

FORAGER

A woman and a man are sitting in a snowy landscape. The woman on the left is wearing a brown and white fur hooded parka with reindeer antlers. She is holding her hands together. The man on the right is wearing a similar fur outfit with a large white fur beard and antlers. He is smiling. They are both wearing heavy fur boots. The background is a bright, snowy field.

Number 2 Fall 2015

**The Great White North:
Cultures of the Taiga and Tundra**

Spruce Trees and Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge

Alestine Andre and Ingrid Kritsch

Tales of the Northern Lights

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Reindeer and the Sami Calendar

Erika Driedger

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Spruce Trees in Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge

Their Importance in the Northwest Territories

ALESTINE ANDRE AND INGRID KRITSCH

For the Gwich'in of the Northwest Territories, the spruce tree has held particular significance for generations. Now through intergenerational programs the Gwich'in are revitalizing their Traditional Knowledge and helping youth from their communities interact with that knowledge.



INGRID KRITSCH, GSCI

Gwich'ya Gwich'in elder Hyacinthe Andre telling a travelling story to daughter Alestine Andre at Nihtavan Diniinlee (literally translated as 'A chain of lakes-many are lined up') in June 1993

Spruce Tree / Ts'iivii – "The spruce tree is one of the very best medicines that we have. We can use most of a day to talk about and work with that whole tree. There is so much to it."

— Teetł'it Gwich'in elder Ruth Welsh, July 2002.

For thousands of years, the Gwich'in living in the boreal forest of Northern Canada depended on plants, alongside hunting and fishing, for their survival. The local plant life supplied food, medicine, shelter, and tools, among other things. They were highly skilled and knowledgeable about which plants to harvest according to the season and their needs. This knowledge was accompanied by a great respect for all plants, which they expressed by giving thanks and leaving appropriate offerings when collecting. While women were the primary holders of this knowledge, everyone had a basic knowledge of first aid. This knowledge was passed on from generation to generation.

In the early days of contact with Euro-Canadians, the Gwich'in were discouraged from using their Traditional Knowledge about plants to heal themselves and treat injuries. In the Fort McPherson area, Teetł'it Gwich'in elder Ruth Welsh recalled that when Indian Agents and the Anglican ministers came into the area, it was often one of the minister's wives who dispensed aspirin, liniments, or other medication when people became ill.

"... We were forbidden to use our traditional medicines that had been used for so many years. We were told it was taboo. We were told it was no good. We were

told it didn't work and... [to] throw it away and don't take it. But we didn't do that. It just went under cover. Everybody used it. All these years it was used without anybody knowing about it."

This article explores how the Traditional Knowledge and use of plants by the Gwich'in has been documented and "brought back" through the efforts of Gwich'in elders such as Welsh and the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI), an organization borne out of the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement that was signed in 1992 between the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the Canadian Government, and the Government of the Northwest Territories. It also highlights one of the plants that is of special importance to the Gwich'in, the spruce tree – *ts'iivii* – by drawing upon oral history and Traditional Knowledge provided by Gwich'in elders.

Gwich'in Elder Ruth Welsh

One of the most important plants used by the Gwich'in is the spruce tree, both the black spruce (*Picea mariana*) and the white spruce (*Picea glauca*). As Teetł'it Gwich'in elder Welsh said, "We can use most of a day to talk about and work with that whole tree. There is so much to it." Welsh was a medicine plant specialist who spent much of her life learning and later teaching about Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge and plant use. She was born in 1931 to Elizabeth (Ross) and Arthur Blake and raised at her family's camp in the Mackenzie Delta.

She learned from her mother and other Gwich'in

elders, eventually becoming one of the earliest Gwich'in nurses. In the 1990s, Welsh was part of an innovative initiative to incorporate a traditional medicine program into the design of the new Whitehorse General Hospital, which was completed in 1997 and is now one of several culturally sensitive holistic health care options available to patients.

Besides conducting many workshops on plants, traditional medicine, and Traditional Knowledge with Yukon and Northwest Territories communities and schools, Welsh was also a key instructor at the Gwich'in Science Camp offered by the GSCI from 1995–2001. The camp was a 10-day on-the-land accredited high school course for upper level high school students, and was aimed at stimulating an interest in science and Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge. Open to all students (Gwich'in and non-Gwich'in), it covered instruction in the fields of anthropology, biology, geography, and the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim alongside Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge and oral history.

One of the most popular parts of the camp was Welsh's traditional plant workshop, where she taught students about a particular plant and how to prepare it for medicinal purposes. All of the students were required to choose a project, present their results, and keep a journal about their activities. You can sense their excitement about learning and experiencing new subjects in their entries from the 1997 Knut Lang Camp outside of Aklavik:

Monday September 15, 1997

"[In the morning] I worked on my presentation... I am doing poplar buds... I really like it out here. I'm having the time of my life... when I am older I wish that I could have my own camp around Aklavik because that's where my whole family grew up. I hope that I have the same cabins that Knut Lang has here. I really love the smoke house [made by Neil Colin] because it is made out of [spruce] tree bark."

