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# Re-building language habitats: Connecting language planning and land planning for sustainable futures

Christine Schreyer

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This paper draws on my experiences working with two Canadian First Nations<sup>2</sup>, the Loon River Cree First Nation, located in north-central Alberta, and the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, located in northwestern British Columbia. In both communities I volunteered on language projects while simultaneously researching native language planning and policy. With the Taku River Tlingit I helped to create a Tlingit language board game based on traveling through their traditional territory. With the Loon River Cree I helped to edit Cree language storybooks, which are based on interviews conducted during their community's traditional land use and occupancy study. Of interest to this paper is the fact that each of the language projects were being developed out of the lands and resources departments in the communities, and not, as one might expect, out of the education or cultural heritage departments. To me, this indicated that part of the communities' language ideologies was that their languages had developed in a particular landscape and that language planning and land planning needed to be closely linked in order to be successful (see Schreyer 2009). As my research drew to a close, I presented a paper on this topic in May of 2008 at the Northwest Anthropological Association's annual conference. A fellow session presenter refuted my argument that traditional land use studies could be used to help maintain and revitalize languages. He argued that as these studies are often used in land claims and court cases they should not be used for collecting information that

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: Gunalchéesh and Merci (Thank you) to the members of the Taku River Tlingit First Nation and the Loon River Cree First Nation, particularly Louise Gordon and the Lands and Resources Department in Atlin, and Richard Davis and the Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study Team in Loon Lake. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this paper; any remaining errors are mine alone.

<sup>2</sup>The term First Nation is inclusive of groups previously known as Indians, and most individuals identify themselves as belonging to a specific First Nation. The term Aboriginal (as is the practice in Canada) is inclusive of all of the indigenous peoples of Canada including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The term Indigenous, when it is used, will refer to those peoples who are original inhabitants of a particular land.

is extraneous to this purpose, such as language vocabulary, traditional stories, songs and place names. In fact, one of the ways in which both indigenous languages and lands *can* be sustainably managed is through the inter-weaving of language planning and land planning. As well, community archives, no matter what their original and intended purpose, are an excellent source for language material for use in language revitalization and maintenance projects.

## 2. Language Habitats: Land planning and language planning

Within Canada, land claims have been one of the major challenges for Aboriginal peoples for the past thirty years<sup>3</sup>. In order to support their negotiations in land claims many communities began gathering information about community history, land use patterns, traditional ecological knowledge, place names, stories, and songs. Often these interviews were done at least partially in the indigenous language of the community, and, as a result, lands and resources departments in Aboriginal communities are an invaluable resource for the development of language curricula. This material is also essential to what Thomas Thornton calls place-based language education. According to Thornton, who has worked with Tlingit communities in Alaska:

Place-based language education starts with the realization that indigenous peoples' most fundamental resources are traditional lands and resources from which they have derived nourishment, instruction, and inspiration for centuries, if not millennia. It recognizes that Native languages are born of intimate interactions with particular landscapes over time... (Thornton 2003:34).

Thornton (2003:34) also argues that, 'place-based language education further seeks to insure that a suitable 'habitat'...will be maintained or restored so that successful transmission of place-based Native languages...can occur in its appropriate context'. Other researchers and language activists working in the field of language shift have also commented on the connection between loss of lands and loss of language amongst indigenous communities. For instance, Hinton (2008:4) links the loss of indigenous lands and habitats to the loss of indigenous languages and Nettle and Romaine (2000:14) state that, 'where languages are in danger, it is a sign of environmental distress'. While environmental distress is not equivalent to loss of control over indigenous lands there can be a relationship between the two particularly where

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<sup>3</sup> In 1973, the *Calder* decision in which three of the seven Supreme Court judges declared that the Nisga'a retained Aboriginal Title to the land prompted the Canadian Federal Government to begin land claims negotiations with Aboriginal Peoples across Canada.

communities have had to fight to maintain their rights to be the stewards of their lands.

Therefore, one way that communities can go about reversing their language shift (Fishman 1991) is through the re-building of what both Thornton (2003) and Mitchell call 'language habitats'. Mitchell (2006:187-188) writes:

...just as with endangered biological species, it is more often the direct destruction of habitat that leads to language endangerment. If endangered languages are to survive, there must be social settings in which these languages are the most appropriate for use in authentic communication. This *habitat reclamation* would ideally involve entire communities (villages, towns, cities, or regions) where the endangered language would again be useful – literally full of uses – on a daily basis.

In Aboriginal communities, linguistic habitat reclamation goes hand in hand with reclaiming stewardship over their lands. Unless Aboriginal communities have control over their lands it will be difficult, if not impossible, to reclaim the physical space and diversity of landscapes necessary to succeed in rebuilding domains of use for indigenous languages or the 'language habitats', which are, as Thornton notes, culturally appropriate.

Both the Taku River Tlingit and the Loon River Cree First Nations have primarily used the information collected in their community interviews to help support their land-use planning. However, an outcome of the collection of language usage in conjunction with traditional ecological knowledge has been the development of an orientation in language planning where language planning developed out of the lands and resources departments of the communities. Ruiz (1984:16) defines orientations in language planning as 'a complex of dispositions toward...languages and their role in society. These dispositions may be largely unconscious...', but it is possible to uncover them in language 'policies and proposals which already exist' (Ruiz 1984: 16). Language and land have also been inter-connected in many documents at the national level in Canada.

