

Following the Trails of Our Ancestors: Re-Grounding Tłı̄chǫ Knowledge on the Land

John B. Zoe

Thank you very much, it's a pleasure to be here. It goes to show that there is a lot of interest in on-the-land activity. And I remember a long time ago, an Elder told me that if you've got nothing to talk about, at least talk about your experience. Those experiences are based on my activity through work and initiatives, and one of them is remembering my early childhood.

I remember people going out to the barrenlands by boat before they started using airplanes back in the seventies. You'd see people get in a boat and disappear out onto the lake, not to be heard from for more than a couple of weeks, and when they came back there was a lot of celebration. At that time, it was kind of initiated by the community, but before that people just lived on the landscape.

Our first real organized canoe trip happened in 1988 when we were meeting with Elders, talking about going on the land and maybe even having a gathering out somewhere in the bush. They said, "We're living in times of conflict and we need something to have peace within ourselves and among each other so that we're speaking the same language and we have the same goals. And one of the best ways to do that is to go back onto the land." So they determined that we should go back to Mesa Lake. It's a peacemaking place from the 1800s. I had heard the stories before, but to see it for the first time was kind of a dream for me at the time.

The funny thing is, the further back you go, the less you see material things, because all they did was take their tents and their rifles. The rest they just harvested from the land while they were there, and it's very difficult to do that now.

When the time came to talk about how we were going to go there, the message from the old people was simple: We'll fly; you guys go by boat. And so that's how we ended up with our first big on-the-land program in 1988 and we had over 500 people there.

We tried to do a second one the year after in 1989. We joined forces with our regional body that manages education. They were looking for a mission statement for the schools, so we had an

Elders' conference made up of strictly Elders and we said, "No translation, we're just going to talk in our language and we'll transcribe it later." So they talked for a good three days and that's where work on the document, *Strong Like Two People*¹, began. During those three days, they reviewed the history to where we are today and the challenges of the day: that we need to ensure our language, culture, way of life is passed on, but at the same time respect the future generations that are getting involved in modern day things. Really, this is not about giving up who we are but strengthening what we have, so that we should be strong like we were before but take the modern tools so we can benefit from programs and things that can be developed through there.

So 1989 became about bringing the same people back into the bush in a different location. We went there by boat again but this one was on a different trail, and when we got there they again talked for three days about how we can integrate education and culture. So we produced another big booklet just from translation. Then in 1990, the Elders got together and produced from those proceedings the *Strong Like Two People* document.

It was around that time in the early 1990s that it was very difficult to find people to go out in the bush with – very, very difficult to find and motivate people to do anything. I'm not saying that people weren't going in the bush – they were – but more on an individual or family basis. For a big group, it wasn't happening.

Then I saw that the Prince of Wales (Northern Heritage Centre) was going to do an archaeological survey for the first time. So I kind of lobbied my way into it and we ended up working with an Elder named Harry Simpson doing a survey for three summers. At the end of the third summer, we went to the place where he spent his childhood, where his parents are buried, and where they used to live. The places where they lived were still intact as if he left it yesterday.

And he was saying, "What happened to all these people? We're here, we're doing documentation of

people who remember who was there, and I have to remember it so it can be put in a document. But where's our people? They're not here anymore. They're in our communities. The land seems to be empty." And that emptiness is something that goes back to the beginning of our own time, when the land was being threatened and devoid of people because there was conflict between animals and people.

In that way, the story of Yamozha² started to emerge. Even though I'd heard about it before,

of archaeological material where people in ancient times were breaking off stones and looking for the right ones to make tools from. It's just a big gravel pile that must have been going on for thousands of years. We can see where people knelt next to a crack in a rock to take one of these stones and drop it in there. There's supposed to be water on top of this hill so that if the rock falls into the water and it hits the side, it means that the earth is comfortable with you. And if you don't hear it, it doesn't mean that you give up right then and there; it's just a signal to



Photo Credit: Pat Kane

Discussing the Tlicho Nation's 'Trails of our Ancestors' on-the-land programs, John B. Zoe reminds Summit attendees that the land is the original teacher, the site of language, history, and the keys to survival.

going to the actual sites was doing things in ritual. One place is where Yamozha and one of his brothers were discovered by an old man, who started to raise them; at camp, people were moving on but he decided to stay where he was to raise those two boys. When time went by and they had gotten a little bit older, they'd like to play tricks on the old man, so when he was sleeping they carved a hole on top of his head and threw in some hot rocks. The old man had a seizure, and if you look at one of your booklets you'll find that rock is called Kweedoò.³

On one of our travels, we came up to this site and we climbed it. We could see the top of the old man's head, and a big crack in it, and then a big pile

say that maybe you should make adjustment to your life, because everything pre-contact was about being in spirit with the land, the environment, the animals.

