DENE THA’ PRESENCE IN NORTHEASTERN BC

Prepared for: Calliou Group, Calgary, Alberta on Behalf of the Dene Tha’ First Nation

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This overview report of the Dene Tha presence in northeastern British Columbia is based on Randy Bouchard’s literature review undertaken over a four-year period between June 2005 and June 2009. While this review of known and available ethnohistoric, ethnographic and linguistic source materials has been wide-ranging and thorough, it is not exhaustive. A number of sources remain to be reviewed.

1.1 Linguistic and Ethnic Affiliations of the Dene Tha’

The Dene Tha’ have been referred to in the literature by a number of names, including: “Upper Hay River Band of Slaves”; “Hay River Indians”; “Hay Lakes Indians”; “Chateh/Assumption Indians”; “Slavey Indians at Hay Lake(s)”; “Upper Hay River Post Indians”; and “Bistcho Lake Tribe.”

In 1978 the name of the “Slaves of the Upper Hay River Band” was officially changed to “Dene Tha’.” As stated in an April 1978 Band Council Resolution, “Dene Tha’ . . . is a name which the people have been using to address themselves for Centuries.” 1 This change of Band name was made because the terms “Slave” or “Slavey” are derogatory and offensive to modern generations of the Dene Tha’. According to present-day Dene Tha’, the terms “Slave” or “Slavey” came about not because of Native terms used by neighbouring tribes to refer to the Dene Tha’, 2 but through a series of mis-understandings by early explorers and other non-Aboriginals as to who the Dene Tha’ really are. 3

“Dene Tha’,” the preferred ethnonym, 4 will be used wherever possible in the present overview, together with another preferred term, “Dene” 5—referring to single groups of Northern

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3 Personal communication of Dene Tha’ Chief James Ahnassay to Tracy Campbell and Randy Bouchard, 11-12 July 2009.

4 An ethnonym is the name used by a group of people for self-identification.

5 A number of tribal groups speaking Athapaskan languages (see the footnote that follows) use variations of the Native term anglicized as “Dene”—meaning ‘man’ or ‘person’—to identify themselves. See Beryl C. Gillespie (1981). Territorial Groups Before 1821: Athapaskans of the Shield and the Mackenzie Drainage, Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 6: Subarctic. Published by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. P. 168. “Dene” also means ‘people,’ as well as ‘man’ or ‘person’ (Personal communication of Dene Tha’ Chief James Ahnassay to Tracy Campbell and Randy Bouchard, 14 July 2009).
Athapaskans, several Northern Athapaskan peoples collectively, or to Northern Athapaskans in general—although it will also be necessary to use the term “Slavey” (“Slave”) when citing the literature.

The term “Slavey” (“Slave”) has commonly been used by anthropologists and linguists to refer to the larger entity of which the Dene Tha’ are a component group. Linguists Michael Krauss and Victor Golla in 1980 referred to this larger entity as “Slavey-Hare” because their research indicated that the groups known as Slavey, Mountain, Bear Lake and Hare all speak closely-related dialects of the same language. Krauss and Golla classified the “Slavey-Hare” language, a dialect of which is spoken by the Dene Tha’, as one of 23 languages comprising “Northern Athapaskan,” a recognized geographical subdivision of the Athapaskan Language Family. Anthropologist Jean-Guy Goulet, who undertook extensive research among the Dene Tha’ over a six-year period beginning in 1979, pointed out in a recent publication that when anthropologists adopted “Slavey” as the English term to refer to all the “Slavey proper” populations, “they collapsed into one general category various groups dispersed over a wide area.”

As Krauss and Golla have pointed out, the most widely spoken of the modern dialects of the “Slavey-Hare” language is “Slavey proper” which is the dominant dialect not only of the Dene Tha’ communities in Alberta but also of other Dene communities in the southern North West Territories at lower Hay River (now known as “Katlodeeche Dene”), Fort Providence (now known as “Deh Hah Gotie Dene”), Kakisa Lake (now known as “Ka’agee Tu Dene”), Trout Lake (now known as “Sambaa K’e Dene”), Fort Liard (now known as “Acho Dene Koe”), Jean Marie River (now known as “Tthe’K’ehdeli Dene”), Nahanni Butte (now known as “N’ah adehe Dene”) and Fort Simpson (now known as “Liidli Keu Dene”), and in British Columbia at Fort

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6 “Athapaskan” is an arbitrary designation introduced in the 1830’s-1840’s to denote “linguistically related Indian groups in the interior of northwestern North America beyond the Churchill River”; see Gillespie 1981, p. 168.


Nelson; there are also significant numbers of Slavey speakers in Fort Wrigley (now known as “Pehdzeh Ki Dene”) and Fort Norman.10

While the Dene Tha’ speak one of the dialects of the “Slavey proper” division of the “Slavey-Hare” language, they also recognize sub-dialects within their own speech area. The Dene Tha’—sometimes written as “Dene Dháa”—refer to their speech as “Dene Dháh.” Thus, “Dene Tha’” (“Dene Dháa”) means ‘ordinary people’ and “Dene Dháh” means ‘ordinary people’s language.’ Linguist Patrick Moore identifies three “Dene Dháh” dialects: Kegúnht’u, the Bistcho Lake Dialect; Xewónht’e, the Assumption/ Habay Dialect; and, Xewónst’e, the Fort Vermilion/ Eleske Dialect.11 The Beaver people, who speak a different but closely-related language to the Dene Tha’, refer to themselves as “Dene Dzaa,” which is said to mean ‘real people.’14

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11 Patrick Moore and Angela Wheelock (editors) (1990). Wolverine Myths and Visions: Dene Traditions from Northern Alberta. Compiled by the Dene Wodih Society. Published by the University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, Alberta and the University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska. Pp. xi, 94-96. Additional clarification is provided by Dene Tha’ Chief James Ahnassay, who points out that “Dene Tha’” means ‘regular; normal; common’ and that “Dene Dhah” means ‘people’s language’ (Personal communication of Dene Tha’ Chief James Ahnassay to Tracy Campbell and Randy Bouchard, 14 July 2009).