For instance, in June of 2005, the Aboriginal Languages Task Force of Canada, a nationally funded body, released their report entitled *Towards a New Beginning: A foundational report for a strategy to revitalize First Nation, Inuit, and Métis Languages and Cultures* (2005:i) explains that:

In December 2002, the Minister of Canadian Heritage announced that Canada would create a centre with a budget of \$160 million over ten years to help preserve, revitalize and promote Aboriginal Languages and Cultures.

Ten Task Force Members were chosen who represented the Assembly of First Nations, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and the Métis National Council<sup>4</sup>. The report outlines ‘a national strategy to preserve, revitalize, and promote First Nation, Inuit, and Métis languages and cultures’ (2005: 1), and emphasizes the relationship Aboriginal languages have to the land from which they originated. The cover page of the executive summary of the report displays a child’s drawing of people surrounding a rising sun amidst an expanse of green land and blue sky. The words within the picture state, ‘As the sun rises.... so should our languages’ (Aboriginal Languages Task Force 2005: cover). Some individuals may take this phrase to mean that Aboriginal languages should be used daily just ‘as the sun rises’. However, those who have an understanding of treaty negotiations and land claims within Canada may see this as an extension of the phrase ‘as long as the sun shines, the rivers flow, and the grass grows’<sup>5</sup>. Many First Nations, Treaty Associations, Governments, and even academics have used this phrase in their writings on treaty and land claims issues (Government of Alberta 1977; Getty and Lussier 1983; Quinn 1991; Aasen 1994; and Wesche and Armitage 2010). As the majority of Aboriginal communities in Canada have been involved in land claims<sup>6</sup> negotiations, the phrase ‘as the sun shines’ in the Aboriginal Languages Task Force report can be seen as iconic of treaty negotiations and illustrating a connection between land and language. This is especially true when other more explicit connections between land and language in the report are examined. For instance, within the body of the report (page ii) it states:

‘The land’ is more than the physical landscape; it involves the creatures and plants, as well as the people’s historical and spiritual relationship to their territories. *First Nation, Inuit, and Métis languages show that the people are not separate from the land.* They

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<sup>4</sup> These are the national bodies that represent these communities within Canada.

<sup>5</sup> This phrase is attributed to both the leaders of the Iroquois Nation during the signing of the Covenant Chain Treaty of 1676 (see: <http://www.iroquoisdemocracy.pdx.edu/html/covenantchain.htm>) and Chief Crowfoot of the Blackfoot Nation during the signing of Treaty 7 in 1877 (see: <http://www.siksikahealth.com/index2.html>), both accessed January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Within Canada, there are two types of land claims that communities can negotiate, comprehensive and specific claims. Comprehensive claims are defined as those claims that ‘arise in areas of Canada where Aboriginal land rights have not been dealt with by past treaties or through other legal means’ (INAC 2008). These usually take longer to negotiate because they involve many different factors (such as self-governance, education, health services, and land and resource management) and larger land areas than in a specific claim, which is defined as ‘claims that deal with past grievances of First Nations related to Canada’s obligations under historic treaties or they way it managed First Nations’ funds or other assets’ (INAC 2008)

have a responsibility to protect it and to preserve the sacred and traditional knowledge associated with it (emphasis added).

The strong connection to land that Aboriginal communities hold can also be seen in the findings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which was a federally funded commission to determine ‘what the foundations of a fair and honourable relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Canada [are]’<sup>7</sup>. Throughout the reports *land* is seen to be a critical element to many of the categories up for debate. For example, the report states:

Land is absolutely fundamental to Aboriginal identity ... *land is reflected in the language, culture, and spiritual values of all Aboriginal peoples*. Aboriginal concepts of territory, property and tenure, of resource management and ecological knowledge may differ profoundly from those of other Canadians, but they are no less entitled to respect<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added).

Similar to Nettle and Romaine (2000), Thornton (2003), Mitchell (2005), and Hinton (2008), the Aboriginal Languages Task Force report also describes how language endangerment often occurs in conjunction with the loss of control over Aboriginal lands. It states (page 72):

Language loss in Canada closely parallels the weakening of the vital connection of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis people to their homelands as a result of alienation of their lands or resource development, such as hydroelectric dams, mining, and forestry.

Therefore, the first recommendation that the Aboriginal Languages Task Force makes is labeled ‘the link between languages and the land’, and argues for Aboriginal communities to have ‘meaningful participation in stewardship, management, co-management or co-jurisdiction arrangements’ (2005:73). Both the Taku River Tlingit and the Loon River Cree First Nations are asserting their stewardship over their lands via a wide range of land planning initiatives, some of which will be discussed below.

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<sup>7</sup> See: [http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/rpt/wrd\\_e.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/rpt/wrd_e.html), accessed August 2010.

<sup>8</sup> See: [http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/rpt/wrd\\_e.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/rpt/wrd_e.html), accessed August 2010.

