

# 9

## Of Nets and Nodes

REFLECTIONS ON DENE ETHNOECOLOGY AND LANDSCAPE

In this chapter I consider landscape and ethnoecology in light of some distinctive aspects of the various peoples who speak Athapaskan languages. I give another perspective on the Witsuwit'en as Dene, and bringing out commonalities between Witsuwit'en and northern Dene.

Athapaskan speakers live across a broad swath of northern North America, from central Alaska to the shores of Hudson Bay, and in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. At some time in the past, other Athapaskan speaking groups moved south to become the ancestors of the Apache, Navajo, and small groups of Athapaskan speakers in the Pacific Northwest, according to archaeologists and linguists (Ives and Rice 2003; Ives 2003; Matson and Magne 2007). The north is the homeland of Athapaskan speakers. As we have seen, northern Athapaskans, or Dene, are travelling people. Their traditional subsistence and way of life involved a great deal of movement across the landscape and over the seasons, as they harvested a variety of resources, especially caribou and other large game, various lake and river fish, and berries. I have described how rivers and trails organize movement across the landscape and through the seasons, linking places and areas, and providing a mental template that connects places and seasons, individual histories, and knowledge of the land itself. We can

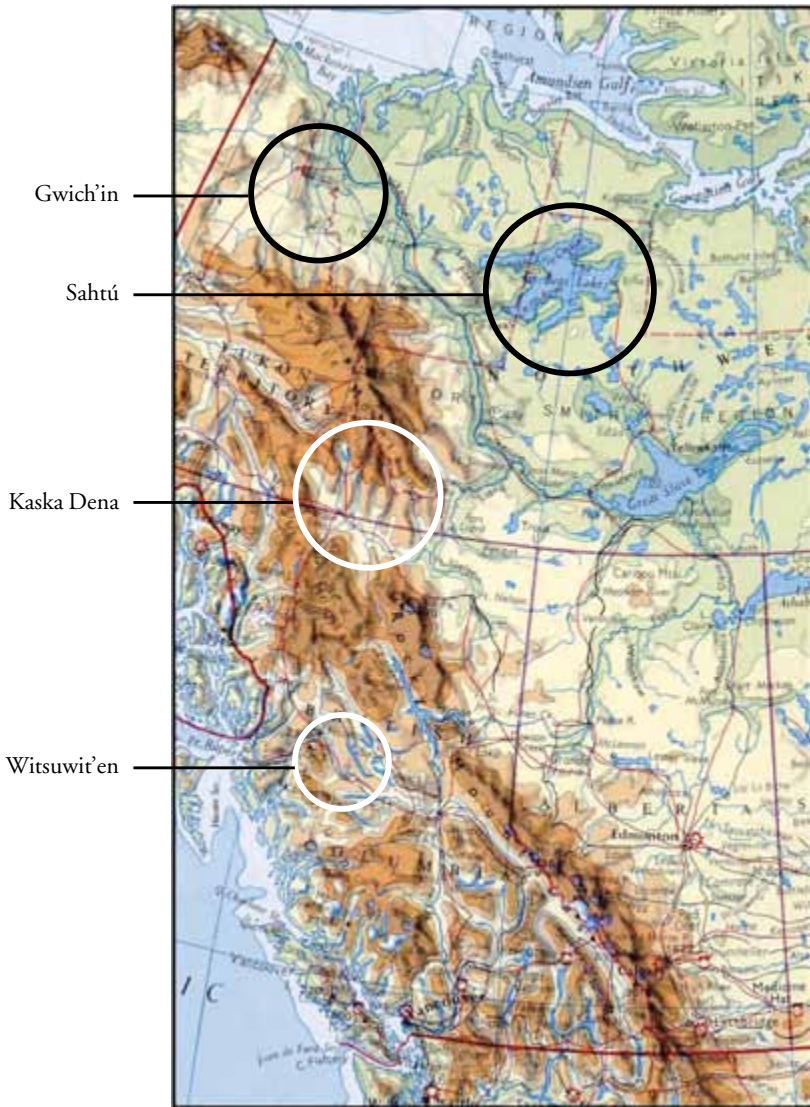
conceive, then, that Dene landscape ethnoecology is organized by a series of anastomosing pathways which form what I call “nets,” and by “nodes,” focal places along the net of trails and waterways that continue to shape human movement over the land. This way of dwelling in and understanding the world is based on a “traveller’s path,” the experience of land which arises by moving through it, that differs fundamentally from the notion of land as fixed bounded plots, typical of European based perceptions of the land surface. The sense of the land as bounded areas is the basis of the planometric area-based polygon which underlies most approaches to mapping and Geographic Information Systems (as I discuss in chapters 11 and 12) and relates to concepts of expanses of land as owned, delineated plots. This common approach to organizing space is implicit in resource management paradigms, and explicit in political geography. Tim Ingold calls it “the view from nowhere” (Ingold 1993:155). Dene are always somewhere, and see the land in relationship to where they are, where they have been (backwards along the trail), and where they are going.