2.0 SOMETHING DOCUMENTARY REFERENCES TO THE DENE THA’ PRESENCE IN NORTHEASTERN BC

A map of the Hay River valley and surrounding areas appears as Figure 1 in the present overview report.\textsuperscript{15}

Maps of overall “Slavey” territory \textit{circa} 1725 and \textit{circa} 1850 appear here respectively as Figures 2\textsuperscript{16} and 3,\textsuperscript{17} and a map showing the approximate twentieth-century boundary of the area used by the Dene Tha’ appears as Figure 4.\textsuperscript{18}

A map illustrating Aboriginal occupation of the Hay River area \textit{circa} 1870-1875 appears in the present overview report as Figure 5.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite the wealth of existing documents from the North West Company’s and Hudson’s Bay Company’s Slave Lake and Mackenzie River District fur trade, there is little in this early historical material that distinguishes the Dene Tha’ from other “Slavey-speaking” groups. Occasionally, groups were distinguished on the basis of clothing, such as the Hare Athapaskan being known for their use of rabbit skin, or the group who called themselves “Embayo dinnah” being known to the traders as the “Gens de Mouten” on account of their use of sheep skin for clothing.\textsuperscript{20} Sometimes linguistic distinctions came to the fore when translators’ abilities were found lacking, but culturally-similar subgroups of Athapaskan peoples remained largely undefined until the mid-19th century. Moreover, nomenclature used during the 18th and early 19th century fur trade was not consistently applied, a situation that researchers have acknowledged throughout the region.\textsuperscript{21} Traders seldom attempted to seek out knowledge of ethnonyms—the names by which groups of people self-identified—and instead applied murky generic terms such as “Slave” or ‘Slavey” to people of the Slave Lake and Mackenzie River District; sometimes this


\textsuperscript{18} Moore and Wheelock 1990, p. xv.

\textsuperscript{19} Harrison 1984, p. 101.


identity included people known otherwise as “Beaver.” Similarly, the term “Beaver” occasionally included groups more often identified as “Slavey” and very likely included in some instances the ancestors of those identified today as Dene Tha’.

Not even documents remaining from fur trade activities located in the area used by the Dene Tha’ provide acknowledgement of the Aboriginal people’s own form of identification. Instead, semi-nomadic groups of people, when distinguished at all, were sometimes associated with a general geographical area. An example of such a practice can be seen in the records of the North West Company, compiled for publication by historian Lloyd Keith. Historical accounts indicate that as early as the fall of 1806 the North West Company established a trading post on the Hay River, at a site subsequently identified as being within the general area where ancestors of the Dene Tha’ commonly travelled for resource harvesting. Summarizing documents of the Company’s activities in the Slave Lake and Mackenzie River regions, historian Lloyd Keith wrote:

As early as the fall of 1806, the Nor’Westers established a post on Hay River, a stream that empties into Great Slave Lake near the head of the Mackenzie River. Although provisioned from Fort Vermilion on Peace River, Hay River Post received peltry from the Slaveys of the upper Mackenzie and Liard Rivers and was intended to serve as a buffer to deter any Hudson’s Bay Company expansion in the direction of Mackenzie River.22

Geographer David Harrison concluded, on the basis of his review of the documentation, that this trading post was situated at some point upstream, on the bank of the Hay River near the junction with the Meander River.23 A site up the Hay River in this same area—the confluence of the Hay and Meander Rivers—is clearly identified on Murdoch McPherson’s 1824 map as an abandoned post.24 McPherson had knowledge of the country, for in 1822 the HBC had ordered him to construct a post at the confluence of the Liard and Black (Petitot) Rivers that would become known as Fort Liard.25

Natives identified as “Slavey,” as well as Beaver, Chipewyans and possibly an occasional Iroquois traded at Hay River Post, although Harrison notes that the Chipewyan had to be persuaded and induced with presents to stay in the region. Hay River became the depot for those “Slavey” who had traded at Fort Nelson and the Mackenzie River outposts prior to the closure of these establishments.26 Harrison concluded that at the time the North West Company operated

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22 Keith 2001, p. 70.
23 Harrison 1984, pp. 74-75.
24 Keith 2001, p. 45.
25 Keith 2001, p. 70.
26 Harrison 1984, p.77.
the Hay River Post (1806-1820), “the Slaveys inhabited the area between the western edge of the Hay River basin and both the Liard and Mackenzie River Valleys.” 27

Oblate Missionary Émile F.S. Petitot’s toponymic work among the Aboriginal peoples of the Athabasca-Mackenzie region from approximately 1862-1883 has been inventoried and analyzed by Donat Savoie who provided Petitot’s classification of the “Slaves” as follows, to include the Hay River people and the Horn Mountain people:

. . . The Slaves properly speaking, who are divided into People of the rivière au Foin [Hay River], of lac de Truite [Trout Lake], of the montagne la Corne [Horn Mountain], of the Fourche du Mackenzie [Fork of the Mackenzie] and of Fort Norman . . . 28

Geographer David Harrison’s map depicting the period circa 1870-1875 shows the “Hay River Indians” [Dene Tha’] occupying the upper reaches of the Hay River drainage in British Columbia (see Figure 5). 29

Government records for the general region of northeastern BC are very meagre until approximately 1930. Very little information is provided in the Treaty 8 records from 1899-1900. As well, the subsequent records of this region in the Annual Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs are cursory. While brief comments on this region were made every year after 1900 by H.A. Conroy in the report of the Treaty 8 Commissioner, these are lacking in useful detail. Because of this region’s Treaty status, it was not administered through the British Columbia Indian Inspectorate. Instead, the area became an adjunct of the Lesser Slave Agency, in Alberta. Since the Indian Agent was based far from the region, and generally only came to visit only once a year, in the summer when treaty payments were made, comments about the area in the Alberta Agency's reports in the published Annual Reports are brief and generally unhelpful. The Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia which conducted relatively detailed investigations between 1913-1916, kept detailed records, and is generally a major source of information on Natives throughout British Columbia, is of minimal use here. Members of the Royal Commission did not go to this region, stating in 1916 that the region's remoteness, and the lack of dependable information about the local Native peoples’s requirements, made a visitation pointless until basic preliminaries like a census were undertaken. The Sessional Papers of the Department of Indian Affairs for British Columbia contain nothing of value about the region until about 1930; these documents indicated that northeastern BC’s Aboriginal inhabitants were "nomads" about whom little was known. It was not until 1934 that a Sub-Agency was established at Fort St.John within the British Columbia Inspectorate.