The Aboriginal Languages Task Force report also addresses stewardship over *languages* in their comments on the Canadian Minister of Heritage's commitment to Aboriginal Languages from 2002. The report (2005:13) states:

At that time [2002], it was already clear, that to survive and prosper the languages and cultures of Canada's First Nation, Inuit, and Métis peoples must be under their *stewardship and control* and receiving their local community direction' (emphasis added).

However, I believe that the report does not take this argument far enough to fully represent the local realities of the communities. Both the Taku River Tlingit and the Loon River Cree have incorporated their languages in the land stewardship policies they have put in place, although only the Taku River Tlingit First Nation labels their policies as stewardship explicitly (see Taku River Tlingit First Nation 2003)

## 2.1 Traditional land use and occupancy studies

In 2006 the Province of Alberta released its Traditional Land Use Study Initiative<sup>9</sup>, which provided funding to First Nations in order that they could conduct these studies to the best of their abilities. According to Jamie Honda-McNeil, from the International, Intergovernmental, Aboriginal Relations branch of the provincial government who deals with traditional land use studies, the studies are a proactive approach to infringement on Aboriginal Rights. There are a variety of reasons why traditional land use studies should be conducted, and all of these are in some way connected to stewardship (Honda-McNeil, pers. comm. 2007). These include:

- protecting the First Nations culture, preparing for consultation within a First Nation's territory;
- preparing for economic development within their territory;
- to help provide capacity building at the First Nations level (Honda-McNeil, pers. comm. 2007).

However, the revitalization or maintenance of First Nations languages is not mentioned here, although it could be since many communities have recorded their languages in their studies. Honda-McNeil has co-edited a *Best Practices Handbook for Traditional Use Studies* (Honda-McNeil and Parsons 2003), which outlines the many aspects of a traditional land use study from a

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that while the government uses the term Traditional Land Use Studies, many local communities, including the Loon River Cree First Nation use the term Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study.

government perspective including such topics as planning a traditional land use study, conducting a traditional land use study (mapping, interviewing, researching), as well as approaches to applying the information from the traditional land use study after it has been completed. Honda-McNeil and Parsons do not include creating language curricula as one of their approaches to applying the information collected, but rather focus on economic issues and development instead.

In contrast, the Loon River Cree First Nation conducted their Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study in order to ‘get the *stories* and *knowledge* from these elders - their history’ (Ward, interview 2007), and the best stories are often stories told in their own language. This is because when it is community members who are conducting the interviews, often their own relatives, a sense of trust is built and storytellers are perhaps less concerned about how the stories will be used in the future. There is also the added benefit that the stories do not need to be translated when both speakers understand the original Cree language; limiting the possibility of misunderstood information due to incomplete or inaccurate translation. While stories, and consequently language, are more of a priority in community-driven traditional land use and occupancy studies, the community also agrees that, ‘conducting a traditional land use and occupancy study is more than merely recording the history of our people; the information needs to be able to be used to promote economic development and assist in the self-sufficiency of the Nations’ (Davis 2003:2). One of the main components in self-sufficiency is the ability of the First Nation to interact with industry, particularly the resource industry, which is where consultation (with the federal and provincial governments, as well as industry representatives) comes into play. Therefore, the Loon River Cree First Nation’s Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study team has transitioned into a Consultation Unit, which ‘assists the consultation process by providing the facts pertaining to past, present, and future development activities throughout the entire Traditional Land Use area and Treaty 8 ... the Consultation Unit makes recommendations to the Chief and Council, who return the applications to the originating bodies’ (LRCFN, Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study pamphlet 2003). Also, the Consultation Unit’s goals include the protection of the language and culture of the community.

### **3. Language revitalization and maintenance projects**

In this section, I discuss the two language projects I worked on with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation and the Loon River Cree First Nation. As each of the communities has developed these language projects out of their lands and resources departments I briefly address the land planning of each of the communities.

### 3.1 Revitalizing the Tlingit language and the Taku River Tlingit First Nation

The Tlingit language is commonly thought to be a language isolate<sup>10</sup>, and is spoken in Alaska, USA, Yukon Territory, and northwestern British Columbia, Canada. There are two major dialects of Tlingit (Inland and Coastal), although they are mutually intelligible<sup>11</sup> (see Leer 1991). The Yukon Native Language Centre, which was created to teach, promote, and document Yukon Native Languages, records that speakers of Tlingit are usually 55 and older and that no children are currently learning Tlingit as their first language<sup>12</sup>. The Aboriginal Languages Task Force Report (2005) lists Tlingit as a language isolate that is ‘endangered’ and states that as of 1996 there were 145 speakers of Tlingit in Canada; the average age of people who use Tlingit as their home language being 41.6 (Aboriginal Languages Task Force Report, 2005). Norris, in her analysis of the 2001 Census data on Aboriginal Languages writes that, in Canada, there are only 105 first language speakers of Tlingit (2007:23), which can thus be considered endangered. She continues (p.22) by stating that although:

...the Tlingit language family has one of the oldest mother tongue populations,... the index of second language acquisition and average age of speakers indicates that two people (usually younger) speak the language to every one person with a mother tongue. These indicators suggest that younger generations are more likely to learn Tlingit as a second language.

