

Hıdó Gogha Sėnégots'ırá (Planning for the Future)

Community-led conservation planning in the
Sahtú region is prioritizing and regenerating
Indigenous Knowledge, law, and way of life.

*Fireweed (Chamerion angustifolium) in the height of summer, Mackenzie Mountains, Sahtu
Lands, Northwest Territories, Canada.*



Summer sunrise in the Mackenzie Mountains, K'á Tə Area (Plains of Abraham), Northwest Territories, Canada. © Tracey Williams

“We are re-building our relationship with wildlife. The wildlife is fine. The water is fine. The land is fine. It always goes back to us as a people. What kind of relationship do you want to have with lands, water and wildlife, it always comes back to us. Look at the history of the world, Canada, we can’t talk about caribou, we have to talk about us, our relationship to it.”

BACKGROUND

The Sahtú region of Canada’s Northwest Territories (NWT) is Dene (K’áhsho Got’jñę, Dehlá Got’jñę, Shúhtaot’jñę, K’áálq Got’jñę, and Sahtúot’jñę) and Métis homeland. Stretching from the Mackenzie Mountains in the west to the tundra in the east, the Sahtú region is a place where spiritual relationships with Dene nęné (the land) and animals are maintained, and náowerá (knowledge) of the land is shared across generations through language, song, and stories —Dene and Métis náowerá support wise land stewardship.

In 1993, Sahtú Dene and Métis signed a modern treaty with the governments of Canada and the NWT. The land claim envisions a conservation system rooted in Sahtú Dene and Métis ways of life and practices. It supports their meaningful participation in planning and decision-making about landscape and wildlife.

ʔehdzo Got’jñę Gots’ę Nákedı (Sahtú Renewable Resources Board – SRRB) is the co-management body responsible for wildlife, habitat, and harvesting in the Sahtú Settlement Area. The land claim directs ʔehdzo Got’jñę Gots’ę Nákedı and the five ʔehdzo got’jñę (renewable resources councils), one for each Sahtú community, to work together to maintain Dene and Métis harvesting traditions and keep the land and animals healthy for future generations.



Youth & Elders hike in the traditional area of K’á Tə enjoying a summer afternoon during a Níó Nę P’ęné Plan gathering. © Tracey Williams

PROCESS

Caribou occupy a central place in the livelihoods and identities of Sahtú Dene and Métis. However, caribou have not been available as they once were. Furthermore, Sahtú communities feel that the government’s conservation approach is ineffective and harmful to caribou and people’s relationship with caribou. In April 2015, the five Sahtú communities gathered in Colville Lake to discuss these issues. At that meeting, they passed joint resolutions supporting traditional Dene ʔeʔa (law) on relationships with caribou and a Sahtú-developed caribou management plan.

Since that time, the ʔehdzo Got’jñę Gots’ę Nákedı also referred to as the Sahtú Renewable Resources Board (SRRB), has been developing the concept, process, and content for a community-led conservation planning approach in the Sahtú region. This approach utilizes and borrows from the Australian adaptation of Open Standards, the Conservation Planning Process, and Healthy Country Planning to help inform their own process. Hjdó Gogha Sénégots’íʔá, the term the SRRB formally adopted for their approach in 2020, is a Dene phrase that translates as ‘Planning for the future.’ Today, Hjdó Gogha Sénégots’íʔá is recognized as the Sahtú-specific adaptation of

Healthy Country Planning and other science-based planning processes, that acknowledge Sahtú values and priorities for managing the landscape are not just valuable contributions for the community conservation plans but for improving co-management decision-making in line with Indigenous knowledge of the lands and waters of the Sahtú. Other NWT planning processes have also informed it, including the Taking Care of Caribou Plan (2014). Most importantly, though, Hjdó Gogha Sénégots’íʔá has evolved with guidance from the Sahtú communities and with contributions to longstanding and ongoing Dene and Métis practices in stewardship.

Hjdó Gogha Sénégots’íʔá, developed in tandem with a five-part series of public listening sessions that looked to answer the question: “What are the most effective ways to conserve caribou?” Community planning and readiness workshops preceded each public listening session, not only have the public listening sessions facilitated community discussions about wildlife planning for the future, but the series has also provided a mechanism for developing a regional approach to community-led conservation planning.