In Dene ecology, drainage basins are fundamental units, with the directionality of slope and river flow as basic perceptions (Kari 1989, 1996, 2008). Athapaskan languages are rich with terms that indicate spatial directions of movement of the speaker, or of landscape elements to each other (Moore 2000; Tlen 2006; Basso 1996). Pat Moore explained that the directional terms in Kaska deal with the path of the speaker, refer to places in front or behind the speaker on the trail or river, or to one side or the other; this system is characteristic of all Athapaskan languages (Kari 2008). These can be extended to include areas at the general distance indicated, and can be metaphorically extended to social relationships. (Moore 2002).

The reflections in this chapter integrate insights from my work with the Witsuwit’*en* of northwest British Columbia, whose ethnogeography and berry patch knowledge I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, the Kaska Dena of the southern Yukon whom we have met in Chapter 6, the Gwich’in of the Mackenzie Delta, discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, and another northern Dene group, the Sahu’*otine* of Great Bear Lake, Northwest Territories (Figure 9.1).

### **Patterns and variations in Dene landscapes**

I begin my discussion of specific patterns of Dene landscapes with the Kaska. The first-order shaping of the Kaska land includes the major rivers and lakes, and significant mountains: the Frances River (Tu Chō Tué<sup>1</sup>) flowing out of Frances Lake (Tu Chō Mene) and joining the Upper Liard, and in turn uniting with other tributaries such as the Dease, which enters at Lower Post, and



**Figure 9.1** General locations of Dene groups discussed in this chapter (basemap from Atlas of Canada and the World second edition Key Porter Books 1997)

the Kechika, which enters above the Grand Canyon of the Liard. As we have seen, significant mountains have names and stories, and are used as landmarks and reference points. Major rivers are all named, and directionality of the rivers and drainage divides has shaped traditional travel. There is a web of trails which connect places on the landscape and through the seasonal round: hunting trails, berrying trails, river travel corridors, and trails for moving over distance such as the Liard-Simpson Lake Trail, which extended from Simpson Lake (Tsē Zul Mene) down to Lower Post BC (Daliyo) in the trading post era. The rivers and the large lakes such as Frances Lake (Tu Chō Mene) are also travel corridors in both summer and winter. The web of pathways forms the “net,” the pattern of all of these corridors of travel, these trails, on the landscape. The “nodes” are the places where people converge—the resource patches, camps, or home base areas that focus movement through the seasons—that people occupy or use in transit between seasonal or other resource areas. To give a sense of the flow of the land, I include a sample of my notes travelling a truck trail that parallels the older trapline trail through an area familiar to my teacher Mida Donnessey. As we ascended a ridge:

Mida explained that fresh moose track is *kéde daga*, uphill is *kúda digé*, and downhill is *kúda ats’á*. *Tlétāgī* is on top of the hill.

We drove on to Billy Lake [on the top of the hill] for our lunch stop. The old foot trail comes through there, following the ridge. I photographed the trail with two very old blazes, and the camp. The site sits on the ridge top and overlooks the lake. Mida says people sit there and watch for moose in the sedge meadows and wetlands that lie on the western side of the lake. The trail comes up Fish Creek from the place we picked mint. It was her Uncle Liard Tom’s trapline, that whole area. Then Frank Tom, who passed away last year, had the trapline.

After stopping at Billy Lake we continued on the old route, passing through an area her Uncles told Mida about, where there is an extensive deposit of red ochre sand, and on toward the confluence of the Rancheria (Ts’ih Tue’) and the Little Rancheria Rivers, and describing the crossing to the Moose River and the hot springs there.

Fish lakes, alpine hunting areas, river fishing areas, berry picking areas, and places for beaver or moose (*Alces alces*) hunting are some of the nodes on the land.

