

# 6

## Lookouts, Moose Licks, and Fish Lakes

CONSIDERING KASKA UNDERSTANDING OF THE LAND

In this chapter I shift attention from the productive inner Coast Mountains and plateau country of northwestern British Columbia, to the boreal forests of northernmost British Columbia and the southwest Yukon, and the Athapaskan speaking peoples who live there. These people are known as Kaska, or Kaska Dena, a term that originally applied to peoples living around what is now called Dease Lake in the Cassiar Mountains of British Columbia (a name apparently derived from the same root as the name of the people). The picture of Kaska ethnoecology I present here is garnered from experiences travelling on and talking about land with Kaska people in the southeast Yukon Territory (Figure 6.1), especially in the area of Watson Lake. My research combines analysis of Kaska and English terminology, and narrative and practice, with use of visual methods. By using this “shotgun” approach, I have sought complementary evidence from different aspects of Kaska life in order to gain multifaceted appreciation of Kaska understanding of and interaction with the Land.

As a prelude to more fully describing Kaska understanding of the land, I describe past Kaska relationship to the land. Until recently, the Kaska



**Figure 6.1** Generalized map of Kaska territory

moved around a great deal through the seasons and from year to year, fishing, trapping, hunting, and picking berries in season. At least during the historic period, families tended to have particular hunting and trapping areas that they used over prolonged periods of time, following them as needed (cf. Weinstein 1992). Like other northern Dene people, before the advent of white traders the Kaska came together in the summers at lakes with fish runs, to catch whitefish and to socialize, and dispersed into small family groups for much of the year. Some time after World War I, Kaska shifted to congregating at trading posts in summer, and this is what anthropologist John Honigmann experienced when he did fieldwork in Lower Post, British Columbia in the mid 1940s (Honigmann 1949; Weinstein 1992).

Flexibility in use of areas likely was mediated by kin relations, allowing movement between different family areas for winter hunting and trapping, in response to the abundance of animals or for personal preferences. Many aspects of Kaska life have changed since the construction of the Alaska Highway, the establishment of the town of Watson Lake, and the construction of housing for Band members at Watson Lake, Upper Liard, and Lower Post. Contemporary Kaska people are generally year-round residents of the modern communities rather than spending much of the year on the trapline or in camps on the land. However, they are often out on the land for short trips, especially in the summer season, and many have traplines and line cabins at considerable distances from their nominal permanent residences.

Before the construction of the Alaska highway in the 1940s, the main access into the Kaska territory was up the Mackenzie-Liard-Dease River systems, along which ran river boats, and up the Pelly River (a tributary of the Yukon) to Finlayson Lake, and from there down the Frances. Early contact centred on Fort Halkett, on the Liard River not far above the Grand Canyon at the confluence of the Smith River (Karamanski 1983). Robert Campbell established short-lived posts on Frances Lake and at Pelly Banks in the mid nineteenth century. A trading post was re-established in the late nineteenth century and remained a feature of Frances Lake until the mid twentieth century. In the 1870s there was a gold rush in the Cassiar District near Dease Lake in northern BC, pre-figuring the 1898 Klondike gold rush (Dawson 1987). Associated with the Cassiar gold rush, a trading post was established at McDames on the Dease River across the border in northern BC, south and west of the present town of Watson Lake, then moved in the late nineteenth century to the mouth of the Dease near the present community of Lower Post (Daliyo). Though the main impacts of the Klondike gold rush were felt outside of Kaska territory, prospectors on their way to and from the Klondike goldfields traversed Kaska territory. Oblate missionaries arrived in this century to convert and minister to the people, and established a residential school at Lower Post on the Liard River (Allard 1929; Moore 2002). In the early twentieth century a number of trading posts operated at locales such as Dease Lake, McDames, Ross River, Pelly Banks, and so on (Weinstein 1992; McDonnell 1975).