27 Harrison 1984, p.77.


3.0 PROPOSED DENE THA’ TRANSBOUNDARY HUNTING RESERVE

The 1934 plan to set aside a very large transboundary “hunting reserve” for the exclusive use of the Dene Tha’—encompassing the northwestern corner of Alberta, the northeastern corner of British Columbia, and portions of the southern North West Territories—came about, in part, because of concerns raised in the early 1930s when it was realized by government officials that Dene Tha’ people had been trapping in northeastern BC “for generations.”

3.1 Dene Tha’ Presence in Northeastern BC, As Documented in the Early 1930s

One of the first government documents that refers to the Dene Tha’ presence in northeastern BC in the early 1930s is a radiogram of 5 March 1932 from the Commissioner of the BC Police to his Commanding Officer in Prince George. The Commissioner stated he had been contacted that same day by the Indian Commissioner for BC who complained that “some Hay Lake Indians” [Dene Tha’] who had been trapping in northeastern BC “had been sent out of the Province,” even though, he added, these same Native people, by Treaty, “are allowed to trap in British Columbia.”

Further details about this incident were provided on 7 March 1932 by W.E. Ditchburn, the Indian Commissioner for BC, who wrote to BC Provincial Game Commissioner Bryan Williams. Ditchburn and said that it was reported in a 4 March 1932 telegram from Indian Affairs Headquarters in Ottawa that a telegram had been received that same day from “Chief Tallay Slave Band Haylakes, B.C.” complaining that:

‘Police at Haylakes has ordered immediate vacation of Haylake Indians from British Columbia who have trapped district for generations.’ [underlining added]. This means added privation. Please endeavour to have this order cancelled and wire reply. These Indians have no reserve if chased from hunting grounds this winter means hardship . . .

This same incident was also noted in Lesser Slave Lake Indian agent Napoleon L’Heureux’s diary entry for 4 March 1932 where he wrote that the “Hay Lakes Chief” had wired him that same day, “stating that the B.C. Police had ordered immediate evacuation of Indians from B.C. and requesting the Dept. to endeavour to cancelle [sic] this order.”

30 Radiogram of 5 March 1932 from the Commissioner of the BC Police, Victoria, to the Officer Commanding F Division, Prince George. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.


It was Ditchburn’s opinion, as expressed in his 7 March 1932 letter to BC Game Commissioner Williams, that evicting these Hay Lakes [Dene Tha’] Alberta people from BC was wrong because “the Indians in the western part of Alberta have by Treaty the right to trap in that part of the Province of British Columbia west of the central range of the Rocky Mountains, as this right is given to them under the conditions of Treaty No. 8 . . .”. Ditchburn concluded that in light of the Game Wardens’ “misunderstanding on this point,” Williams should:

\[\text{take such action as will permit of the full terms of this Treaty, particularly with regard to the matter of hunting, trapping and fishing, being carried out to the fullest extent by notifying your Game Wardens to permit of the Indians coming under Treaty No. 8 continuing their trapping, hunting and fishing in that part of British Columbia lying west of the central range of the Rocky Mountains.}\]

Williams’ initial response to this 7 March 1932 letter of Ditchburn’s was firm. On 10 March 1932 Williams wrote that he was “very much inclined to think that we have every right to prevent these Indians [the Dene Tha’] coming here.” He cited Section 6 of the Game Act which at that time, he noted, specified “no Indian who is not a resident shall hunt or kill game in the Province [of BC] at any time.” Thus Williams concluded “my Wardens who are enforcing the Game Act are perfectly right in turning these Indians back.” While he acknowledged Treaty rights to hunt, trap and fish, Williams pointed out that “such rights are subject to such Regulations as my from time to time be made by the Government of the country.” Williams concluded his letter by stating that he would seek the views of District Game Warden T. Van Dyk on this same matter.

Also on 10 March 1932, Lesser Slave Lake Indian Agent Napoleon L’Heureux wrote in his journal:

\[\text{Received reply from Ottawa re telegram of the 4th inst. stating that the Province [BC] had been requested to allow Slave [Dene Tha’] Indians to continue to trap in B.C. as formerly, as provided with}\]

Agent Napoleon L’Heureux.

\[\text{33 Ditchburn to Williams, 7 March 1932. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.}\]

\[\text{34 Williams to Ditchburn, 10 March 1932. LAC, RG 10, Vol. 6735, File 420 – 3B.}\]

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Van Dyk was quick to respond to Williams’ request for his views on the subject of the Dene Tha’ trapping in northeastern BC. On 15 March 1932 he sent a brief report to Williams that was entitled “Alberta Indians (Hay Lakes) [Dene Tha’] trapping in British Columbia.” According to Van Dyk, it had been the Game Department’s custom to enforce the Game Act in its entirety. He also pointed out that “special instructions have been issued from time to time regarding Section 6, to the Constables and Game Wardens in the Peace River and Fort Nelson Districts.” Van Dyk added that during the last two years he had given “special instructions to enforce Section 6” to the Fort Nelson Game Warden, in response to complaints about “Alberta Indians” trapping in northeastern BC. It was Van Dyk’s position that Section 6 of the Game Act should be “maintained and enforced.”

Acknowledging Van Dyk’s report on 18 March, 1932, Williams commented that “what you have written is almost identical with my answer [of 10 March 1932] to Mr. Ditchburn on the subject.” Williams instructed Van Dyk “to continue to keep these Indians [Dene Tha’] out [of BC] until it is absolutely proved that we have not the power to do so.”

Meanwhile Ditchburn, who was not satisfied with Williams’ response of 10 March 1932, wrote directly to R.H. Pooley, the BC Attorney-General. In a 15 March 1932 letter to Pooley, Ditchburn described the situation of the “Hay Lakes Indians” trapping in northeastern BC, referenced Williams’ views on this as set out in his 10 March 1932 letter, and asked for Pooley’s views “as to whether Section 6 of the British Columbia Game Act overrides the conditions mentioned in Treaty No. 8.” Ditchburn concluded his letter by stating:

If I am right in my contention then I would strongly recommend that Section 6 of the British Columbia Game Act be so amended at the present Session by making provision that the Indians under Treaty No. 8 will in future be permitted to enjoy the privileges guaranteed to them when they surrendered their interest in the territory covered by the Treaty mentioned.


37 Williams to Van Dyk, 18 March 1932. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.

38 Ditchburn to Pooley, 15 March 1932. LAC, RG 10, Vol. 6735, File 420 – 3B.
However, the views of the BC Game Department would soon change, as a result of a remarkable “patrol report” dated 20 April 1932 by J.S. Clark, the Fort Nelson Game Warden. 39 This report is discussed below.