For example, the Taku River Tlingit First Nation’s population is approximately 372 (INAC community profiles, 2006); however, few people in this community are fluent in the Tlingit language. In a language survey the community conducted in 2006, three people said they spoke and understood Tlingit fluently, and four people said that they understood or spoke Tlingit somewhat. Twelve individuals indicated that they were learning the language; however, this number does not include the children in the community, and if it did the number would be substantially higher.<sup>13</sup> Programs for language learning within the community for children have been developed at the Tlingit Family Learning Centre (a day care), the local elementary school (which is

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<sup>10</sup> There is debate over whether or not Tlingit belongs to the Eyak language family, which is otherwise extinct; see Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.ynlc.ca> - accessed, August 2010

<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.ynlc.ca> - accessed, August 2010

<sup>13</sup> This information comes from [http://www.maps.fphlcc.ca/taku\\_river\\_tlingit](http://www.maps.fphlcc.ca/taku_river_tlingit), accessed August 2010

not Tlingit-run), summer culture camps, and, for a few years, an after-school program.

Resources for Tlingit second-language learners, including dictionaries, books, literacy lessons, and on-line games and learning tools, have been developed by institutions such as the Yukon Native Language Centre, located in Whitehorse, Yukon, the Alaska Native Language Centre, located in Fairbanks, Alaska, and the Sealaska Heritage Institute, located in Juneau, Alaska. Despite the fact that these three institutions have created language learning resources, the Taku River Tlingit First Nation has also worked to create language curricula of their own, which focuses on stories and traditional ecological knowledge from their own Elders.<sup>14</sup> It is the stories and language of the Elders that is documented in their language curriculum and the community respects the Elders' knowledge on this topic perhaps because they are the last ones to have learnt Tlingit as their first language.

The Taku River Tlingit First Nation's traditional territory stretches from the Yukon into British Columbia and down the Taku River to the coast of Alaska. Although the community members once traveled more frequently through their territory, hunting and gathering, the main location for the community has become the town of Atlin, British Columbia. The town of Atlin was originally a summer camp for the Tlingit people who came to Atlin Lake to fish. The Tlingit name for Atlin is *Wéinaa*, which means alkali or where caribou used to come for salt lick in the Tlingit language (Nyman and Leer, 1993). With a gold rush in 1898, Tlingit people began to share the area with the miners. The Taku River Tlingit First Nation's land planning has focused around their Vision and Management Document, entitled, *Hà t\_tátgi hà khustiyxh siti-* Our Land is Our Future. Within this document it is written, 'Land use planning and management shall be grounded in Tlingit concepts, values, and understandings, and should be *infused with Tlingit language*' (Taku River Tlingit First Nation 2003:16, emphasis added).

Throughout the document, interviews with community members of all ages stress the importance of looking after their land and how knowing the Tlingit language is a way of doing this. For example, Linda Johnson, an individual in her forties, stated: 'I would like to see my generation and the younger generation learn stories, more history of the Tlingit history, and more gatherings: more sharing' (Taku River Tlingit First Nation 2003:67). Similarly, Jerry Jack, an individual in his early thirties, commented, 'The land is such a big part of our being Tlingit...The future is so unknown, I know the young people will take care of the land just like we do. The most important

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on language curriculum available for the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, see: <http://maps.fphlcc.ca/node/248/resources>, accessed January 30, 2011.

thing to me is that we belong to the earth and ... [it] doesn't belong to us' (Taku River Tlingit First Nation 2003:iv). Therefore, the focus on being stewards of the land is not simply an agenda of the Elders and this is why the language curricula is relevant to the community as a whole and learners of all ages.

Further in the document, under the land plan for the Management of Heritage and Cultural Values, it is written (Taku River Tlingit First Nation, 2003:70) that the community's goals include:

- Inceas[ing] awareness and use of Tlingit language, culture, and heritage values.
- Ensur[ing] that Tlingit names are consistently adopted in all documentation for archaeological and traditional use sites, values, and features of geographical areas within Taku River Tlingit territory.
- Provid[ing] education to Tlingit citizens and others on important places within the traditional territory, the significance of Tlingit place names, and appropriate measures to respect and protect these values.
- Us[ing] plaques and other forms of communication to educate Taku River Tlingit citizens and others about the cultural importance of special Taku River Tlingit places (where confidentiality is not an issue).

The land then, and certain places that are situated within it, are important to the community, and they have deemed it especially important to 'educate Taku River Tlingit citizens and others' about the Tlingit place names for these areas, the activities conducted there, and the resources that are found in those places as well. This is exactly what the board game sets out to teach learners as they travel their ancestors' paths.

### **3.1.2 Haa shagóon ítx̱ yaa ntoo.aat – a Tlingit language board game**

Louise Gordon, the Lands and Resources Director of the community, myself, and a wide range of community members jointly created the game *Haa shagóon ítx̱ yaa ntoo.aat* (Traveling Our Ancestors' Paths).<sup>15</sup> The board of the game consists of a map which outlines a portion of the community's traditional territory around Atlin Lake, and photographs of the local landscape

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<sup>15</sup> For information on the development of this game, see: Schreyer, C and L. Gordon (2007).

that represent the Tlingit place names to be learnt during game play surround the map. The map itself contains a grid and some of the squares of the grid have photographs of resources that can be found in a particular area. Players begin by placing their playing pieces, which are multi-coloured buttons<sup>16</sup>, on the town of Atlin. The goal of the game is to travel around the territory and land on these squares in order to obtain the resource pictured there.