In the historic period, trading posts and trapline cabins also formed nodes, and family trapping areas centred on trapline cabins and winter camps. In contemporary life, the villages are central places from which people radiate as they travel on the land, and the major highways such as the Alaska Highway, the Cassiar Highway, and the Campbell Highway, facilitate vehicle access to regions adjacent to these arteries.

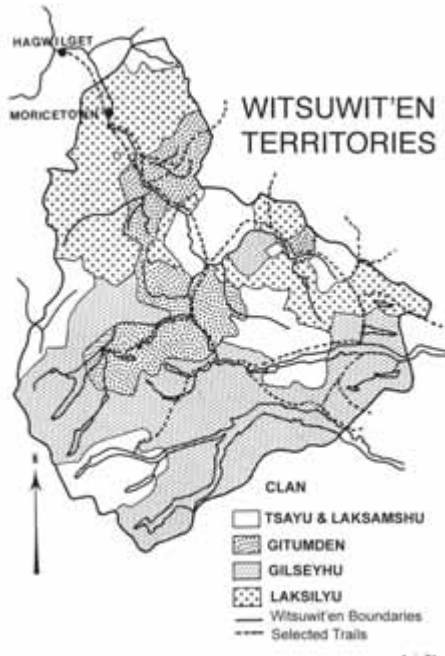
In contrast, in Witsuwit'en country in west-central and northwestern British Columbia, both the topography and the regional aboriginal political geography combine to make ownership of fixed bounded territories a strong feature of the regional ethnoecology (Figure 9.2). These territories belong to corporate house groups called *yikb*, which themselves are organized into exogamous clans (Gitumden, Tsayu, Laksilyu, Gilhseyu, and Laksamishu). The reciprocal relations between clans of spouses, and therefore clans of fathers and sons, influences access to territory in a manner similar to the Gitksan (Daly 2005; Mills 2005; Johnson 1998).

A well-developed trail net traversed the Witsuwit'en homeland (main trails are indicated by heavy dotted lines crossing the clan territories on Figure 9.2). People travelled in a large seasonal round, alternating time on their winter hunting and trapping territories with coming together to fish and feast in the summer at canyon fisheries. Some families travelled long distances, while other groups had territories adjacent to the summer villages. The late Elsie Tait provided a clear picture of the Witsuwit'en cycle of movement in the early years of the twentieth century:

Summertime. That's the potlatch, big feast time. They would gather up all of the elders from Nass River and all around. In the old days the people from this Hagwilget Reserve, they all moved in toward Fort Fraser, Fraser Lake, and spread out there. They went to the lakes to fish [for char and whitefish?] and out on their traplines and hunting grounds. In the summer they all came back here. They came by horse and buggies with bundles of smoked meat and half-smoked and dried lake trout . . . They moved back to their houses or set up tents.

Then the big feast time comes for a couple of months. (Elsie Tait, L.M. Johnson interview notes October 29, 1986)

Each territory had its own trails connecting river to alpine zone, and extending to key lakes, and so on. An interesting aspect of the trail net is that main trails necessary to access one's trapline from the summer salmon



**Figure 9.2** Map of Witsuwit'en lands showing clan territories and major trails Witsuwit'en relationship to land is framed in the context of clan and house territories that are fixed and bounded (after Gottesfeld 1993).

fishing village are a kind of no man's land in terms of hunting; Alfred Joseph, Gisde We, affirmed that people travelling along such a travel corridor may hunt in the immediate vicinity of the trail for their subsistence while travelling without infringing the rights of the adjacent territory holders. Certain concentrated resource patches are nodes and access to these resource-rich areas is definitely controlled: alpine groundhog<sup>1</sup> hunting areas were such a resource for the Witsuwit'en, attested in part by vocabulary highlighting the ecotopes which support this resource. Berry patches and fishing stations were other resource nodes for Witsuwit'en. The whole question of territoriality and ownership of resource sites among the Witsuwit'en is related to the discussions of economic defendability (Dyson-Hudson and Smith 1978), and access limitation brought forward by Richardson (1982) for the northern Northwest Coast (Gottesfeld 1993), and applies to Gitksan resource sites and territories as well. Significant resources were spatially restricted and of local abundance, making them "worth" defending; in other words, limiting access by others. In practice, the complex social relations between "mother's" and

“father’s” sides, and between husbands and wives, makes access to resources very flexible. As with the Yolngu (Williams 1982), the key thing is to ask. The interesting aspect of Witsuwit’én territoriality is that it is overlaid, as it were, on a more fundamental Athapaskan pattern exemplified by Kaska Dena.