— (Charlene Firth, Inuvik)

By working with Welsh the students learned that all around them are plants that they could use to feed and heal themselves while in the bush, and that just being in the bush can be therapeutic and regenerative. The students also learned that traditional medicine is not only about the traditional use of plants, but that it also involves taking care of one's body, mind, and soul.

About the same time that GSCI started running its yearly camps it became clear that since people were not spending as much time out on the land as they previously had, they were not practicing their traditional

Gwich'in youth learning from elders in the community



ALAN FEHR, ARI



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ALESTINE ANDRE, GSCI



INGRID KRITSCH, GSCI

Ochre outcrop at Tsaih Natr'bondak (translated as 'Ochre-they pick up') along Rock River, July 2008. Ochre is considered sacred and highly valued by the Gwich'in as a decorative element for clothing, snowshoes and other traditional material items. A gift must be left before collecting samples

skills and sharing their knowledge about plants. In response to this, in 1996 and 1997, the GSCI and Aurora Research Institute (ARI) partnered with Gwich'in elders from Aklavik, Fort McPherson, Inuvik, and Tsiigehtchic to begin documenting the plants the Gwich'in traditionally used and how they used them.

The elders were interviewed both on the land and in their communities, with youth from each community participating to aid in transmitting this knowledge to the next generation. The knowledge recorded included the use of wood as well as leaves, bark, roots, flowers, cones, and berries. An important body of Traditional Knowledge is now available on the uses of plants in Gwich'in traditional material culture as well as the treatment of a variety of medical conditions.

The Spruce and Gwich'in Place Names

Gwich'in place names speak to the importance of plants along with many other resources and places of significance in their traditional lands. During the 19th and 20th centuries, many traditional names for rivers, lakes, mountains, and other features fell into disuse or were replaced by settler names. Since 1992, GSCI staff

have interviewed elders and land users, and captured the traditional names of 900 places along with their meanings and associated stories.

This has resulted in the official recognition of close to 500 names on government maps in both the Northwest Territories and Yukon, and new signage reflecting these names along the Dempster Highway, in local territorial parks, and in communities. A series of place name maps created by the GSCI is now available for use in schools and local band, tribal, and government offices, and is accompanied by an online and interactive Gwich'in Place Names and Story Atlas available at atlas.gwichin.ca. This research has been an important step in the ongoing process of Gwich'in culture and language revitalization.