A die is used to decide whether or not the player is able to collect the resource following pre-determined rules. If the player has been successful in collecting the resource they must say the Tlingit name of the resource, as well as the Tlingit name of the place where it was found. There are two sets of cards to be collected – resource cards and place name cards. A player wins when they have collected five resource cards and returned to the town of Atlin, where they must state the names of the resources and the name of the places where they were collected in Tlingit. Each of the cards has the Tlingit name printed on; however, as there are so few fluent speakers in the community it is often a challenge for learners to understand the complex writing system of Tlingit.<sup>17</sup> In order to alleviate some of this difficulty it is beneficial for younger learners to play with members of the community who know the place names or they can also use the CD that comes with the game. In 1999, the Taku River Tlingit First Nation's heritage department took a trip around Atlin Lake in order to record Tlingit place names and also names of the resources found around the lake. The late Mrs. Antonia Jack, Louise Gordon's grandmother, was the Elder who participated in this trip, who was also involved in the development of this project. Unfortunately, Mrs. Jack passed away before the completion of this project, and as a result the game is dedicated to her (see Schreyer and Gordon 2007). Her voice is the one that appears most frequently on the CD.

The benefits of the game as a learning tool are overlapping and numerous. Most importantly, playing a game as a form of language learning is fun; having a good time while learning a language helps make it 'more noticeable, and therefore, more memorable' (Smith 2006:418). This was evident in how people played the game. For example, although at times one resource square was closer to an individual, they would often travel to another square where their favorite foods were pictured in order to obtain that resource, such as salmon or moose. Also, spontaneous usage of Tlingit often occurred such as complimenting someone on their abilities, counting, or saying 'poor me' when a turn did not go very well.

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<sup>16</sup> Buttons are also important traditionally as they are frequently used to make designs on traditional regalia known as 'button blankets'.

<sup>17</sup>For information on the complexities of Tlingit orthographies, see Crippen 2007.

The game also provides the learners with a way to integrate information they already know, such as where wild rhubarb grows or where you can hunt deer, with new Tlingit words and ideas. The game models real-life and real world situations because children in this community often spend time out on the land with their families. In fact, children were often eager to share their own experiences of being out on the land during game play. This connection to the land was also important to the community when deciding whether or not to use drawings or photographs. Louise and I decided to use photographs because this gave learners more of an opportunity to connect the places they have seen or resources they know with the Tlingit language. Last, the locations of resources on the map are based on traditional ecological knowledge, and this helps children, and learners of all ages, learn more about the land and how to be good stewards of the land. The game models the ideals set forth in the Taku River Tlingit First Nation's land planning documents. It illustrates how language planning is intimately connected to land planning. In the game, players strive to collect resources and one of the resources collected through engaging with the game is the Tlingit language.

### **3.2 Maintaining the Cree language and the Loon River Cree First Nation**

The Cree language belongs to the Algonquian language family, and is spoken in communities across Canada including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and the Northwest Territories<sup>18</sup>. Cree has been reported as one of the three native languages expected to survive in Canada; the others include Inuktitut and Ojibwa (Foster 1982; Aboriginal Languages Task Force Report 2005). Norris (2007) lists 97, 230 individuals with the ability to speak Cree, 20,160 of whom are second language learners of Cree. Cree is also described as 'largely viable' within the Aboriginal Languages Task Force report (Aboriginal Languages Task Force Report 2005). The language is split into five distinct dialects, which are regionally specific, and are labeled based on geographic and natural features of the areas in which they are found.<sup>19</sup> These include: Plains Cree dialect ('y'), Swampy Cree dialect ('n'), Moose Cree dialect ('l'), Wood Cree dialect ('th'), and Atihkamek Cree dialect ('r'); the letters represent the dominant sound difference in the dialects. Many individuals continue to speak Cree at Loon Lake. The dialect spoken in the community is Plains Cree. However, during

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<sup>18</sup> Cree is one of eight official Aboriginal languages in the Northwest Territories.

<sup>19</sup> For a more in-depth description of the geographical dialects of Cree see: Westman, C. 2008. *Understanding Cree Religious Discourse*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Alberta, Department of Anthropology.

my work in Loon Lake, community members made the distinction between ‘northern Cree’ (that which they spoke) and ‘southern Cree’ (that spoken closer to Edmonton). Westman describes the local varieties of Cree that occur in northern Alberta. In his research (Westman 2008: 83-84) discovered that:

Even between northern Alberta communities, differences in speech practice exist. As I moved the focus of my research from Cadotte Lake east to Trout Lake/Peerless Lake in 2005, it became clear that many people felt the two districts (sharing kin groups and located less than 200 km apart) each had a distinct style and speed of speech, which could be recognized and pinpointed by fluent speakers familiar with the region. Moreover, the community of Loon River, in between these areas, was recognized as having yet a third, intermediate, ‘way of speaking’ (Hymes 1974).

Due to the large numbers of Cree speakers there have been many books and teaching materials created in all of the dialects, although the Plains Cree dialect appears to be the most active in new research. Although Cree is still considered a viable language within Canada, the Aboriginal Languages Task Force report records it as ‘losing ground’ (2005: ii), and this can be seen in the case of the Loon River Cree First Nation.