Game Warden Clark, assisted by his colleague, Special Game Warden B. Villeneuve and using two trains of sled dogs and toboggans, undertook a 90-day patrol between 21 January and 19 April 1932, covering a total distance of 1,430 miles between Fort Nelson and Hay Lakes, Alberta, via the Shikillie, Hay, Black [Petitot] and Fontas Rivers. The primary object of this patrol, according to Clark, was “to see that there were no infractions of the B.C. Game Laws by the Alberta trappers.” Clark described the patrol as one of the most difficult ever undertaken from the Fort Nelson detachment. The patrol was made during one of the worst winters in 20 years, with temperatures ranging from 10 to 60 degrees below zero, almost continuous winds, and deep snow. And to make matters even worse, there were no accurate maps of this entire region, and no boundaries had been demarcated on the ground between northeastern BC and northwestern Alberta.40 As Clark described the situation:

. . . The rivers and lakes that are on our maps are nothing like what is actually in the country. You could never travel by any of the maps or you would be sure to be lost. There has been no survey of this country made, the outline of lakes and drainage is more or less heresy. I could have got twenty convictions had there been a boundary line cut . . . The B.C. Government is losing every year about two thousand dollars in revenues, by not having this line [the BC/Alberta boundary] cut out. . .41

Clark pointed out that there was much more game in northeastern BC than in northwestern Alberta:

The country between N.W.T. line and Kotcho Lake and thence to the Alberta line is one of the very best Fur countrys in Western Canada. While I was in the Shikillie River country I never seen better fur signs and Beaver dams to e found all over the country, and Big Game such as Moose and Caribou can be found all the way


40 It was not until the early 1950s that the Alberta–British Columbia Boundary Commission arranged for the northern portion (i.e., north of approximately 57 degrees 30 minutes latitude) of their common boundary to be surveyed and marked. See: Report of the Commission Appointed to Delimit the Boundary between the Provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, Part IV, 1950-1953. Published by the Office of the Surveyor General, Ottawa, 1955.

up and down the Shikilie River, and the same on the Black [Petitot] River, and the Hay River. 42

When Clark was in the Hay Lakes area of Alberta in early April 1932 as part of this patrol, he said that the “Hay Lakes Indians” [Dene Tha’] told him that “there has never been an Alberta Game Warden at Hay Lakes or any where in that country” and that he (Clark) was “the first Game Warden or Policeman to see Hay Lakes.” According to Clark, there was at this time at Hay Lakes, Alberta “an Indian settlement with 29 hunters and 3 Fur-trading posts.” He noted also that “20 of these Indians [from Hay Lakes] have trap-lines running into B.C.” Some of these traplines, Clark added, “come within a short distance of Hay River, others West of the Shikilie River” [underlining added]. 43

The situation of the Dene Tha’ people at Hay Lakes, Alberta, as Clark described it in the winter of 1932, was rather difficult, to say the least. Indeed, this situation moved Clark profoundly, as indicated in the following observations he made in his report:

There was nothing I could do with these Indians even if I had caught them on their lines, because these Indians are absolutely destitute and starving . . .During the war [World War I] I seen lots of poor people in Germany and France but I never seen anything like what we have on the Boundary at Hay Lakes. I never had such a pitiful job in my life when I advised these Indians, that only B.C. Indians are given trapping privileges in B.C. The old people sat there and cried, they told me I could not find enough food in any one of their camps to feed one of my dogs for one night, which I am sure was the truth, they told me that they had trapped towards Hay River and the Shikilie River for generations [underlining added] . . .The agent has never been to Hay Lakes, nor has any Game Warden or Policemen been to see them . . .These Indians informed me that, their agent told the chiefs at the Upper Hay River last summer [1931] at treaty time that, the Indians could trap anywhere, meaning Alberta, B.C. and N.W.T. as provided by their treaty. [underlining added] 44

Clark was faced with a serious problem. As he put it, “There’s no question in my mind but something has got to be done for these Hay Lake Indians trapping into B.C.” He felt there were 3 options for these Aboriginal people: 1) give them special privileges to “trap into B.C. as they


have been doing”; 2) or, the Indian Department “will have to make them take up residence in B.C.”; 3) or, “they will have to be kept out of B.C.” 45

Clark recommended the first of these three options. He envisaged a situation that would work along the same lines as one already in place, in which “The N.W.T. Dept allow[s] the Alberta and B.C. Indians to trap into the N.W.T. and Royalties [sic] are taken care of by the Traders [fur-traders] and paid to an agent the Postmaster at Fort Vermilion.” In recommending this plan, Clark noted again that these Hay Lakes people [the Dene Tha’] “made their living in the Hay River and Shikilie country for generations.” [underlining added]. To this he added:

I am sure it would be very much to the advantage of our dept to allows these Indians to trap there [in northeast BC] providing they register their trap-lines and royaltys paid on their Furs. I can attend to their applications for registration. The Fur-traders at Hay Lakes informed me that they would be only to[o] glad to pay the Province from which the Furs are trapped in. 46

Divisional Game Supervisor T. Van Dyk forwarded Clark’s 20 April 1932 report to the BC Game Commissioner, Bryan Williams, with a note that stated:

The work of our Game Wardens J.S. Clark and B. Villeneuve is worthy of comment and I respectfully suggest that same be brought to the attention of the Honorable the Attorney-General. 47

It is clear that Clark’s April 1932 report strongly influenced Williams’ previously-stated views concerning the Dene Tha’ trapping in northeastern BC. In a 28 June 1932 letter to W.E. Ditchburn, Indian Commissioner for BC, Williams stated the Clark report put this matter “in an entirely different light.” Because of Clark’s report, Williams now said there was “no cause for my fears.” Consequently Williams stated that:

... with the sanction of the Attorney General, I propose giving serious consideration to the question of allowing these Indians to register their trap lines exactly as our own Indians [of BC] do, in accordance with the suggestion made by Game Warden Clark. 48


48 Williams to Ditchburn, 28 June 1932. LAC, RG 10, Vol. 6735, File 420 – 3B.
Williams concluded his letter by drawing Ditchburn’s attention to the plight of the Hay Lakes Indians, as set out in the Clark report. As well, Williams said he would be writing to Clark and “sanctioning his action in this matter.”