### **Rivers and trails**

Trails connected places on this landscape, converging on centres such as McDames, Lower Post, and Frances Lake, travelling along the rivers,

connecting key sites such as fish lakes and overlooks, and providing access to traplines. In the memory of living elders, and in the stories they learned from their relatives, camps and routes of travel organize perception of land. Today the Alaska Highway, the Campbell Highway, and two or three other roads or truck trails serve a similar mnemonic function. Rivers and lakes too are key places on the land, and also may order travel. Similar organization of geographic knowledge is reported by James Kari for northern Athapaskan speakers in Alaska and adjacent Canada (Kari and Fall 1987; Kari 1989).

The Liard and Frances Rivers provide access to large areas of hunting territory. Critical habitats such as sloughs, which focus game animals at certain seasons and are also the habitat of valued medicinal plants, are also found along rivers, and can be accessed either from the rivers or from trails running along the valleys. Frances Lake (Tū Chō Mene) has long been a focus of Kaska Dena activity. A large lake consisting of two arms that converge to form a single lower lake, the east arm has a caribou crossing site and a narrows that does not freeze in winter. This site allowed fishing during the winter season, and ancient settlements are focused in these areas of the lake (Gotthardt 1993).

The trail net from Big Eddy to McDames and to Lower Post figures in the mental geography of my teacher Elder Mida Donnessey from her childhood. Trails extending up the Rancheria River (Tsłh Tué) and from there to Blue River (a tributary of the Dease) also shape her sense of the land. Big Eddy is a good fishing site near the confluence of the Rancheria and Liard Rivers, and is a former village site. The site can be recognized from a long distance by the sharp horseshoe bend in the river and the high banks. The route of the truck trail from the present village of Upper Liard to the Rancheria River runs roughly along the route of the old trail, prompting reminiscences of what the trail route was like and how it passed through stands of tall forest (*dechen chō*). On one occasion we sat overlooking Liard Canyon, and Mida talked about the route from that spot to the site of the present town of Watson Lake, where there was then a camping place for overnighting on the return journey. The open wet meadow (near what is now a tourist campground) represented an opportunity to look for moose on the journey.

Liard Canyon below Watson Lake, Cranberry Rapids near Fireside, and the Grand Canyon of the Liard all figure largely as hazards to boat navigation, and cost many lives during the period of river boat travel (Karamanski 1983; Campbell 1958). There are other canyon sections on the Frances River, a tributary of the upper Liard linking Frances Lake to the Liard and

Mackenzie. Sitting at the old McDames site, now abandoned, the late elder Bob Watson talked about travelling by boat from McDames to Lower Post when he was a boy, and Mida recalled the cross-country trail link from McDames to Big Eddy.

### **The “layered” land—stories and places of power**

The Kaska view of land is holistic and integral. As one moves along trails, travelling to specific places and harvesting from the land, another aspect of the land which is experienced is that field of power instantiated in place, in the land itself and in the living beings and powerful entities who dwell on the land, linking the moral with the quotidian. McDames, as well as being the site of the Sylvester's Landing trading post, was the site of a disaster in the past where “half a mountain” fell away and buried ancestors, perhaps for failing to observe moiety exogamy by marrying Crow with Crow, Wolf with Wolf. More recently, McDames is said to have been precipitously abandoned as a result of a flu epidemic. Another possibility raised was that giant worms in the nearby Horseranch Range, said to cause rain and bad weather, might have prompted the move from McDames to Lower Post (L.M. Johnson field notes).



**Figure 6.2** Liard Canyon between Watson Lake and Lower Post

People tell tales of times long ago, in which local places are tied to stories involving powerful beings. Watson Lake itself, Łuwe Chō, named for its formerly abundant whitefish runs, is known as the site of a past encounter with a supernatural monster. A killer elephant,<sup>1</sup> which some have interpreted as possibly a mammoth, was tricked onto thin ice on this lake by a resourceful boy. The elephant went through and drowned, thus saving the remaining people from its ravages. As others have noted, passing by places may elicit localized stories (Palmer 2006). The first time I heard the Elephant Story, Elder Mida Donnessey and I were driving by the lake on a trip up the Campbell Highway to collect moss and medicines. As we drove on, Mida then continued with the story of another elephant, whose lair was in the upper Hyland River, which was also killed by humans. On another occasion we walked near the Liard Canyon below Watson Lake (Figure 6.2). Yellowlegs put his legs across the canyon, I was told. He helped two sisters escape a pursuing wolverine (Moore 1999).<sup>2</sup> A mountain in the Cassiar region in BC has bones of a large creature on top. One can never forget that the landscape is an empowered landscape, and a landscape that holds history.