Cree language use at Loon Lake has continued for a variety of reasons despite the fact that the Cree language is losing ground in communities across Canada. The isolation of the Loon River Cree First Nation community, their classification as Métis until fairly recently (1991), the lack of community members who attended Residential Schools, the strong Alliance religious presence, who favour local pastors, and the construction of a local community school, have all aided in the creation of stable bilingualism (see Crystal, 2000) in the community. Although currently the Cree language is not endangered within the community at Loon Lake, the continued oil and gas and logging development in their traditional territory has led some community members to be concerned for the future of Cree at Loon Lake (see Schreyer 2008). In our interview together, Kenny Ward spoke about the importance of teaching children about the land, and how this would impact their learning Cree language as well. He commented (Ward, interview July 2007):

I think probably the younger generation [it] would be good to educate them on those things [land use]. For example, school kids, telling them this is where your grandfather used to live, and [show them] little maps and even icons and stuff like that, and I think they would learn. They’ll remember that and they’ll speak Cree as well I think.

While the Tlingit language board game focuses on speaking the Tlingit language, the language project I worked on at Loon Lake, Cree storybooks, focused on reading. This is in part due to the fact that many children still understand and speak the Cree language in their homes, but for some families

English is now spoken at home (Noskey, interview, February 2007). However, parents wanted their children to be able to read and write in Cree as well as English. They emphasized the need to use similar punctuation to English for the Cree books in order that children are able to learn both easily and transition between the two. This is important to them as they do not want their children to experience the same set-backs in their learning that they did. As Arthur Noskey told me in an interview, 'For me, as a monolingual Cree speaker, when I was going to school as a five year old I had to learn the English language before I could start understanding the work. So, it was a struggle, and it probably put us back about a year and a half in the educational process having to learn the English language first' (Noskey, interview, February 2007). Many of the community members grew up as monolingual Cree speakers in part due to the geography of the community and their political status.

Previously known as one of the 'isolated communities' of northern Alberta, the Loon River Cree First Nation's traditional territory is located within the Treaty 8 area of Alberta, approximately 175 kilometres north of Lesser Slave Lake in north-central Alberta. Treaty 8 was originally signed in 1899; however, members of Loon River Cree First Nation did not sign the Treaty, and were not recognized as a band until 1991 (see Federal Government of Canada 1991). The most commonly referenced reason behind the Loon River Cree First Nation's absence from the signing of Treaty 8 is that the Treaty commissioners traveled by major rivers, and the Loon River Cree were missed because they lived 'in the bush' between the rivers (J. Noskey, interview 2007). The Loon River Cree did not receive reserve lands until the community signed an addendum to Treaty 8 in 1999. With the settlement of their land claim, the community received a total of 44,800 acres of reserve lands, which was then split into three reserves, although the majority of community members live on the reserve at Loon Lake. They also received two million dollars in compensation. Land is important for survival not only in the past, but also currently in the face of contemporary economic development. While some believe that by settling a land claim a community 'sign[s] away their Aboriginal title and their right to protect the land in return for superficial benefits such as fast cash and houses' (Martin-Hill 2008:158), this is not the case for the Loon River Cree First Nation. For this community, it was only through the settlement of their specific land claim that they were able to acquire rights to the land and have some input into the development that would occur in their traditional territory. As Kenny Ward, a member of the Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study team, stated (Ward, interview 2007):

They [the community] wouldn't have been able to have this working area [from the Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study], and they

couldn't have had too much say. Once you have a reserve in place you have a little bit more say in things'.

Therefore, once land matters were resolved, other important issues such as economic development, housing, construction of infrastructure, education (including language), and health care have also become priorities for the community (A. Noskey, interview 2006).

The Loon River Cree First Nation's Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study was another favorable development out of the land claim settlement. Due to the fact that the Loon River Cree were now officially recognized as 'status Indians'<sup>20</sup> as opposed to Métis, with historically acknowledged use of land in the Treaty 8 area, the community was able to acquire funding for the study which further investigated their use of the land. Community members Eva Whitehead, Laverne Letendre, and Kenny Ward worked together under the direction of Richard Davis, a Cree consultant from Swan River, Alberta, and Barry Hochstein, a Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study consultant, in order to learn 'how the people lived off the land, and how the land was used in the past and how it is being used currently' (Davis, interview 2007).

Unlike many traditional land use and occupancy studies, it was the community researchers rather than outside researchers who conducted the interviews. As a result, almost *all* of the interviews were conducted in the Cree language, which is the first language of the Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study team members. The team conducted interviews with twenty Elders in the community, and also did group interviews with men and women. After interviews were conducted, the team members would conduct site visits to the places mentioned during the Elders' interviews and record the coordinates of the locales with hand-held GPS (global positioning systems). Whenever possible the Elders would also come on the visits, and this would inevitably lead to more stories. The site visits were conducted in order to provide another method of assuring certainty of knowledge. The community is currently in the process of publishing a Traditional Land Use Atlas entitled *Ekospîhk ekwa Mekwâc* (Then and Now). This book emphasizes the importance of the historical narratives within the community's identity, but also focuses on contemporary land use. This focus on the 'now' is important in the face of continued logging and oil and gas development within the Loon River Cree First Nation's traditional territory.