### **Northern Dene—Gwich’in and Sahtú**

Gwich’in means “those who dwell here.” Gwich’in landscape ranges from flatlands and complex delta environments to the more rugged terrain of the Richardson and Ogilvie Mountains with their extensive rocky areas and alpine peatlands. Gwich’in from Teet’it Zheh (Fort McPherson) use lands and waterways in the northern Yukon, and have strong social relationships with Gwich’in now settled in Old Crow. The Dagoo who occupied the ranges and rivers draining the ranges and valleys of the Ogilvie and Richardson Mountains settled in more recent times in Teet’it Zheh, Aklavik, and Old Crow. Routes and passes through the mountains from the drainage of the Peel and the west side of the Mackenzie Delta extend to Old Crow and the Old Crow Basin, and down to meet the Tronjek Hwech’in (Han) in the drainage of the North Fork of the Klondike River near Dawson City. The social net also encompasses Gwich’in from across the border in Alaska, who dwell on the Yukon River and its tributaries and use the slopes of the Brooks Range. Upriver on the Mackenzie, the area of Thunder River marks the contact with the Sahtú people, who speak North Slavey, and now reside in Fort Good Hope and Colville Lake. People from Tsiigehtchic have strong social relations with Fort Good Hope people, as the Mackenzie has been a major travel route, and in historic times they have also shared the Catholic religion. A sense of the movement up and down the Peel from the present site of Teet’it Zheh is described in Chapter 7.

A bit to the south and east, the Sahtú’otine landscape is dominated by Bear Lake and its pervasive influence on the climate, vegetation, and human mobility. Travel on the lake enables access to many significant areas, but requires knowledge and respect to achieve safely. The inflowing rivers and adjacent lakes are also important, such as the Johnny Ho River. The major trail overland past Hottah Lake, through Rae Lakes to Great Slave Lake to the south, called the *Ìdaà* Trail (Andrews and Zoe 1997; Auld et al. 2005), facilitated strong regional connections, and bypassed the longer and more difficult route up the Mackenzie River. Even in recent times, trips are undertaken along this route to visit Tłìchq neighbours in Rae Lakes. The outflowing Great Bear River, connecting the Sahtú people to their relatives at Tulita on the Mackenzie, is also very important.

### **Rivers—pathways, barriers, and sources of fish**

Northern rivers are pathways in the summer and winter seasons, and are barriers to travel in spring and fall, during freeze-up and break-up, and where waterfalls, dangerous rapids or canyons obstruct safe boat or ice travel, quintessential strands of the net. Rivers are also one of the main sources of fish in the summer and early fall seasons. Use of fish is a fundamental Athapaskan Dene strategy. River fishing with traps, nets, and hooks in the open water season has been important in many locations as we have seen in previous chapters. Winter fishing in known and reliable “fish lakes” in winter is also important, especially for more northern groups.

The main fish used by Gwich'in are species of whitefish and arctic charr, and the loche, and they were still obtained by netting in river eddies in the summer, by net under the fall river ice, on fish lakes, and in spawning areas such as the one described by Hyacinthe Andre by Travaillant Lake. In the past fish were extremely important as dog feed, allowing use of dogsleds to cover large distances and haul meat and the gear necessary for making camp and making northern life possible (L.M. Johnson field notes 1999-2000). Families formerly tended to use dispersed fishing areas consistently, but now people may focus their attention on eddies close the main settlements.

The waters of Great Bear Lake, Sahtú itself, shape the Sahtú'otine fishery. Nets are set from the ice off the shore of the village of Deline, and at other productive locations on the lake (Figure 9.3). Large amounts of huge lake trout are the main species thus caught. There are also net fisheries in bays with inflowing streams, and there was formerly a significant spring fishery at the outlet of the Johnny Ho River at the south end of McTavish Arm, now known to be contaminated by naturally occurring mercury (Auld et al. 2005:24). People know where to fish for grayling along the rivers in the summer season, as at the mouths of some tributary creeks to the Great Bear River. Whitefish are also taken.