### **Ethnoecology—the view from here**

Travelling with Dene teachers, one learns about significant kinds of place as well as specific places of significance, and general rules of proper behaviour. Determining the linkage of terms describing different kinds of land with places on the land, and learning why places are significant in Kaska ecology, is challenging for the outsider and requires a blend of participant observation in the “bush,” recording of narratives and indigenous terms, and documentation of what the referents of the terms are through visual methods—still photography and videography. In contrast to my earlier research with Gitksan and Witsuwit’en, I found travel on the land and visual recording of kinds of place was the appropriate strategy in the Kaska context, where knowledgeable Elders still may travel widely on the land but be less comfortable with, or less skilled at interpreting, out-of-context representations on paper.

Kaska are keen observers of animals and the rhythms of animals’ lives—the rut, where they feed at what times of year, where and when they travel. Licks are an important class of Kaska place. Moose licks, which are muddy areas that the moose come to for the mineral content, draw other animals as well. Such places are reliable spots to encounter animals. They can be changed by things such as nearby road construction, but may continue to be active licks even after a road is built nearby. People mentioned the licks and former lick

sites whenever we were in their vicinity. The Kaska noun dictionary (Kaska Elders 1997) corroborates the importance of “lick” as a kind of place, and gives terms for caribou lick, moose lick, sheep (*Ovis* sp.) lick, and so on. Some places are named for the presence of a lick, such as Elés Tué’ or ‘Lick Creek’, now known as Money Creek after the trapper and miner Anton Money who settled there in the early twentieth century (Money 1975). I was told of the localities of several active licks, and one that was formerly effective but is now apparently spoiled by the Campbell Highway. In 2003, I photographed two lick areas, and drove by a third, which was described to me but not visible. I was also told of the location of a sheep lick at the edge of the highway near Good Hope Lake, but apparently Kaska rarely hunt sheep or mountain goats at the present time, so animals are not disturbed there. The visual profiles of the various areas that were described as “licks” were quite dissimilar, as the defining characteristics are the presence of mineral rich mud or earth, rather than any specific vegetation or landform.

Swamps (*tütseł*) were mentioned various times, and also sloughs (*ts’ele, tili*) as places to which game comes (Johnson 2005, 2009). The pairing of a “lookout” with a slough, or swamp meadow, is an especially effective situation (Figures 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5). An old foot trail to the Rancheria River traverses such a site, and there is a camp conveniently located by the lookout.



Figure 6.3 Lookout: old trail with blazes



Figure 6.4 Lookout: hunting camp—camp along the foot trail with a view of the lake below



Figure 6.5 Lookout: view from the camp—lake with fringing swamp meadow *tütse!* and beaver lodge

Another slough that Mida mentioned for game can be seen from a lookout along the Meister Road. The spot is also known for its berries on top of the steep bank. We made note of the abundance of white cranberry flowers in June, and came back in late August to harvest the abundant cranberries. Persuading me to go with her in the truck, it was “just red” she said. It turned out that she used to climb up to that site from down below to look for berries, long before the truck trail was made, when she came to the slough to camp with her Aunt in her childhood.

When I was in the Watson Lake area in late August of both 2001 and 2002, the main occupations of the women that I spent time with were hide processing and berry picking. Hunting and fishing were also happening. By early September, everyone was talking about moose and caribou. People like to go up into mountains looking for game; families travel out together to find “something,” looking for caribou, berries and certain medicines. When Mida and I sat on top of a mountain called in Kaska Tse Dek’ese ‘Blue Rock Mountain’. It is now the site of a sporadically active jade mine, so is sometimes also called “Jade Mine Mountain.” Mida called my attention to the caribou trails visible on the opposite slope. The grassy alpine patch we were sitting on also had caribou trackways and old scats, though we saw no caribou the day we were there. She remembered camping there with her children when they were small. Because of the mining activity in the area, a rough truck trail has gone up “Jade Mine Mountain” for several decades, making hunting access easier. The same kind of travelling occurs in other areas where there is truck access to areas near where caribou are expected, up the network of truck trails constructed for mineral access since the mid twentieth century. Tootsie (Tudzie) Mountain is another alpine area to which people travel, and Mida explained the habitat differences between “rock mountain” (Figure 6.6) and “grass-topped mountain” (Figure 6.7) pointing out how “rock mountains” are good escape habitat for sheep, while “grass-topped mountains” provide forage for many animals, including sheep and caribou. Older foot trails to the alpine zone also exist, and are accessed from the Frances River and other travel routes.