One day later, on 29 June 1932, Williams wrote a similar letter to Van Dyk. He referred to the Clark report as “extremely interesting” and again noted that this report “places the matter of the Hay Lake Indians in an entirely different light.”

Williams advised Van Dyk by letter of 30 July 1932 that “after consulting the Attorney-General in regard to this matter, it has been decided that you may instruct Game Warden Clark to carry out his suggestion with regard to registering these Indians [Hay Lake, i.e. Dene Tha’], and getting royalty collected by their agent.”

Documents in this same file suggest the system of registration and royalty collection that Clark suggested in April 1932 was in place by December 1932, and that Dene Tha’ trappers began registering their trapping areas in northeastern BC that same month (December). Clark stated in a letter/report of 18 January 1935 that when he was on patrol in this region in December 1932, he “received Ten applications from the Hay Lake Indian’s [Dene Tha’] for registration of trap-lines”. This number of registrations is put into context by Clark’s statement that when he was at Hay Lakes in the winter of 1932, there were 20 Hay Lakes Aboriginal people [Dene Tha’] who were trapping in British Columbia. By 1938, there were approximately 23 Dene Tha’ people identified by the BC Game Department as trapping in the Fort Nelson District.

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49 Williams to Ditchburn, 28 June 1932. LAC, RG 10, Vol. 6735, File 420 – 3B.

50 Williams to Van Dyk, 29 June 1932. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.

51 Williams to Van Dyk, 30 July 1932. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.

52 Letter/report of Clark to Williams, 18 January 1935, re: Game Reserve for Hay Lake Indian’s in British Columbia. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934. In another GR 1085 document, Clark stated that he was again in Hay Lakes, Alberta in December 1932, so presumably it was at this time he made these initial ten trapline registrations for the Dene Tha’. See Clark to Van Dyk, 21 April 1933. BCA, GR 1085, Box 24, File 9.


54 BCA, GR 1085, Box 39, File 5.
3.2 The Proposed 1934 Dene Tha’ Transboundary Hunting Reserve

Section 3.1 of the present overview report discusses the documentary record leading up to December 1932 when the Dene Tha’ began to register their traplines in northeastern BC.

While historical documents from the early 1930s that have been reviewed to date give only a general indication as to how far westward into BC the Dene Tha’ trapping activities extended at that time—i.e. “West of the Shikilie River” [underlining added]—a document from the late 1940s suggests that Fort Nelson was within the overall region used by the Dene Tha’ during the course of their annual round of sustenance activities in former times. This document is a December 1948 Indian Affairs report by Fort Vermilion Indian Agency Superintendent Neil Walker in which he mentions that the “Hay Lakes Indians” [the Dene Tha’] “moved around” as far west as Fort Nelson “in the olden days”:

> These people in the olden days were free to move around from Hay Lake to Fort Nelson in northern British Columbia, the Lower Hay River [in the NWT] and Great Slave Lake [in the NWT]. [underlining added] They would winter wherever winter caught up with them and they lived mainly off the country . . .

Another document from the late 1940s stated that “a large block in British Columbia” had been registered in the name of the Hay Lake [Dene Tha’] people; this “large block,” the boundaries of which were not provided in this particular document, was said to be “the ancestral trapping grounds of the people of the Hay Lake area” [underlining added].

This issue of the westward extent of the Dene Tha’ into British Columbia was taken into consideration in 1934 when a transboundary Hunting Reserve for the Dene Tha’ was proposed, as will be discussed below.

Lesser Slave Lake Indian Agent Napoleon L’Heureux indicated in a 12 September 1934 letter to the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs (DSGIA) in Ottawa that he and the DSGIA had “recently” discussed the establishment of a transboundary Hunting Reserve “exclusively for the use of Treaty Indians of the Provinces of British Columbia and Alberta who were so unfortunate as to be deprived of their traplines where their registration has been made compulsory.” In this same letter, L’Heureux proposed that a large tract of land be set aside for this purpose, whose boundaries he recommended as follows:


The South boundary to be a line running from East to West by 58 degrees 30 minutes latitude, the West boundary by 122 degrees longitude, the North boundary to be as far North in the North-West Territories as the Administration may grant and the East boundary by 118 degrees longitude. \textsuperscript{58}

L’Heureux ended this letter by requesting that Ottawa advise him if the Department found such a proposal to have practical value. A minute on the letter indicates that it was sent on for comment to M. Christianson, Inspector of Indian Agencies for Alberta. \textsuperscript{59}

According to L’Heureux’s figures, this proposed Hunting Reserve would extend approximately 75 miles westward into BC from the BC/Alberta border, and about 105 miles southward into BC from the BC/North West Territories border.

While L’Heureux, as stated above, had suggested the proposed Hunting Reserve was to be set aside “exclusively for the use of Treaty Indians of the Provinces of British Columbia and Alberta who were so unfortunate as to be deprived of their traplines where their registration has been made compulsory,” other more senior officials clearly understood it was for the exclusive use of the Dene Tha’. For example, the Inspector of Indian Agencies for the Alberta Inspectorate, M. Christianson, referring to L’Heureux’s 12 September 1934 letter in his own letter of 27 September 1934 to the Secretary of Indian Affairs in Ottawa, referred to this as “a hunting reserve exclusively for the use of Treaty Indians at Hay Lakes and Upper Hay River, which location is in the Northwest corner of the Province of Alberta.” \textsuperscript{60} There is no doubt whatsoever that this is a reference to the Dene Tha’.

Christianson’s 27 September 1934 response to L’Heureux’s 12 September 1934 proposal was not encouraging. He stated it was “questionable whether the area mentioned in the Agent’s letter could be set aside, being approximately 140 miles in breadth and 227 miles in length . . . making it necessary for us to deal with three different governments.” As well, Christianson pointed out that on the basis of information he had gathered, the Dene Tha’ “hunt mostly along the border of Alberta and go into British Columbia, and some of them may, at times, go into the North West Territories.” It was Christianson’s recommendation that the Indian Department take up the matter individually with the three governments in question, but that it might be first of all

\textsuperscript{58} Letter of Indian Agent N.P. L'Heureux to Dr. H.W. McGill, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 12 September 1934. LAC, RG 10, Volume 6733, File 420-2X [entered into Federal Court Action T-305-99 as Crown document No. 02233; Dene Tha’ document No. 4024].

\textsuperscript{59} L'Heureux to McGill, 12 September 1934. LAC, RG 10, Volume 6733, File 420-2X.