The Kaska in the Liard drainage lack local access to salmon.<sup>2</sup> They rely on whitefish runs into fish lakes, and on other fish such as grayling or pike (jackfish) in either rivers or lakes. Formerly, there were encampments in the summer to harvest and smoke-dry the whitefish that lived in lakes such as Simpson Lake, Frances Lake, and Watson Lake. (The construction and improvement of the airstrip, and highway construction have tainted and disrupted the fish in Watson Lake itself, which can no longer be used.) Eddies on the Frances (Tu Chō Tué'), Rancheria (Ts'ih Tué') and other local rivers are productive sites for line fishing for grayling. Fish lakes, sometimes called *ihuwe* ('fish') are used throughout the seasons. Kaska elders such as my



**Figure 9.3** Tsia, Russell Bay, a productive area for summer lake charr fishing on Sahtú, Great Bear Lake

teacher Mida Donnessey can give an inventory of all of the fish lakes, and what species can be fished from them, along the trails or highways they have frequented over the course of their lives.

For the Witsuwit'en in northwest British Columbia, the Skeena River system provides anadromous salmon, especially the highly prized chinook ("spring") salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) and sockeye (*O. nerka*). The two main Witsuwit'en village sites, Hagwilget (Tse Kya or Tsë Cakh) and Moricetown (Kyah Wiget) are located adjacent to productive canyon fisheries, and formed an annual focus for summer gathering sites.<sup>3</sup> Much has been written about the Skeena River fishery (Morrell 1989; Gottesfeld et al. 2002), including some regarding conservation ideology (Gottesfeld 1994c). Chinook are taken by gaff in canyon sites that constrict the river's flow and force fish to pass in specific areas, where they rest in deep eddies after battling the strong current. Fishing stations were named and owned, and those not destroyed in federal government salmonid enhancement efforts of the 1950s are still used. Trout are also fished from lakes and rivers. Traditionally, other species such as whitefish and sucker fish (*Catostomus* spp.) were also taken in winter through the lake ice, and implements such as willow bark nets were used in such fisheries.

### **Caribou**

Caribou are a key component of northern Dene life. Northern Dene such as the Gwich'in and Sahtú people rely primarily on migratory herds of barren ground

caribou, while Kaska, and formerly Witsuwit'en rely on woodland caribou. Caribou movement is key in shaping access to caribou in different regions.

Barren ground caribou are highly migratory, and the probability of encounter is only broadly predictable over their range through the seasons, requiring both mobility and information sharing to ensure that everyone has access to fresh meat. When barren ground caribou are encountered, there are often very large numbers of animals, leading to a premium on sharing information about the location of animals, and of sharing meat. Formerly, Gwich'in in the northern Yukon constructed huge and elaborate caribou fences with snares, a communal activity that intercepted migrating herds and yielded large amounts of meat (LeBlanc 2006; McFee 1981; Roseneau 1974; Warbelow et al. 1975).

For the Sahtú'otine, Great Bear Lake (Sahtú) not only serves for obtaining fish, but also serves as a primary means of accessing caribou. In season, hunters centred in Deline travel by lake to the north end of the lake some 200 km from the community, to the Barren Grounds, for caribou. In the fall when the barren ground caribou of the Bluenose-East Herd (Auld et al. 2005:47) reach the area around the north shore, the lake is still open and the water turbulent even as the surrounding land grows cold. Later in the season, caribou utilize the peninsula across Keith Arm, a much less arduous journey across the lake ice.



**Figure 9.4** Boreal woodland caribou hunted by George Kenny and Simon Neyelle along the Bear River, July 2006 and brought to the Deline Plants for Life camp to share

In the summer, barren ground caribou and boreal woodland caribou (Tracz 2006) may be encountered along rivers such as the Mackenzie or Great Bear River as single animals or in small groups, where they are hunted when encountered (Figure 9.4).

Kaska hunt woodland caribou in the mid to late summer in the alpine zone when access up trails or truck trails is good, and when the animals are feeding in relatively lush alpine meadows. This is a contemporary continuation of an ancestral Athapaskan alpine caribou hunting tradition revealed in ice patch archaeology: stone hunting blinds where a hunter could crouch with atl-atl and darts, or bow and arrows, are still evident in the mountains of the southwestern Yukon and the Mackenzie Mountains on the Northwest Territories border, and organic remains of the darts and arrows are melting out of the ice patches (Hare et al. 2004; Farnell et al. 2004; Andrews et al. 2009). In the winter woodland caribou descend from the mountains and roam the lower slopes and valleys, favouring open pine stands (*gōdze*) with abundant lichens, such as the “white moss” (*ajú*) or turf of *Cladina* species. They can be hunted in such locations, I was told.