Spring time is a good time to pick medicines—e.g. June just after leaves come out when sap is running—especially the barks. It is also a time to avoid solo travel in the “bush,” because the bears are “running” (rutting). I was scolded for walking alone in the bush at that time of year with neither gun nor dog. In the fall, you have to watch out for moose when they are in rut; a careless scraping sound may bring a hopeful, hopped up, and dangerous bull



**Figure 6.6** "Rock mountain" *tsē dzēh*



**Figure 6.7** "Grass mountain" (grass-topped mountain) *hēs*

running to you, ready to charge a rival. Bark medicines are hard to gather in fall, but it is a time to lay in a supply of some other plants such as Labrador tea and green black spruce cones, and to make sure that an abundance of cranberries is picked and put away.

Traplines order people's sense of who is where. People can and do move around, and establish ties to new areas, especially through marriage. But narratives of Elders such as Mida Donnessey and Alice Brodhagen give a sense of where people were in the past, and the knowledge of these two Elders seems to be tied especially to family areas. Although formal registered traplines were an innovation of the territorial government in the early twentieth century, Weinstein (1992) corroborates the traditional importance of family hunting and trapping areas in the Ross River area, and indicates that this approach to hunting areas is a widespread Dene pattern.

Language also reveals ethnoecological knowledge, a topic explored in greater detail in Johnson (2009). Terms such as 'high bank' (Figure 6.8), 'rockslide', 'swamp', 'eddy' and 'fish lake' give a strong sense of the Kaska landscape. People talk about disturbance events—fire, floods, snowslides, landslides—and describe ecological entailments of fire and the personal risks of snowslides (L.M. Johnson field notes).



Figure 6.8 High bank *t'étāgī* bluff along Dease River below French Creek

Like other Dene, Kaska people are resourceful and constantly aware of opportunities. Respect pervades their attitude toward the land and other beings. The land, the animals, and plants are aware, and some are very powerful. People gain access to meat and healing from medicines by a kind of negotiation with powerful Others. Everything must be treated with respect, and one must never be boastful. Offerings should be left when gathering medicines. Powerful animals must be spoken about circumspectly, especially when they are present and you are in the bush. “Bushmen,” often called “kidnappers” by local elders (Nagone), are in a way emblematic of untamed Others (Basso 1976). Stories of the Bushmen were used to encourage girls to stay close to camp when Elders Mida and Clara Donnessey were growing up. Elders such as Alice Brodhagen and Mida Donnessey tell stories about the origins of various animals, which bear on both edibility and proper behaviour.

People have a sense of plant habitats and vegetation as well. Bear root (*Hedysarum alpinum*) and caribou weed (*Artemisia tilesii*) grow beside rivers or along creeks. Balsam (*Abies balsamea* ssp. *lasiocarpa*) and mountain ash (*Sorbus* sp.) are found in the mountains, not in the “moss.” Tamarack and Labrador tea are prevalent in the moss or muskeg. Stands of tall “big trees” (*dechen chō*) including both white spruce (*gat*, *Picea glauca*) and black spruce (*ts’ibé’*, *P. mariana*) are found along the Liard River in various places along the trail back down to Lower Post. These contrast strongly with the more stunted, black spruce and tamarack (*tadūze*, *Larix laricina*) on organic soils. From the overlook above Tom Creek, Mida commented about “brushland” (*naw’a*) by which she meant the expanse of unbroken conifer stands below us. She recalled the abundance of berries after a burn in the Tom Creek area, and was surprised by how much the site had changed through forest succession since she had last spent time there. People differentiate meadows, or grassy areas, the timberline dwarf birch-tundra mosaic, areas with emergent aquatics, and so on. They also recognize old burn areas with phrases such as “fire come through,” and understand the dynamics of channel change and slough formation along main rivers as well as changes in wetlands due to the activities of beavers and to their cessation.