\textsuperscript{60} Letter of M. Christianson, Inspector of Indian Agencies, Alberta Inspectorate, to the Secretary [A.F. MacKenzie], Department of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, 27 September 1934. LAC, RG 10, Vol. 6733, File 420-2X. A copy of this letter also exists in: BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.
prudent for someone to visit the people at Hay Lakes and determine “the exact location as to where these Indians have hunted in the past and wish to hunt in the future.”

It should be noted, however, that the known and available materials reviewed to date do not indicate whether or not this very sensible suggestion of Christianson’s—to visit the Dene Tha’ and determine from them exactly where they have hunted in the past and wish to hunt in the future—was ever followed up.

Having received Christianson’s 27 September 1934 letter, the Secretary of Indian Affairs, A.F. MacKenzie on 6 October 1934 forwarded it to C.C. Perry, the Assistant Indian Commissioner for BC, in Victoria, and requested that Perry give it his attention and prepare a report on this matter. MacKenzie also referred in his letter to this proposed Hunting Reserve as being set aside “exclusively for the use of Treaty Indians at Hay Lakes and Upper Hay River” [Dene Tha’].

When Christianson had first met the Dene Tha’ the previous year, 1933, he reported that the 460 Band members “live here and there throughout that part of the country and I understand that quite a number of them live at Hay Lakes.” The Acting Secretary of Indian Affairs used the figure of 500 when he advised R.A. Gibson, Acting Deputy Minister of the Department of the Interior, how many people would be affected by the reservation of the proposed lands. The plan, in his view, would protect not only the interests of the Hay Lakes and Upper Hay River people [the Dene Tha’], but would be in the interests of game conservation, as well.

The area proposed for the Dene Tha’ Hunting Reserve, almost 32,000 square miles in size, was marked on a sketch map and blueprint, a copy of which was forwarded to various government representatives, along with the request that they confer with their respective governments as to the proposal’s viability. The map, itself, which followed the boundaries set out by Indian Agent L’Heureux’s 12 September 1934 letter (as discussed above), appears in the present report as Figure 6. The letter transmitting this map was written on 23 October 1934 by Indian Affairs Secretary A.F. MacKenzie to M. Christianson, Inspector of Indian Agencies, Alberta

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61 Christianson to the Secretary of Indian Affairs, 27 September 1934. LAC, RG 10, Vol. 6733, File 420-2X.

62 Letter of the Secretary of Indian Affairs, A.F. MacKenzie to C.C. Perry, the Assistant Indian Commissioner for BC, 6 October 1934. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.


65 The source of this map is: LAC, RG 10, Volume 11947, File 147/30-1, FA 10-105 [entered into Federal Court Action T-305-99 as Crown document No. 02237A; Dene Tha’ document No. 4301A].
Inspectorate, in response to Christianson’s letter to MacKenzie of 27 September 1934. MacKenzie in this 23 October 1934 letter referred to the area in question as a “hunting reserve exclusively for the use of Treaty Indians at Hay Lakes and Upper Hay River” [i.e. Dene Tha’].

Responding to MacKenzie’s 23 October 1934 letter, Christianson on 9 November 1934 said that he expected to meet with Alberta officials within several days concerning the proposed Hunting Reserve for the “Indians of Upper Hay Lakes and Upper Hay River” [Dene Tha’]. He also noted that MacKenzie was himself going to take up this matter with BC Government officials and with the North West Territories Commission. And Christianson again referred to the position he had taken, as set out in his 27 September 1934 letter, that is, the territory being requested “was excessive to the requirements of these bands of Indians.” He ended his letter by stating: “I believe we should go thoroughly into the matter of what these Indians [the Dene Tha’] actually need, before this vast territory is set aside . . .”

C.C. Perry, Assistant Indian Commissioner for BC, responding to MacKenzie’s 6 October 1934 request to investigate the matter of this proposed Hunting Reserve with BC officials, reported on 23 November 1934 that he had travelled to Vancouver on 19 November. There Perry met with Provincial Game Commissioner Cunningham and Inspector Butler of the Game Department to seek their views. They decided to obtain additional input from the Fort Nelson Game Warden, J.S. Clark, which would supplement his 1932 report, especially since the Commissioner thought that there may be irregularities in the trapline records. Hence, Perry decided to wait for a supplemental report from the Fort Nelson office, acknowledging that this might take some time due to the remoteness of this area. MacKenzie wrote to Christianson in Alberta on 28 November 1934 to advise him that the BC Game Department in consultation with Mr. Perry was investigating the situation of the Hay Lake and Upper Hay River Indians’ [Dene Tha’] hunting and that the results of this “will be communicated to the department at an early date.”

On 23 November 1934, Inspector F.R. Butler of the BC Game Department transmitted to the Commanding Officer of the Game Department in Prince George, a copy of a letter dated 22

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66 Letter from A.F. Mackenzie, Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs to M. Christianson, Inspector of Indian Agencies, Calgary, Alberta, 23 October 1934. LAC, RG 10, Volume 11947, File 147/30-1, FA 10-105 [entered into Federal Court Action T-305-99 as Crown document No. 02237; Dene Tha’ document No. 4301].

67 M. Christianson, Inspector of Indian Agencies for Alberta, to Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, 9 November 1934. LAC, RG 10, Vol. 6733, File 420-2X [entered into Federal Court Action T-305-99 as Crown document No. 02241; Dene Tha’ document No. 4033].


69 A. Mackenzie, Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs to M. Christianson, Inspector of Indian Agencies for Alberta, 28 November 1934. LAC, RG 10, Vol. 6733, File 420-2X [entered into Federal Court Action T-305-99 as Crown document No. 02244; Dene Tha’ document No. 4035].
November 1934 that he (Butler) had received from C.C. Perry, the Assistant Indian Commissioner for BC. Butler noted that Perry’s 22 November letter contained Indian Affairs’ correspondence relating to the proposed “exclusive hunting territory” for the “Treaty Indians at Hay Lakes and Upper Hay River [Dene Tha’], in British Columbia and elsewhere.” As well, Butler acknowledged Perry’s understanding that he (Butler) was awaiting a report from Game Warden J.S. Clark of Fort Nelson. 70