Caribou are now nearly absent in Witsuwit'en country, though twenty-five years ago old weathered antlers could still be found in alpine areas they formerly inhabited (Mike Morrell, pers. comm., 1984). Elders such as the late Johnny David (Mills 2005) recalled the time when caribou were hunted and moose yet uncommon in the region. Climate change and perhaps Euro-Canadian settlement seem to have progressively favoured in-migration of moose, which have increased in numbers while caribou precipitously declined. At this time, a very small remnant herd persists in the alpine zone near Telkwa Pass.

## **Berries**

Although animals and fish may dominate Dene traditional economy and shape ethnoecological perception, berries in season also exert their pull. Berries are one of the few productive plant foods of northern latitudes, and often appear in profusion while in season (cf. Parlee et al. 2006; Trusler and Johnson 2008; this work, Chapter 5). In northern communities, berries may suddenly dominate conversation, and children, women and men may all go berry picking when blueberries or cranberries ripen. As described in Chapter 5, the most important berry species for the Witsuwit'en are black huckleberry (*Vaccinium membranaceum*), lowbush blueberry (*V. caespitosum*), and saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) and a number of other species such as wild

strawberries (*Fragaria virginiana*) are also utilized. The Witsuwit'en, in common with other indigenous peoples in British Columbia and apparently in contrast with northern Dene, managed berry patches by burning, especially harvesting areas for the favoured black huckleberry and lowbush blueberry.

For the Gwich'in, the three main types of berries still widely sought are cloudberry (*Rubus chamaemorus*), locally called yellow berries; blueberries (*Vaccinium uliginosum*); and lingonberries (*V. vitis-idaea*), also called lowbush cranberries. The cloudberry has a very short season at the beginning of August, but may be harvested in large quantities in certain areas at the right time. Blueberries are slightly later than cloudberry, and blueberries and cloudberry may be found in the same places at times. They also have a short season, and do not keep well unfrozen. Cranberries are widely available and highly prized. Although the plants are very common, productive patches are not ubiquitous, and neither can the berry crop be consistently relied upon. According to Parlee, families tend to have more or less private cranberry patches near fish camps (Parlee et al. 2006). The degree of sharing of berries, access control and sharing of information seems to vary in part depending on annual or seasonal patterns of abundance or scarcity.

Certain sites are known as productive berry areas for the Sahtú people. The alluvial fan where Wolverine Creek enters the Great Bear River is one site known for its abundant and productive berry plants, and is easily accessed by those travelling up or down the Great Bear River. (The association of the abundant berries with bears was one reason our group camped at a different location in the summer of 2006.) Bog blueberries (*Vaccinium uliginosum*) and lowbush cranberries are prized berry species.

Kaska also pick bog blueberries, "blackberries" (crowberries, *Empetrum nigrum*) and lowbush cranberries, as well as smaller amounts of several other berry species, including raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*), highbush cranberries (*Viburnum edule*), wild strawberries, soapberries (*Shepherdia canadensis*), and cloudberry. Cranberries are picked in particularly large quantities because they store well. People are attentive to the characteristics of sites with good berries, and also watch where cranberries flower heavily in the spring to predict where the berry crop will be concentrated in the fall, as I describe in Chapter 6. Cranberry patches adjacent to traditional camps or on traplines may to some degree be seen as belonging to the owner, as with the Gwich'in, though at this point anecdotal evidence is only suggestive of access limitation.

### **Dene patterns: connectivity of nets and nodes**

Travelling with Kaska Elder Mida Donnessey, I began to get a sense of some other important focal areas for hunting people. For example, people always talk about licks, mineral lick areas that are visited by animals such as moose, caribou or mountain sheep, particularly when travelling up or down the road or trail that passes a lick area. I learned that lick areas can be spoiled by physical disturbance (e.g. road construction) or by improper behaviour such as failing to retrieve a wounded animal, or fouling the area with entrails (L.M. Johnson field notes 1998-2004). Such areas are of obvious importance for hunters to know about, and may require special care not to disturb the population balance of animals that use the area.