From another perspective, land and the activities that go with land, are also seen as the key to identity, in opposition to watching TV and drinking and getting in trouble in town. People hold meetings such as General Assemblies on the land, and have healing camps, language workshops, and youth camps on the land when possible. The land offers a sense of self-reliance and insurance to those who have the skills; it can be relied upon if you know how

to take care of yourself, no matter what the government does or does not do, whether or not there are jobs or transfer payments.

### **Framing my understanding of Kaska ethnoecology**

My understanding of Kaska ethnoecology is necessarily limited by the fact that I have only worked with Kaska in the short green season, from late spring to early fall, so the discussion presented here has been biased toward the non-winter world. As an ethnobotanist and a woman, and since the elders I have worked closely with are also women and are known for their knowledge of medicines, much of what I have learned is focused on plants. If I were a hunter or fisher, different domains of knowledge of land and waters and the significance of their features would be revealed through practice, verbal explanation and narrative.

I found that I could not draw a landscape block diagram on the basis of my experience with Kaska Dena, in contrast to those presented in Chapters 3 and 4. I had the sense that it was in part because key aspects of human interaction with land could not be fixed in space, drawn definitively and labelled. Partly this may be a consequence of Athapaskan languages and their polysynthetic-agglutinative nature, and the significance of relational terms. The Kaska language is rich with deictics or directional words, which are used to describe motion and spatial relationship in talking about both the land and social relations (Moore 2000, 2002).

Partly this may be a consequence of the nature of the topography and boreal forest landscape; it is harder to encapsulate a view including all the significant ecotopes in one diagram, for big country with more subdued topography and a range of local landscapes. Another significant factor is that vegetation types do not seem to be delimited as a significant way to see the landscape, though they can be described (Johnson 2007, 2009). Perhaps most significant is that a block diagram is of necessity static, while the Dene way to experience land is fluid and dynamic, and depends on what aspects of land, history, and personal experience are being referred to.

Interestingly, Iain Davidson-Hunt and his co-authors found that they had to consider Shoal Lake Anishinaabe landscape from the framework of “cultural landscape,” and the landscape diagrams they drew did not make sense to the community until they included the human layer as integral with the biophysical (Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2003, 2009; Davidson-Hunt 2003).

Talking with and travelling with my Kaska teachers, the story of the land that emerges is rich: a medley of sloughs and overlooks, old trails, camps

and places of power, places of past stories, moose licks and fish lakes, edible and medicinal plants, and berry patches. Ethnoecology is complex, as it links many aspects of a people's life. Like other northern Dene peoples, the Kaska view of land is not based primarily in vegetation types; variations in vegetation seem less significant than topographic features. Kaska knowledge of land is organized around season and place, and united by a net of trails and rivers, memory, and an active eye. In the past, Kaska moved widely over the land to harvest meat, fish, furs and berries. Like other northern places, seasonality is extreme and winters long, placing a premium on adaptability. With the exception of wood, plants are largely a concern of the summer season, and while important, in terms of cultural salience they are overshadowed by relationships to animals.

At present, Kaska relationships to land have of necessity altered, through settlement into villages and towns, integration into the money economy, and the increasing pressure on their homeland by outsiders as global forces intensify their interest in the Kaska homeland as a source of raw materials (emeralds, mixed sulfide ores, oil and gas, even timber), for transportation corridors (for example, for natural gas from the shores of the Beaufort Sea via the Alaska Highway route), as "scenery" and wildlands, and for recreation. Contemporary Kaska, like other northern indigenous peoples, are confronting challenging decisions about their future relationship to the land and how their communities will sustain themselves. To what degree can a balance between traditional values in the sentient land—the land as source of identity and self-reliance, physical and spiritual well-being, history and knowledge, food and home—be reconciled with the conversion of Land and nature to natural resources, which must be articulated with the limitless appetites of global markets and global concepts of property?