Butler also stated in his 23 November 1934 letter to the Commanding Office of the Game Department in Prince George that he was transmitting “a copy of the Game Regulations on which I have marked the territory which the Indian Department desires set aside as an exclusive hunting area for the Indians mentioned [the Dene Tha’].” He ended his letter by stating that he wanted to have a “full and complete report” from Fort Nelson Game Warden Clark, together with this Prince George Officer’s recommendations, “as soon as possible.” 71

The hand-drawn sketch map that Butler transmitted to Perry on 23 November 1934 appears in the present overview report as Figure 7. 72 It differs in several ways from the map which has been discussed above (and appears here as Figure 6) and which follows the geographical boundaries set out in Indian Agent L’Heureux’s 12 September 1934 letter. To begin with, Butler delineated only the proposed boundaries in BC. He did not indicate the proposed boundaries in Alberta or in the NWT, as L’Heureux had done. While Butler’s western boundary of the proposed Dene Tha’ Hunting Reserve in BC was the same as L’Heureux’s (122 degrees of longitude, which extends about 75 miles west of the BC/Alberta border), Butler’s southern boundary extended about 32 miles further south to 58 degrees latitude, which is about 137 miles southward into BC from the BC/North West Territories border.

Inspector T. Van Dyk, the officer in charge of “D” Division of the Game Department in Prince George, to whom Butler’s 23 November 1934 letter and its enclosures had been sent, transmitted these materials to the Fort Nelson Detachment of the Game Department [to the attention of Game Warden Clark] on 27 November 1934. Van Dyk’s instructions and observations, as set out in this letter, were as follows:

In reporting on this matter it would be advisable to show all Indians registered in the area claimed for the Hay Lake Indians, shown on

70 The source of Butler’s letter is: F. R. Butler, BC Game Department Inspector, to the Commanding Officer of the Game Department, Prince George, 23 November 1934. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934. The source of Perry’s letter is: C.C. Perry, Assistant Indian Commissioner for BC, to F.R. Butler, BC Game Department Inspector, 22 November 1934. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.

71 Butler to the Commanding Officer of the Game Department, Prince George, 23 November 1934. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.

72 Map entitled “area claimed for Hay Lake Indians,” accompanying Butler’s letter to the Commanding Officer of the Game Department, Prince George, 23 November 1934. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.
the enclosed Map, and in order to cover the subject in its entirety make a copy of the Map of N.B.C. [northern BC] and show all Indian trap-lines entered on your map.

I am positive that it will be impossible to give the Hay Lake Indians the area claimed, as it comes very close to Fort Nelson, and the Fort Nelson Indians must be given consideration. The white trappers in the area must also be protected in so far as their registered trap-lines are concerned.73

Van Dyk ended his letter by requesting that Clark give this matter his very close attention and report back on this matter “as quickly as possible.” 74

It was almost two months later that Van Dyk received the report he had requested. This was in the form of a two-page report by Fort Nelson Game Warden J.S. Clark, dated 18 January 1935 and entitled “Re: Game Reserve for Hay Lake Indian’s [sic] in British Columbia.” Clark began his report by saying that while he had “every respect and sympathy” for these Aboriginal people [the Dene Tha’] and thoroughly understood “the condition they are living under,” he could see “no justified reason why a game reserve should be made in the area in question, that is the British Columbia area . . .”. Clark added the following concerning his views on this situation:

The Game Commissioner [of BC] has given permission for these Indian’s of Hay Lakes to be properly registered in British Columbia, which entitles them to the same privileges as other British Columbia trappers. During my patrol to that district in December 1932, I received Ten applications from the Hay Lake Indian’s for registration of trap-lines in British Columbia under most advantageous conditions and I am doing by best to give the protection from poachers . . .75

Clark then went on to say that when he took over the Fort Nelson detachment in 1928, “not one of the Nelson [Fort Nelson] Indian’s had made application for registration of trap-lines, and were determined not to register.” He said that he managed, however, to explain the meaning of registration to them and that now [1935] the Fort Nelson Aboriginals were “all well satisfied” with their registered traplines. Clark also said that he was enclosing a copy of a map of northern BC “showing the Fort Liard, Franceways, Nelson Forks, Snake River, Fort Nelson, Fontas, Indian trap-lines running into the territory claimed for the Hay lakes Indian’s.” (This map does

73 T. Van Dyk, Inspector in Charge of “D” Division Game Department, Prince George, to the Fort Nelson Detachment of the Game Department [to the attention of J.S. Clark, Game Warden], 27 November 1934. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.

74 Van Dyk to the Fort Nelson Detachment of the Game Department, 27 November 1934. BCA, GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934.

not accompany this letter in the file and has not been found in the materials reviewed to date). He continued:

    If the territory is given to the Hay Lakes, our [Fort Nelson] Indian’s that are trying to conserve their lines will not want Hay Lakes Indian’s taking their territory over. There are also about Twenty white trappers that have registered trap-lines, and some have had them for the last ten years . . . they will have to be taken into consideration.  

Clark ended his report by stating: “I would respectfully ask that instead of a Game reserve being made, that registered trap-lines in British Columbia be given the Hay Lakes Indian’s.”

There is one other letter/report concerning this proposed Hunting Reserve for the Dene Tha’ that exists from this same approximate time period. It is from T. Van Dyk, Inspector in charge of the “D” Division Game Department Office in Prince George, is dated 19 February 1935 and addressed to the BC Game Commissioner, and is found in the same file as the 18 January 1935 report by J.S. Clark. But it is incomplete. Only the last page exists, and it is not known how many pages preceded it. In the first paragraph of the final page of Van Dyk’s report, he states:

    From the enclosed sketch it is evident that the setting aside of a trapping area for the Hay Lake Indians in British Columbia is out of the question, as it will be impossible to dispossess the trappers, whites and Indians alike, registered in the area.

Van Dyk then goes on to say that the BC Game Department is accepting applications “from Hay Lakes Indians [Dene Tha’] who can prove that they have trapped in B.C. over a period of years” and points out a number of such applications have already been registered, with others pending. In the last paragraph of his letter/report, Van Dyk states:

    I recommend that we continue to register the Hay Lake Indians [Dene Tha’] who have proof that they trapped in B.C. over a period of years, but the wholesale registration of all Hay Lake Indians in B.C. will be impossible and not quite fair to our own Indians and white trappers.