Much further north, along the Dempster highway, the presence of a lick near the road and the river brought thinhorn sheep (*Ovis dalli*) to the slope by the highway just once in several trips up and down the highway, which made me think of my Gwich'in friends' admonition to be constantly watchful, because you never know when you will see an animal (see Figure 9.5).

I also learned about lookouts from travelling with Mida. A lookout is an area along a trail at the top of a bluff or steep hill, which has a view of a productive area below where one may see game. This concept is also shared by Witsuwit'en who call such a place *coënk'it*; the late Pat Namox described its importance in hunting and its association with seeing (see Chapter 4).

To get a sense of how different sites within an area may be spatially and seasonally related, I would like to return to consideration of what I learned from Mary Teya about her family's use of sites in the Road River area near the Yukon-Northwest Territories boundary. Mary mentioned key resource areas available in different areas near the various camps, including moose country, berry patches, and fish lakes (see Figure 7.3). The river provides reliable access to the area and between sites in summer and in winter. Trapline trails extend along the river or up ridges, converging on the main winter camp, located a few kilometres downstream of the summer fishing camp. Fishing sites, moose habitat, and berry patches all occur near the summer fish camp site. During spring (break-up) or fall (freeze-up), river travel, or indeed much travel at all, is impossible, so camps for spring and fall had to be located where resources could be reached in the immediate vicinity of the camp, as with the spring camp at Three Cabin Creek, where muskrats were available in the wetlands as well as moose in the willow areas.

In Northwest British Columbia, along the drainages of the Bulkley River, the trail net included main trails up and down the main river valleys, and

shorter trails up side drainages that connected the main valley with the resources of montane and alpine slopes. The country is precipitous, and in pre-contact times considerable effort was expended in making trails in the mountains, and in making bridges over swift and deep rivers. The Blue Lake area, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter and in Chapter 5 as the site of an important berry patch, is a resource rich montane and subalpine area near the historic village of Hagwilget, where most Witsuwit'en lived for at least some part of the year. After salmon fishing along the main Bulkley River, people travelled up the trail to timberline in the Blue Lake area to access medicines, pick black huckleberries, hunt mountain goat (*Oreamnos americanus*), and dig fern rhizome (*diyii'n*, the rhizome of the spiny wood fern *Dryopteris expansa*) a highly prized carbohydrate food which could be stored for winter, packing down the harvest to the winter village at Hagwilget (Turner et al. 1992). People still sometimes pick berries up in old clearcut patches along a logging road that follows part of the old foot and horse trail. The site also had spiritual aspects, requiring first time travellers to put ashes on their faces, and it is mentioned in some Witsuwit'en narratives as a special place.

### **The sacred in Dene ethnoecology**

The sacred, or spiritually potent, also shapes Dene ethnoecology. The land itself is sacred and things that come from the land, such as medicinal roots or red ochre, must be taken with prayer and payment (Mida Donnessey, L.M. Johnson field notes 1999-2004). The land contains reminders of moral lessons and past events in the relationship of people with place. Shiltee rock is a prominent landmark near Fort McPherson on the Peel River. As described in Chapter 7, this rock formation memorializes a story about a family who camped by the Peel long ago, and what happened when a young girl violated her puberty seclusion. Not only does the place provide a vivid reminder of the consequences of failing to observe the rules of proper behaviour, but it also remains a place of power that demands respect. As Mary and William Teya explained to me, in the late 1980s the community decided to hold a music festival and celebration in a meadow at the base of the slope below Shiltee Rock. Apparently, this was not sufficiently respectful of a place of power, and the following year the meadow area filled and became a lake. People considered that a sign and decided to move the festival to a small lake beside the Dempster Highway, halfway to the mountains. The lake by Shiltee Rock is again dry.

There are many stories about Distant Time and events which occurred long ago, shaping the present form of the world, connecting the distant past with the present in localized places, and providing a geography of power (e.g. Andrews et al. 1998). Watson Lake was the site where a rampaging giant elephant was drowned through the quick-witted action of a clever young man, as I describe in Chapter 6. A rocky islet on Great Bear Lake is the frozen remnant of a ferocious giant wolf that used to terrorize travellers that passed by a certain rocky point where its lair was located (L.M. Johnson and C. Fletcher field notes 2005).<sup>4</sup> And red rock formations in Moricetown Canyon are evidence of an ancient tale of infidelity and revenge, also associated with spoiling hunting luck (Madeline Alfred [Dzee], L.M. Johnson interview notes 1988). Further afield, Henry Sharp (1987, 2001) describes giant animals that inhabit dangerous river crossings and other powerful places in the landscape of the Dene Suline' (Chipewyan) in northern Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Northwest Territories. Basso (1996a) and Palmer (2006) show similar connection of story to place, and its moral power for the Apache and the Secwepemc of Alkalai Lake, BC, respectively.