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<sup>20</sup>A 'status Indian' is defined as, 'A person who is registered as an Indian under the Indian Act. The act sets out the requirements for determining who is an Indian for the purposes of the Indian Act' (see <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ap/tln-eng.asp>).

Since the completion of the Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study, the team has merged into a Consultation Unit, one of whose first mandates was to create a policy outlining their role in consultation with government and industry. The document of policies and procedures outlines the unit's responsibilities as including:

- Protect[ing] Loon River First Nation members' Treaty and Aboriginal rights
- Protect[ing] the environment on reserve and within Loon River First Nation traditional use area
- Protect[ing] the *culture, language and lifestyle* of the Loon River First Nation community and membership (emphasis added).

In addition, their goals include 'assist[ing] LRFN member trappers with *awareness and understanding* of resource development activities affecting their registered fur management area' (Loon River Consultation Unit, Policies and Procedures 2006, emphasis added). By May of 2007, the Consultation Unit had already processed 171 referrals from industry and government in their traditional land use area (Davis, interview 2007). One way in which the Consultation Unit has been actively protecting the 'culture, language and lifestyle' of the community is through the project that I worked on with the community – the creation of Cree language storybooks entitled, *Namôhkâc nika-pôni âcimon* ('I will never quit telling stories'), which are based on the interviews with Elders during the community's Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study.

### **3.2.1 *Namôhkâc nika-pôni âcimon* – Cree language storybooks**

The title of the storybooks, as well as each book, are quotes from an Elder in the community, and the text is also from the Elders' own words. There are eight books in the set, on the following topics: 1) Moose Hunting and Use, 2) Housing, 3) Pow-wows, 4) Fishing, 5) Collecting Berries, Herbs and Medicines, 6) Trails, 7) Ways People Travel, 8) Trapping. Each of the storybooks includes photographs of the Elders from when they were younger, but also from more recently as well. The photographs were taken during interviews and site-visits, but are also from personal collections, or contemporary community activities, such as a moose-hide tanning workshop in the fall of 2006. These books are the first language curriculum the community has created. Cree language is taught as a subject at the local school, but, prior to the creation of these books, all language curricula was from outside of the community and often not based on what life is like at Loon Lake (see Schreyer 2008). The books were recently published on-line, making them accessible to more members of the community. They could potentially also be used in other domains as well, such as by families who

want to read them together.<sup>21</sup> Similarly to the Tlingit language board game, the storybooks help teach language, but also provide information on traditional ecological knowledge, which is important to community members, particularly the members of the Consultation Unit and the Chief and Council, who instigated the creation of these books.

For example, the book on fishing practices, entitled *Kayâs kîmihcetôwak kinosewak Mâkwa Sâkahikanihk nân'taw isîsi ekî esi pîhtokwetwâw* ('Long ago there used to be fish that would come into Loon Lake'), describes how there used to be fish in Loon Lake, but now, due to beaver dams, the water does not rise high enough for the spawning fish to get into the lake. The book also describes the types of fish people used to catch, the methods of fishing, other places people used to fish, and how people used to dry and cook the fish. Photos in this book include:

- elders who contributed some of the quotes;
- the places where people used to fish;
- the actual fish that were caught;
- ice fishing and net fishing;
- a beaver and a beaver dam.

All of these photographs come from local places, and so they are examples of how the community is trying to teach the children and others who will read these books about *ekospîhk* (then) and *mekwâc* (now). Bernard Perley has also included images from the local landscape in his work on Maliseet language curriculum, and writes that 'making all of the images correspond to the local landscape...valorize[s] local knowledge and experience' (Perley, 2009: 263). Connecting language learning to local places is what Thornton advocates for in 'place-based' language education (2003); this connection is also useful in what Mitchell (2005) calls 'building language habitats' (as discussed above).

The Loon River Cree First Nation's language project is another example of how lands and resources departments within Aboriginal communities are excellent sources of language materials. The interviews conducted will be included in the Traditional Land Use Atlas that the community is producing in English, but the recordings will remain on file in the Consultation Unit office, and could potentially be used for language projects in the future as well.

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<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.neverquittellingstories.ca> to visit the website for the *Namôhkâc nika-pôni âcimon* storybooks, accessed January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011.

#### 4. Re-Building language habitats

The Taku River Tlingit see the land as their language classroom, and the curriculum they have created thus far, including the *Haa shagóon itx̄ yaa ntoo.aat* game, takes the land into consideration. For example, Alice Carlick, the heritage officer for the community, told me in our interview, ‘If you get to know your map [and the Tlingit place names] then you get to know your land’ (Alice Carlick, 2006). Another example comes from the time I had the privilege of going moose hunting with community members from Taku River Tlingit community. Afterwards, I commented to Nicole Gordon, Louise’s daughter, that it seemed like she was using more Tlingit with her own young daughter when she was out on the land. She said that she felt more comfortable out there and that her daughter responds more in Tlingit when she also feels comfortable (N. Gordon, interview 2006).