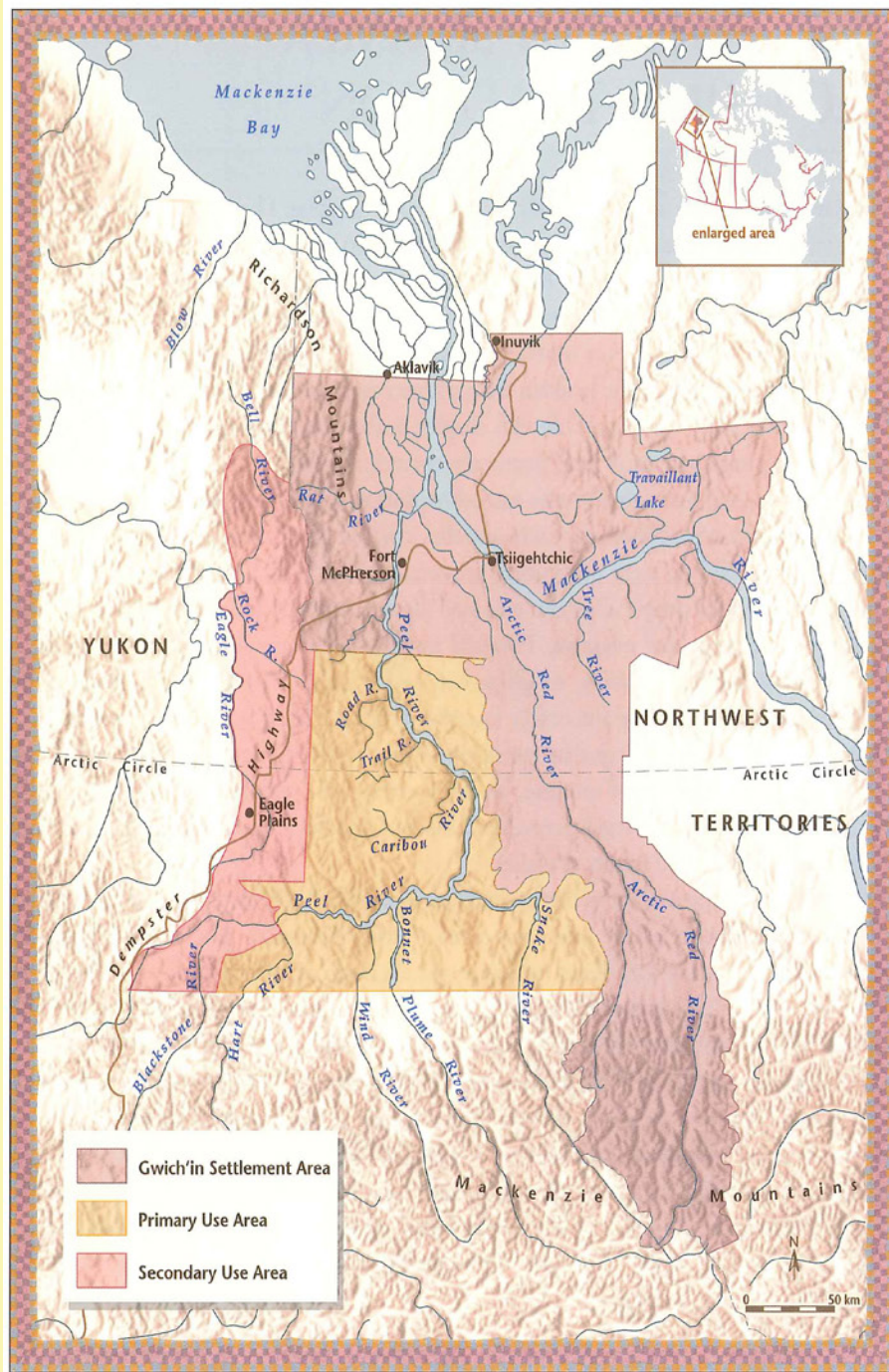
Of the 900 recorded place names, many make reference to spruce wood or timber. Besides their use in medicine, spruce trees were essential for the construction of boats, fish traps, houses, and caribou fences, and were also used for fuel. Knowing where these trees were was critical for Gwich'in survival in earlier times, and is still important today.

For example, *Khàtaiinlaih Èhdi'* (literally translated as "water flowing out-stands of timber (along the river)") refers to an area near the confluence of the Peel and



ALESTINE ANDRE, GSCI

Spruce gum



Map of Gwich'in Settlement Region — adapted from map included in *The Gwich'in Land Use Plan – Nan' Geenjit Gwitr'it T'igwaa'in: Working for the Land*, August 2003. Map by Signy Fridriksson. (Thompson and Kritsch, 2005: 10)

The Gwich'in are one of the most northerly indigenous peoples in North America; only the Inuit live farther north. In anthropological terms, the Gwich'in are part of a larger family of indigenous people known as Athabaskans, which includes the Slavey, Tłı̄chǫ (Dogrib), Han, and Tutchone peoples, plus relatives such as the Navajo and Apache in the United States.

At the time of contact the Gwich'in lived in nine different bands, with lands stretching across the

subarctic region of North America. In the Northwest Territories, the Gwich'in, with a population around 3,400, now live primarily in the communities of Fort McPherson, Tsiigehtchic, Aklavik and Inuvik. Close cultural and family ties are still maintained with relatives in the Yukon and Alaska, and together the Gwich'in Nation totals 9,000 people in 15 communities. Hunting, fishing, and trapping remain important both culturally and economically, with caribou, moose, and whitefish being staples of the diet.



Hard spruce gum



Spruce gum tea

Bonnet Plume rivers where large stands of tall and straight spruce trees (that were needed to build moose skin boats) could be found. These boats were used to carry families, their belongings, tons of dry meat, and later furs out of their wintering grounds to the trading posts.

Dachan Lee K'adh (wood-on the end-fish trap) refers to a lake at the edge of the treeline where a fish trap was made. Fish traps were made from poles, which were tied together with peeled and split spruce roots and placed near eddies. They directed fish into an opening from which they could be scooped out.

Dachan Njuu Njik (stick-long-creek) refers to a river that flows into the Rat River where timber suitable for making a caribou fence could be found. Caribou were driven into these fences and ensnared or speared. Both the fish trap and caribou fence were highly efficient fishing and hunting technologies.

