



Weledeh Gondi

VOICE OF THE YELLOWKNIVES DENE FIRST NATION



Drilling in Wool Bay and Drybones Bay

"You're in our backyard, and we know what your intentions are"



Lutsel K'e Elder Liza Enzoe (left) and Yellowknives Dene member Patrick Charlo (right) spoke their minds about the flurry of exploration taking place in Akaitcho Territory, as did most everyone in the crowd.

They came from places south - a handful of representatives from companies with names like 'North American General Resources' and 'New Shoshini Ventures.'

They were in Dettah this month to talk to community members about their exploration activities in the sacred Weledeh Dene areas of Wool Bay and Drybones Bay. The representatives faced difficult questions from the members, and while they professed to have done their homework on where traditional gravesites and sacred lands were located, no Elders were ever consulted on the subject. That, coupled with the fact that they have already been doing exploratory drilling for a year before coming to consult with Akaitcho, angered the crowd.

"We have to speak out because this is our land that we're talking about," said Elder Alfred Baillargeon.

"We can't let them come over and take over our land. You should all know by now how much of our land has already been destroyed -- and I'm telling them right now that they can't treat us like a dog that is tied. We've come too far to allow that to happen."

Elder Michele Paper listened as the company reps described the time they spent at the Prince of Wales Heritage Centre researching the area, and how they respect the land. He respectfully brought them back to earth.

"Before I speak I want to say that we know you guys are only here to take money from the land," Paper told them.

"You must respect us by coming around to visit with us, and to ask for permission when you want to do something on our land. What I don't want to see is our land being destroyed."

He went on to remind people that he was here before white men came. It was a time when moose and fish were plentiful and the water in the Weledeh Bay was clean and clear.

"We as Elders have to pass on our knowledge to our young people so they know how to speak out about their land and so they always remember why it's so important to protect it."

Yellowknives Dene Chief Richard Edjericon had strong words for the company representatives. It started with a history lesson - a brief reminder to them that the land they are drilling on is protected by a Treaty that was signed in 1900. When they mentioned they brought along permits from the Mackenzie Valley Land and Water Board, it was clear they had no idea what was going on here.

"It seems like we've been in constant battle in Akaitcho to protect our land. When BHP came, we were told we had 60 days to negotiate an agreement, which made us feel like we had a gun to our head. That agreement could have been better, but we learned from that experience," said Edjericon.

"We fought for boundary, we challenged the authority of the Mackenzie Valley Land and Water Board by winning the Patterson Sawmill court case, and we signed an Interim Measures Agreement with the federal government while we continue to negotiate our Treaty."

Edjericon said there was a meeting held in Lutsel K'e recently where the Elders overwhelmingly stated how important it is to protect the land. They talked about taking steps to slow down development.

"I see people who come up here waving permits to conduct exploration on our lands, but I'm asking under whose authority is permission granted?" said Edjericon.

"We are reclaiming that authority -- and we are very aware that you are in our backyard. We understand what's happening. We know about permitting and we know what your intentions are. What you need to know is that we don't think in terms of a couple of years or decades. We have to have a plan for the next 100 years and a 100 years after that because that's how long we're going to be here."

One by one people stood up to voice their grave concerns regarding the recent diamond finds in the area.

"Your exploration looks successful which means it will lead to mining. If we aren't involved at all stages then bad things are going to happen," said Councillor Jimmy Beaulieu.

"We're talking about an area that is like our National Park. It's full of moose, beaver, muskrat and fish but you're only coming to us now after a year of working there. As a boy I went trapping and canoeing in that area with my Elders. When mining starts everything is going to be different. Now is the time to make sure you understand how we used to live, because we know your first priority is to the white people from down south."

Lutsel K'e Chief Archie Catholique summarized the feelings that were going through the crowd.

"Licensing and permitting is something we will be handling ourselves. That's what we're negotiating right now," said Catholique.

"What we see here is people trying to come in the back door - and that's not respectful. Akaitcho is open for business, but we want to do it the right way. And if that doesn't happen then there's going to be some rough roads ahead."

What's going on? A Snapshot

- * To-date exploration companies have identified four potentially diamond rich kimberlite pipes in the Wool/Drybones Bay area.
- * New Shoshini Ventures is applying for a new land-use permit to continue exploratory drilling in the area. They expect to explore for an additional 2 to 5 years, depending on what they find.
- * Diamonds North Resources is an exploratory company that has four claims covering 2,169 acres around the Drybones Bay area.
- * North American General Resources have a single claim that they want to explore for diamonds. It's located 20 km south of Dettah.
- * Snowfield Development Corp. claims holdings in the Drybones Bay area that exceed 22,000 acres. They state: "The Drybone kimberlite is believed to have the (greatest potential) of any known kimberlite discovered in the Northwest Territories."