Through the settlement of their land claim and the acquisition of reserve lands, the Loon River Cree are in the process of protecting their lands and resources, including their language. If they are able to provide more and more domains of use for the language in the face of increasing pressure from development and the English that comes along with it, it is likely that Cree will continue to hold its ground, literally, in this community. As Richard Davis, the manager of the Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study, writes, ‘For thousands of years First Nation people traveled this land. Our history is written in every river, lake and living part of creation’ (Richard Davis 2003:2). For both communities, then, the land is a safe place where they feel comfortable speaking their languages, and where the languages can, especially in the case of the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, be re-learned.

Thomas Thornton (Thornton 2003:34) writes that:

In Southeast Alaska, where traditional lands and subsistence lifeways...still enjoy a comparatively high degree of integrity, the possibilities of making habitats for Tlingit language are favorable...For this to succeed, stronger measures are needed to protect and enhance Native subsistence ties to traditional lands.

Both of these communities have worked at developing ways to protect and enhance their ties to their traditional lands through their land planning. A by-product of this has been the parallel development of language planning aided, in part, by the documentation that had been collected for land plans. By working to protect their lands, they communities are also re-building language habitats for their languages. These are necessary if the languages are to be again be, as Mitchell (2005:188) stresses, ‘useful – literally full of uses – on a daily basis’.

## 5. Conclusion

In the course of my research I have worked in two very divergent landscapes: from rocky, snow-capped mountains to dense, prairie muskeg, and I have come to see how desire for stewardship over these lands has led each of the communities I have worked with to develop land plans that reflect their desire for control over the resources that are a part of that land, including language. The communities have a long history of fighting for control over their lands, including land claims negotiations and court cases<sup>22</sup>, and have acquired a wide range of information about their lands and how the land was used in the past and continues to be used today; often this information was recorded in their ancestral language. Heritage archives, traditional land use and occupancy studies, and various other departments which have records of interviews with community elders, are an excellent source for language material with which to protect both endangered languages and endangered knowledge in a sustainable manner.

In her paper in this volume, Lenore Grenoble discusses the importance of reclaiming place names amongst indigenous communities of the north as a step in reversing language shift. In both of the projects discussed above place names have played an integral role. In the Tlingit language board game, place names are a major focus. Players need to learn not only the Tlingit name of the resource they are ‘collecting’, but the Tlingit name of where to find that resource, and this in itself is a form of reclaiming the place names while simultaneously connecting knowledge of the land to knowledge of the language. In the Cree storybooks, place names are often used to label pictures of places where activities are occurring, such as in the fishing book described above. However, there is also one book, entitled *Kayās māna sâkahikan’sa peyakwan meskanawa ekî itâpatahkaw sisonê sîpîhk*, ‘Long ago the little lakes were used just like roads along the river banks’, which describes trails the community members used to travel on. The book lists place names in succession as the Elders tell the story and the book follows the trail.

Grenoble also discusses the importance of engaging youth in language planning, which was a focus in the Aboriginal Languages Task Force of Canada report as well. The eleventh recommendation (of twenty-five) that the report makes is ‘funding of immersion programs for youth’ (2005:10), while the fourteenth recommendation is ‘training opportunities for postsecondary students’ (2005:10) in order that they can become teachers of their own languages. In addition to supporting language learning the report also supports ‘initiatives to teach youth the skills to live traditionally or on the land’

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<sup>22</sup>Taku River Tlingit v. British Columbia (Project Assessment Director), 2004 SCC 74

(2005:4). Here, again, the connection between learning to live on the land and learning to speak the language is made evident. Both the Taku River Tlingit and the Loon River Cree First Nations have also focused on the youth of their communities in their language curricula projects. For example, the Tlingit board game is directed at the youth of the community, although intergenerational learning also occurs as older speakers or even community members need to be present to help the younger players learn more of the language and the traditional land use as well. The storybooks were developed for use in the local school in hopes that the children will want to read them because they are specifically about their own community, their own ancestors, and the places they themselves have traveled.

While the connection to land that I have been discussing here for Aboriginal communities in Canada may not be as strong, or may be of a different nature, in other parts of the world, this model of using information collected from other areas of the community can be moved from one locale to another. Even diasporic communities may have records or recordings of their language, perhaps in songs or stories, which can be integrated into language curricula and help to revitalize or maintain languages with just a little imagination. Archives and repositories of records should not be regarded as simply places where information is preserved and held; they can be sources of inspiration and keys to language habitat reclamation. As Richard Dauenhauer (2005:277), who has worked extensively with Tlingit speakers in Alaska, writes:

We can preserve berries in two ways: by making jam, and by keeping the berry patch alive. We can preserve fish in two ways: by somehow putting it up as dry fish, smoked fish, frozen, canned or jarred; and by keeping the salmon stream and salmon run alive. It's very important to distinguish between jam and the berry patch, between canned salmon and the salmon stream. As great as documentation is, it remains canned salmon and jam.

The berry patch and the salmon streams are the language habitats that need to be re-built or re-claimed in land planning amongst Aboriginal communities in Canada. One way for this to occur is to use the information held in the archives, or, in other words, to use the jam and the canned salmon to feed people's interests in their languages, which has been the aim of *Haa shagóon ítx yaa ntoo.aat* and *Namôhkâc nika-pôni âcimon*.

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