The conflict between animals and people was taken care of by Yamozha in the story about his travels. Those sites he visited, there are very many along where he traveled, all the way to the North Arm and continuing on to the East Arm, for somebody else to pick it up. I get to hear all these stories, but at the same time I am kind of involved to some degree on the political side – not upfront but in the background – so I get to hear a lot of things, too, about the early days when the land and environment were being taken without consultation.

When our people rose to work together, somehow they had to pick a logo. And if you remember the old days of the Dene Nation they had a kind of bird – some people would say it's a raven and others would say maybe an eagle, but regardless it goes back to the beginning of time. They chose a bird that can speak many languages, because when the old people got together back in the early seventies they knew that speaking in one voice in a language that they can all understand among each other was important. So I think that carried for a long time until the organization became organized. When you get organized you have to transform – now you have an office, you have a constitution, you have a bank account. Now you can start measuring the linear time of the organization and choosing a leadership and all that kind of stuff.

They came up with the second logo. And the second logo that came up in the mid-seventies was the logo of Yamozha. Yamozha, for the regions – especially speaking for our region – is a time before contact, of how the world was at the time. People were in spirit with the environment, with the animals and everything within it, and our big law at the time, the law of Yamozha, was to co-exist with your surroundings, in a landscape that you're familiar with. The land shelters, holds, gives indicators of what it has. And it has very many fishing holes – lots of them. The early place names that follow the story of Yamozha chart out his travels and the places that he's been, and what happened pre-contact.

After Yamozha resolved the conflict between people and the animals, people started to put place names on the ground to mark out where the fishing holes are, where the caribou crossings are, where the caribou fencing is, all the quarry sites, where the moose live. Even getting a little more technical — in our area we have five substances of soil and we have maybe about seven trees at least. So, if you match the substance of soil with the tree and put in a place name, that kind of makes a determination of the type of fish in that area.

The early place names from pre-contact were not associated with the names of people themselves, because it was more important to know where the animals were. At that time, people's experiences were documented on the land so that the land starts to tell the story for us to pass on through the generations whenever we travel on it. The land provides all this activity. And the people get to know the land because the land speaks to them about what it has and how those things can be used. So, the language derives from the landscape, and the more connected we are to the landscape, the stronger the language is.

After contact, early explorers were shown the country. They were shown our resources, how we live, how we can survive, and the stories that we have. But really what they were doing was taking an inventory of what we have, the richness of the land and the map towards future exploration. So the first impact was that there were now other people that we had to share resources with. That was first contact. And when trade came in we continued to harvest, maybe even a little extra so that they could be given to trade.

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Eventually came contact with governments. They needed an agreement, because it was a requirement of them from the 1763 [Royal] Proclamation that they had to secure the rights from the Aboriginal people in order to make it public. The early written treaties were about, okay, now we have the land, we have the ability to give the interest to developers. So those developers – mining companies and anybody else – are part of the treaty partnership. And it's more recently through IBAs [impact benefit agreements] that we have to say, well, you were given the rights through the treaties – the written version. But our understanding of what we have is that the landscape is going to be altered forever. The richness from the land will be extracted. And whatever is left over from it, the waste, is what we would end up with. So it's very important to know that those things were given through the treaty, and so IBAs, impact benefit agreements, have to be done. Those monies belong to you and it comes from the exploration of those lands. It's very important to not sink it into more contemporary training but to use those monies to sprinkle people back onto the landscape. What else are you going to use it for? To set up another office program? No. It came from the exploration, so let's sprinkle people back onto the land.

What happened, interestingly enough, is that those early contacts with the newcomers were also documented onto the landscape. So we know where the early explorers came, where they travelled, and the hardships that they had, and the relationship – or not having a relationship – with you is also part of that narrative. Somehow, we've been following that story to where we are today. It doesn't take away from the original documentation – what the

landscape is about. We are part of that original landscape. It's never going to move. So, when you start talking about Aboriginal rights – treaty rights come later – it means that you use this land in a way that it renews itself; your relationship with it, your leadership with it, your way of life, it still continues to be there today.

When we talk about land claims and self-government, we know that we can't do anything to alter the landscape, because it's not possible; the stories that belong with it are still there, but we need to bring them forth. So when we talk about self-government, people have many minds about it. But we know that there is a system of leadership that's attached to pre-contact times. In our communities we know they exist; they're just not part of the local structure, but they exist.