### **Sentient ecology and probabilistic encounter**

The Dene world is well described by David Anderson's cogent phrase "sentient ecology" (2000) or Richard Nelson's "the watchful world" (Nelson 1983). For the Dene, the world itself is aware, and people exist in a dynamic and interactive relationship with all of its aspects, threading a careful path across the landscape, alert to all possibilities.

Dene ethnoecology is based on probabilistic encounter, and considers the landscape and the living things that dwell there to be sentient and have agency.<sup>5</sup> It is a moral universe that entails mutual obligations. People cannot take things for granted; they must be alert and perceptive, mentally nimble, ready to take opportunities that present themselves, and ready to avoid dangers. The landscape is not a mosaic of stable fixed areas with hard boundaries, though the exigencies of dealing with contemporary governments and jurisdictions sometimes impose such boundaries on the land.

Dene knowledge of place is rooted in experiential engagement with particular places through the seasons over lifetimes, and through narratives that extend backward through previous lifetimes back to Distant Time. People are keen observers, generalizing on the basis of previous experience of similar places, and quick to apprehend present potentialities. The landscape as well as the plants and animals that dwell within it exist in shifting configura-

tions that form trajectories across the seasons as well as space. The engaged and aware person must be aware of and responsive to these configurations when encountered.



**Figure 9.5** Dall sheep along Dempster Highway in the area of Engineer Creek This sheep sighting symbolized “probabilistic encounter” for me.

## Reflections and refractions

*Thinking about landscape and journeying. . . . I imagine the bubble of here—relationships with landscape experienced from where the journeyer stands—moving with him/her as he/she journeys. . . .*

*Emplacing story on landscape—as relationships move with the journeyer, they are (re-) established in homelands. When people pause in the journey and take up a place as home, stories and relationships are created by dwelling.*

*The story about the pubescent girl and her father/brothers and/or the dogs turning to stone is emplaced multiple times—at Shiltee rock on the Peel in the homeland of the Gwich'in, and again by Ross river.*

*Emerging from the moss house<sup>6</sup> into the upper world—and there were monsters, as the Twins found when they emerged into the present world.*

*The Navajo hogan really is similar to the Gwich'in moss house; they are the “same” kind of dwelling.*

*Is this the origin of Ket and Navajo stories of emergence from the lower world? Can this emergence also be seen symbolically as birth from the safe lower/inner space of darkness through the empowered hole into a place of light, risk and possibility? Light entails vision and visibility, knowledge and vulnerability.*

*Thinking about Navajo cosmology and Ket. . . . emerging from a safe lower world to the surface of the land that we know . . . there were monsters to be overcome before the world became as we know it now, relatively safe for human dwelling. All the Dene tell stories about overcoming monsters . . . even Europeans have stories about this . . . memory is long and dwelling on the land is as long as humankind. Kaska have "elephants"; Navajo monsters killed by the Twins; the giant wolverine of Kaska and Dene Tha narrative and others . . . even science acknowledges that there were monsters in that Distant Time when the Age of Ice was waning. . .*

*These thoughts occur to me after a recent visit to Navajoland, or Dine Bikéya, my first real visit with southern Athapaskan speakers. Connections are even more ancient: it is now apparent that the Ket and Yeniseic speakers of Siberia are far distant kin to the Dene, speaking a language that shows relationship even after thousands of years of separation, and sharing similarly deep ways of understanding the land.*

*These thoughts also occur to me after reading Spider Woman by Gladys Reichard (1934), Ed Vajda's (2008) paper "A Siberian Link with Na-Dene Languages," and Ingold's (1993) "The temporality of the landscape." I also give a nod to Moore and Wheelock's (1990) Wolverine Myths and Visions, Dene Traditions of Northern Alberta, to Dene Gudeji, Kaska Narratives (1999), and to the stories my Kaska Elder teachers Mida Donnessey and Alice Brodhagen have told me.*