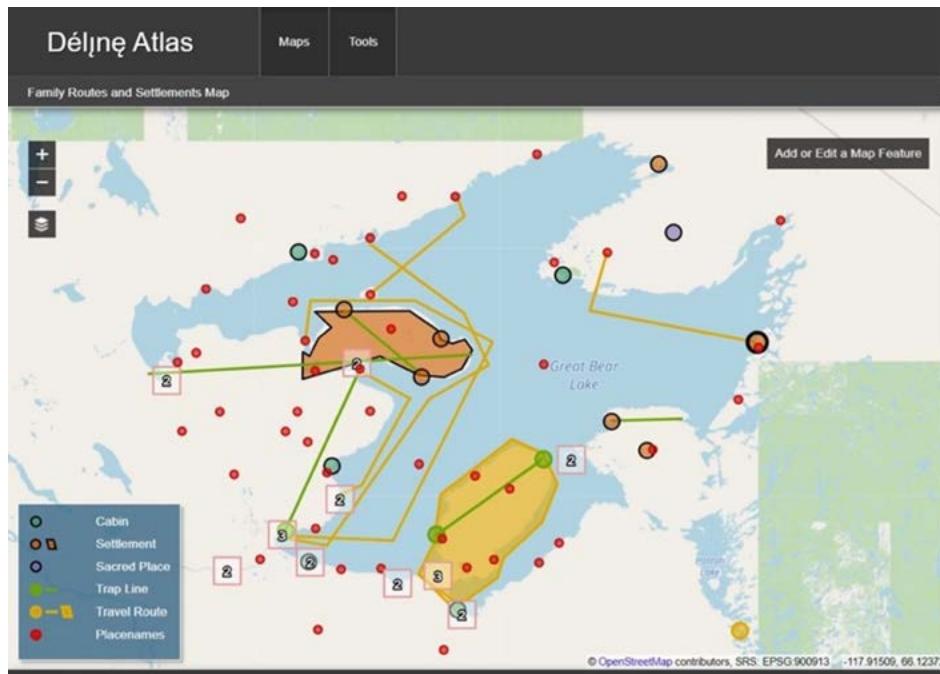


What Did We Find?

- Fish are a dietary staple for Sahtúgot’ne and are at the core of their cultural identity.
- Whitefish are an essential, culturally important food source, but are getting more difficult to access and source.
- The Dene *pepa* are cultural laws or principles for respectfully harvesting, preparing, sharing, trading, and eating fish.
- The bond between the Sahtúgot’ne people and fish is guided by these respectful ways, and part of their spiritual connection to the Sahtú ecosystem.
- Colonial fisheries management, sport fishing, resource development, industrialization, and climate change have made it harder for Sahtúgot’ne to follow these principles.

What Does This Mean?

Cumulative impacts affect every part of the Sahtúgot’ne relationship with fish – cultural identity, health, economy, spirituality, environmental governance, stewardship, and food sovereignty. This bond is growing again because of local Dene Kádá language, traditional harvesting, and sharing knowledge between generations. To protect Indigenous cultures and the environment, which go hand in hand, we need to shift toward Indigenous stewardship.



Screenshot of the Dél̨ne Atlas showing Family Routes and Settlements.

What's Next?

The results of this project will inform community decisions about conservation planning and self-determination that revitalize Sahtúgot’ne relationships with fish and protect the watershed from growing pressures. As the community map grows, it can continue supporting Sahtúgot’ne-fish relationships into the future.

For More Information

Edward Reeves, Dél̨ne ɻehdzo Got’ne (Dél̨ne Renewable Resources Council)
drrc.manager@gov.deline.ca

<https://deline.ca/en>

NWT Cumulative Impact Monitoring Program (CIMP229)

NWT CIMP is a source of environmental monitoring and research. The program coordinates, conducts and funds the collection, analysis and reporting of information related to NWT environmental conditions. If you’re conducting environmental monitoring and research, consider sharing your information with northern residents and decision-makers in a Bulletin.