Through the Indian Act after the treaties, a system was set up – a chief and band council – so that Canada could perform exchanges with people who were not recognizable as an entity in Canada. To transfer public monies, you have to give it to some accountable entity, so how do you give entity to people of treaty status? Very difficult. So one of the ways of them dealing with their management of people was to create the [Indian] Act so that decisions can go back and forth, and their communication pipeline is the Band Council Resolution. You pass a resolution and sign it and send it to Indian Affairs and then they'll bring back a cheque for core funding and then you have to go back and forth and do reports. That system has been with us at least since 1870. It's like living in a bubble, because remember that Aboriginal people didn't get to vote until the 1960s. And you're not registered anywhere. So the only way that some form of relief could happen was through that process.

But it didn't change where people were at. They still lived off the land, they still practiced their ways of living, and today's term "governance" is really about what kind of structure would work that takes into consideration the old system and some blended new ones. Because we're dealing with accountability and selection of leadership and transparency, so some structure has to be brought in. But it's not the structure that owns the land; it's the people. The structure is just to provide accountability to them. Some authority rests with those elected bodies, but it's limited to the point where they can't affect your way of life, so it's just a management of modern day resources but anchored into protecting what was there before.

So when we're going forward, we see that the influence from the outside sources is very, very strong.

We didn't forget who we were. But we have ridden the wave of what was made available and what is recognized by the authorities of Canada to the point where we kind of know where we're from, but we're kind of just a step away from where we were before. And the further you step away from the land, the further you get away from the original teacher of the language; that is, the land. It first spoke to us to say, here's where the fish are, here's where the moose lives, here's where the caribou cross, and this is where good berries are – all that kind of information was provided to us. It communicated with us. And in that communication, we need to bring people back onto the landscape so that we reconnect with that environment of teaching.

That's what we're really talking about, is grounding – somehow finding a way of grounding – ourselves back onto the land so that we are connected to the natural environment for teaching the languages and sharing our experiences as to what the land holds — all the stories from the beginning of our own time and all the impacted place names since the early explorers came in. Ironically, most of those impacted place names are negative. It's just to show that there were events that happened in these areas that allowed for some destruction to the landscape. And we have very many of those. There are levels of place names, so if you go on the landscape and travel the trails and you hear of a place name following the traditional methods, you know how old that place is and which category it comes from.

One of the early things that I was involved in back in the early eighties was I got an opportunity to work with Elders. I was working as a stationary engineer at the Chief Jimmy Bruneau School and you get to see a lot of officials go through the building, mostly from Yellowknife – superintendents of education and managers that come in. So when you're going from station to station to check on your equipment, I was on one of those rounds, and in the early days before the reconstruction of the school they had little seminar rooms with little small elementary seats. And I couldn't ignore but see one of those officials meeting with some Elders in a little seminar room sitting on these little chairs. The official kind of motioned for me to come over. So I came over and what he wanted to do was he wanted me to interpret some of these policy changes and the impacts that they were going to have. I didn't hear anything about language, I didn't hear anything about the way of life, and so these old guys had to kind of try to figure out what the benefit was of doing some of that policy around teaching the young people.

I guess they kind of liked the way that I interpreted, so they got me to start hanging around with them and that started the relationship towards getting more involved towards a land claim back in the eighties. After the demise of the Dene-Métis agreement, we went regional and we had to get a chief negotiator. So they asked me to be the chief

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negotiator and I said, “I don’t know anything about land; you might be better off getting some administrator to do it, I don’t think I can do it.”

One of the things that roomful of Elders said was, “We’re not asking for your opinion, we’re saying we want you – take it. Because there’s over fifty of us here, if we add up all our years it adds up to over a thousand years of knowledge and it’s those things that we want protected. We can teach all that stuff but it means going back onto the land and having many camp fires, because any time you build a campfire it draws people to it and then people exchange information. So the more campfires you have, the more you know.”

So what we have is a system of governance that was transported into the area. And most of our disputes are always about what are we trying to implement, because some of the things that we’re implementing with modern governments is to weaken people more. Our view is that we should be strengthening ourselves, but do it in a way that we “reconcile” our issues towards a common understanding for delivery. That’s a term that’s starting to pop up on the national levels, but where does it touch the ground? It touches the ground at the local level.