Spruce Trees as Medicinal Plants

When the Gwich'in lived and travelled widely on the land, they relied extensively on spruce trees and other plants for treating ailments and injuries and to foster good health. The cones, boughs, inner spruce bark, gum (resin), and roots of the spruce trees were made into teas, salves, and poultices to treat various internal and external ailments. Steaming was also used as a method of healing. Of all of the uses described, the one that is most widely known and practiced even today is spruce gum for healing injuries. Gwichya Gwich'in elder Joan Nazon's story from the 1950s demonstrates the healing properties of spruce gum:

"In 1952, I think, 1952—we were staying down in our house. We had an upstairs, and one of our sons, our oldest one, Jimmy, was playing up and down, and he fell down and he got a big cut right here! Deep! About that long, too. Right down to the skull, I guess. Oh, it was just open like that! And there was no nursing station or anything around here that time. The RCMP looked after the medicine at that time.

So I brought him up to the police barracks to see if it was possible for them to stitch it. Oh, they didn't know what to do. They tried to close it, and then they put a band-aid on it, but it just kept opening...I told [the RCMP officer], 'Oh alright! If they can't fix it, I'll do something myself.' So he told me, 'I am going to go home with you.' ...we [stopped] right in front of [the RCMP] barracks, [where] there were [spruce] trees.... I told him, 'I'm going to take some gum from here. I'll show you what to do after I take the gum.' I took that clear one. I picked up some. I went back down and he said, 'I'll be right down there. Don't put it on him. I want to be there. I'll watch you,' he said.



ALESTINE ANDRE, GSCI

Dry fish on dried spruce poles, August 2013

So I cut out a little bit of canvas, thick canvas, and I put the gum on top of it. I left it close to the stove and then it melted slowly, you see. Everything was melted. In the meantime Jimmy came; we washed his head and then cut his hair right around the wound. Really cleaned it real good and then there were two officers there. I told them: "Hold that, hold it together while I put that gum on top." So they held it flush like that, real hard and then I put that gum right on top of the wound. Patted it down. Not even a week later, about three or four days, I told him, "We're not taking this off. It's going to come out itself. When it heals up, it's going to come out itself. Don't bother it."

So one day [the officers] came; they always sat with us, those boys. One day they came and they were having tea with us, and Jimmy was playing around and Jimmy said, "Mom, that thing came off my head." It dropped, you see, came off and dropped on the floor. He came over and we looked at it: Just healed up like nothing! They just both looked at me for a long time. "Now we know what you're talking about." — See, it heals up something, even big cuts, like nothing, you know."

— Joan Nazon (Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names Project 1992).

Traditional Uses of Spruce

In addition to making medicines to treat internal and external ailments, the Gwich'in used parts of the spruce tree in almost every aspect of life.

Tree roots were used for string, rope, and sewing the rims of baskets and birch bark canoes. Straight grain roots found on riverbanks after the spring ice breakup were split and used to make fish nets, which were stored in water when not in use so they did not dry up.

Outer spruce bark was used for the construction of fish smokehouses. Large pieces of bark were peeled from trees in the spring and used as shingles and siding for smokehouses. Smokehouses made with bark were preferred because it was easier to maintain a constant inside temperature than in structures sided with plastic tarps.

Spruce wood, including green wood, dry standing wood, and driftwood could be used for fuel, making tools and for building log houses, smokehouses, caches, and stages. Axes and ice chisel handles, snow shovels, and sleds were also made from spruce, as were candlesticks. Dried branches, found at the base of spruce trees, continue to be used for starting fires. People carry dried branches and birch bark with them



INGRID KRITSCH, GSCI

Spruce bark smoke house, September 1997

while travelling to start a quick fire if needed. Spruce boughs, changed weekly throughout the year, are still used for flooring in tents, which makes for a warm floor when combined with caribou skins. Many people believe that the aroma of the boughs inside a tent keeps people healthy, which is why small young spruce trees are considered particularly therapeutic.

Trappers found many uses for spruce trees: young spruce trees, which are strong and flexible, could be used for snowshoe frames and for beaver pelt stretchers. Long spruce poles (about 16 feet long) with the bark removed are still used to set fish nets under the ice in the fall.

Conclusion

Ruth Welsh believed that was why the use of traditional medicine survived. "It's really come back now, which is good. Because [in]... seeing how the medical system is working now, it's not going to be long [before we] have to depend on [traditional medicine] again." The information provided by Welsh (who sadly passed away in 2011) and many other Gwich'in elders on their traditional use of plants is a precious gift that Gwich'in elders have left for future generations.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge and thank all Gwich'in elders who have shared their Traditional Knowledge with the GSCI and for having the foresight that this knowledge

be safe-guarded and made available for their future grandchildren and the general public.

To learn more about the Gwich'in of the Northwest Territories and the work of the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, including our plant database, we invite you to visit our website at www.gwichin.ca and our YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/user/GwichinNWT>). 🍄

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Ingrid Kritsch has worked as an Anthropologist in the Canadian North since 1977. She was the founding Executive Director of the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute in 1993 and has been its Research Director since 1998. In 2008 she was named an honorary Gwich'in by the Gwich'in Tribal Council Assembly.