Níó Nę P’ęné Begháré Shúhta Gogepé Narehʔá

Trails of the Mountain Caribou plan is unique because it was jointly developed by the Tulíʔa and Norman Wells ʔehdzo Got’jñę (NWT) and Tu Łidlini (Ross River) Dena Council (Yukon). Known as an area that encompasses all of nature and holds everything together, Níó Nę P’ęné—the Shúhtaot’jñę (Mountain Dene) name for the backbone of the Mackenzie Mountains—has been a gathering place for people and caribou for thousands of years.

Guided by the principles of Healthy Country Planning and building on the SRRB’s learnings from community conservation planning, work on a plan for Níó Nę P’ęné was drafted in the mountains in 2017, and refined in 2019. Níó Nę P’ęné Begháré Shúhta Gogepé Narehʔá prioritizes the knowledge, values and goals of Shúhtaot’jñę and Kaska Dena. It includes a research, monitoring, and land protection method that will keep Dene/Dena language, law, ways of life, and relations to caribou strong.

The planning process helped to anchor ongoing research with many partners & prioritize the Nations, with a shared territory bisected by a colonial border, to establish common ground for realizing their co-management responsibilities to caribou and landscape and build capacity for stewardship and monitoring. It has also created space for collaboration with other Indigenous communities and organizations, scientists, outfitters, researchers, and multiple levels of government in ways that recognize and strengthen Shúhtaot’jñę and Kaska Dena authority and leadership in stewardship.



The green-bordered outline defines the Sahtú regional area of the Northwest Territories, Canada. The co-management authority responsible for wildlife has been working with the Indigenous Sahtú communities to develop their own community conservation planning process called “Hjdó Gogha Sénégots’íʔá” (Planning for the Future – PFF).



ʔehdzo Gotʔinę Gotsʔé Nákedí- Sahtú Renewable Resources Board (SRRB), in partnership with Sahttu leaders from Tulít á and Norman Wells ʔehdzo Gotʔinę - Renewable Resources Councils, & Tu Łidlini leaders (Ross River Dena, Yukon) collaborated to create the Nio Nę Pʔenę Shúhta Goʔepé Narehʔá (Trails of the Mountain Caribou Plan). Participants in the formative planning event in 2017 are pictured here. © SRRB

OUTCOME

The SRRB believes that Hjdó Gogha Sénégotsʔá, which is community-led and prioritizes Dene and Métis náoweráand practices, is not only a more rights-compliant approach to conservation, but it also provides a way to achieve the objectives of the land claim better. Hjdó Gogha Sénégotsʔá involves cross-cultural, on the land, and youth-centered approaches; builds on and strengthens community governance; and supports training, leadership development, and economic opportunities for Sahtú participants. Furthermore, decision-makers (including the SRRB) must work closely with harvesters, community leadership organizations, community members and youth to ensure better conservation outcomes and more effective co-management decisions.

Hjdó Gogha Sénégotsʔá is guided by three interdependent principles:

1. Planning and decisions should account for ʔasʔl godí hé dene tsʔl hé (All living things and Dene ways of being).
2. In Dene ʔeʔa people and wildlife are called upon to respect each other's autonomy through ʔedetsʔé kʔótsʔerewe (self-regulation).
3. Dene and Métis participation in conservation efforts with government depends on godí kehtsʔ (Fair consideration or coming together of diverse perspectives or ethical space).

To date, Sahtú communities have developed three conservation-focused plans for the future:

- Déljné's Belare Wíle Gotsʔé ʔekwé – Caribou for All Time Plan (2016);
- Colville Lake's Dehlá Gotʔinę ʔədə Plan and Tsʔduweh ʔədə ʔeʔá (2020); and
- Nio Nę Pʔenę Begháré Shúhta Goʔepé Narehʔá – Trails of the Mountain Caribou Plan

The SRRB invited feedback on the formal Hjdó Gogha Sénégotsʔá (Planning for the Future) policy as part of the Déljné public listening session on ʔeʔetsʔewéhkwe godí (living with wildlife) – predators and competitors in April 2022. Currently, the board and its partners are working on a toolkit that will provide communities engaging in Hjdó Gogha Sénégotsʔá with practical tools, templates and tips.

Caribou has been the focal point of planning so far, still, these plans may become broader and more holistic, as Hjdó Gogha Sénégotsʔá is connected to food security planning, the stewardship of other wildlife and wildlife landscapes, cultural expression, and many other aspects of Sahtú Dene/Métis tsʔl (ways of life).