Decolonization is what we had before – the first recording of pre-contact, before colonization. Since then we’ve been impacted by early explorers, trade, developers. Those kinds of things draw us away from our original source, the strength to fight and, not only fight, but to put it into terms of development to ensure that at least minimal damage is done.

So today when we talk about doing traditional activity, on-the-land activity, it’s super hard – very, very hard. You need to have a community of people – administrators, Elders – all these people to come together to organize. If you want to do anything in modern education and training, that’s the easy part.

It’s very, very easy to be drawn there. But we need to do a blend. And one of the original teachers of on-the-land activity is the stories that were there before, the dialogue that’s been honed for thousands of years. Human nature is very interesting; without all the modern benefits that we have, it allows you to reconnect in a hard way. The Elders still hold those stories. Our teachers closest to the land are the Elders. We need to look at their stories and map out our travels so that we touch base on everything that means everything to us. We have our traditional teachers, traditional counsellors, and spiritual leaders that we need to rely on a little bit more, because in the old way, they are naturally qualified to teach us things. In a modern context, it really means finding a way of moving through the architectural policies that exist to try to keep you away from the funds. We also need experts to deal with those kinds of things.

So in the end it’s about, how do we reconnect to on-the-land programming? The longer we’re a step away from it, the more drawn in we are to the modern context. To me, on-the-land programming is to put your feet back onto the original landscape through travel and to hear the original stories of how people survived, the stories that come from it, and the place names tell you stories along the way. In the end, the land speaks for itself and all we do is talk about our experiences.

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Our experience is about coming to grips that we have the responsibility of ensuring that there is a continuation of the original story in a modern context, that that story has to be told, and those stories can only happen by reconnecting with the traditional teachers, counsellors, spiritual leaders as a basis for how we can manage the modern context of making sure those things happen. It means that we have to meet halfway somewhere. And I think a get-together like this is the beginning of those things.

These are just a sample of our own experiences, but we’ve been doing Trails of our Ancestors since 1995. Earlier I was saying I was travelling with Harry Simpson and in the last year we were in a tent, we were sharing a tent, and he says, “Look, we’ve been doing it for three summers and all this

stuff is going to end up in a museum and nobody's ever going to see it; it's not going to see the light of day. Where's our people anyways? We need to get them out back on the landscape; we should start something." So we say that in the booklet. If you go to the first page there's a picture of Harry as one of the founding members of Trails of our Ancestors. The idea was, let's get youth back onto the landscape so that they get to experience what we have. We need to tell them these stories because the old people, they inherited all this knowledge but they have nobody to pass it on to. And so they're full of it. And sometimes when Elders speak they say, "Well, I can't hang on to the stuff any more because it hurts to keep it in," so they let it out to anybody. It might not be reaching the right ears, but we need to create a forum for that.

So we've been doing the Trails of our Ancestors on an annual basis a little over 10 years, and the first group that we sent out was about 30. Since then it's been averaging between 30 and 150 people on a yearly basis. By a rough calculation, over 20 years a little over a thousand individuals have had the experience. Twenty years sounds like a long time but it's really short time if you add all the times that we were there out on the landscape with as much youth as possible. If we add up all the days, it adds up to less than a year.

The challenge is that the same youth are going to spend at least 12 years in the North in education. So we need to anchor them to the original strength,

which is the landscape. It's not easy today. It's hard, but if we have the same type of commitment that was there before I'm sure we'll get there.

The idea is to put our feet back to where they were before. All these things that have happened in more modern times is something that has to be dealt with, but it shouldn't be what drives us. We need to put those things aside over time as individuals and as a collective to say that that's not what drives us today. We're going to get back on the original vehicle and ride that, and strengthen ourselves in a modern context as to how these things flow to make those things work. ●

Editor's note: This piece has been edited for length and clarity

John B. Zoe is a member of the Tłı̨chǫ First Nation who was born, raised, and continues to reside in Behchokòk in the Northwest Territories. He spoke about the Tłı̨chǫ First Nation Trails of our Ancestors Initiative.

Notes:

- 1 *Strong Like Two People: The development of a mission statement for the Dogrib schools, Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, Rae-Edzo, N.W.T., 1991.*
- 2 Yamozha is a cultural hero and historic lawmaker of the Dene, known as the transformer for his work defeating enemies and making the world safe. His name means "traveler" or "wanderer." He is known by other names in Denendeh, including Yamoria, Yabatheya, Yamohdeyi, Yamba Deja, Zhambadezha, Yampa Deja, Yabatheya.
- 3 <https://www.tlicho.ca/sites/default/files/TrailsofOurAncestors.pdf>