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4.0 CONTINUED DOCUMENTATION OF DENE THA’ TRAPPING AND HUNTING IN NORTHEASTERN BC

Situated in the remote northwest of Alberta, the bands of the Fort Vermilion Agency, which had until 1947 been part of the Lesser Slave Lake Agency that included northeastern British Columbia, seldom received a visit from an Indian Affairs’ representative, and then it was generally only at the time the assembled members received their Treaty annuity payment. The known and available records that have been reviewed to date indicate little knowledge of these Aboriginal people had been recorded prior to about 1930.

As noted also in Section 3.1 of the present report, the documentary record shows that by 1938 there were approximately 23 Dene Tha’ people identified by the BC Game Department as trapping in the Fort Nelson District, and an August 1943 report stated there were 37 Dene Indians from Hay River [Dene Tha’] who had registered traplines in northeastern BC.

Superintendent S.C. Knapp of the Fort Vermilion Agency compiled a report for the period 1947-1951 in which he pointed out that the boundaries of the Agency legally stretched to the Alberta/BC border, although the Aboriginal people in this Agency trapped in Alberta, BC and the NWT. This report estimated that in the late 1940s, 38 families of the Upper Hay River Band [Dene Tha’] trapped in BC. This same report stated that “a large block in British Columbia” had been registered in the name of the Hay Lake [Dene Tha’] people; this “large block,” the boundaries of which were not provided in this particular document, was said to be “the ancestral trapping grounds of the people of the Hay Lake area” [underlining added].

On June 18th, 1952, representatives from Alberta and BC, along with representatives from the Department of Indian Affairs, met at Hay Lakes to discuss with the Upper Hay River band what measures could be taken to conserve the trapping resources. Present were 78 Upper Hay River band trappers with traplines in Alberta and BC, along with the Chief and a Councilor. According to the Minutes of the meeting, a considerable amount of time was spent finding new lines for

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80 BCA, GR 1085, Box 39, File 5.


young men without licenses, in addition to locating an area where widows and old men without trapplines might trap to the exclusion of all others. The assembled members agreed that those found trapping in this reserved area, who held trapplines, “would be dealt with similarly to the Alberta Game Act, under the poaching clause.”

For the convenience of the BC game officials at Fort Nelson, it was also agreed that the Upper Hay River Ranger would handle beaver permits for trappers using the BC block.

Surveyors with the Alberta – British Columbia Boundary Commission in 1951-1952 observed that trappers using the area north of the Petitot River were “from the Upper Hay River and Hay Lake, belonging to the Slavey tribe.” Hence, the surveyors recognized the trappers as Dene Tha’. Several years later, it was discovered that the cleared Alberta – BC boundary transected at least two trapplines, that of Paul Metchooyeah and Alexis Seniantha, both members of the Upper Hay River Band. The problem was resolved by separating the blocks and restricting them to a single province, so that Paul Metchooyeah and his sons would be registered in Alberta and use portions of both trapplines that were in Alberta, and Alexis Seniantha and his son would stay in BC and use portions of both trapplines that were in BC. Additional meetings were held in 1955 with BC and Alberta game wardens to clarify the location of trapplines with the intention of reducing overcrowding in certain areas. It was resolved that certain Dene Tha’ trappers would be registered on a BC block, if the government was successful in purchasing the line from its current holder.


86 Report of the Commission Appointed to Delimit the Boundary between the Provinces of Alberta and British Columbia: Part iv, 1950-1953. Published by the Office of the Surveyor General, Ottawa, 1955. Page 67. Surveyor C.B.C. Donnelly, in charge of the crew marking the boundary line between Alberta and the NWT in 1951-1952 commented that two trap lines were intersected between Hay River and the BC border. It has not been possible to determine the location of these two trapplines, and Donnelly did not comment on the ethnic identity of the trappers, but he did note that one of trapplines crossed the boundary “near Mon. [survey monument] 375” and “led to a lake 8 miles distant” that was “full of Jumbo White Fish averaging 5 lbs. each.” See C.B.C. Donnelly’s Surveyor’s Reports for the Alberta/North West Territories Boundary Commission: Phase 2, Winter Season 1951-52. Land Survey Records, Surveyor General’s Office, Natural Resources Canada, Headquarters, Ottawa. No. 23387, p. 13.


5.0 CONCLUSIONS

This overview report has focused on the Dene Tha’ presence in northeastern British Columbia and has been based on a literature review undertaken over a four-year period between 2005 and the present date. While this review of known and available ethnohistoric, ethnographic and linguistic source materials has been wide-ranging and thorough, it has not been exhaustive. A number of sources remain to be reviewed.

The literature review indicates that northeastern BC was within overall Dene Tha’ traditional territory, although there is little in the early North West Company and Hudson’s Bay Company documents to distinguish the Dene Tha’ from other “Slavey-speaking” groups. Moreover, Government records from northeastern BC are very meagre until approximately 1930.

Beginning in the 1930s, the Dene Tha’ presence in northeastern BC began to be recorded in a number of documentary sources. Dene Tha’ trapping in northeastern BC caused problems for BC government officials at this time because these Aboriginals were not registered trapline holders, and there were calls to evict them from BC. However, a reconnaissance patrol by the Fort Nelson Game Warden in early 1932 across northeast BC and over to Hay Lakes in northwest Alberta led to a better understanding of Dene Tha’ patterns of land use. As a result, a decision was taken to allow those Dene Tha’ who were trapping in northeast BC to register their traplines with the BC Game Department. The actual registrations began in December 1932. By 1938, there were about 23 Dene Tha’ people identified by the BC Game Department as trapping in northeast BC, and in 1943, a total of 37 Dene Tha’ were said to have registered traplines in this same region.

A number of source documents identify the Dene Tha’ presence in northeast BC. One 1932 document stated that the “Hay Lakes Indians” (Dene Tha’) had trapped in northeastern BC “for generations”; a late-1940s report described northeast BC as “the ancestral trapping grounds of the people of the Hay Lake area” (Dene Tha’).

What has not been determined with certainty, on the basis of the historical documents reviewed to date, is how far westward into northeast BC these trapping and hunting activities of the Dene Tha’ extended. A 1948 document said that the Dene Tha’ “in the olden days” roamed as far west as Fort Nelson. A 1932 document stated they trapped “West of the Shikilie River.”

In 1934, Indian Affairs officials proposed the establishment of a large transboundary “Hunting Reserve” exclusively for the Dene Tha’, encompassing northwestern Alberta, northeastern BC and portions of the southern North West Territories. As proposed, this Hunting Reserve extended about 75 miles westward into BC from the Alberta/BC border, and either 105 or 137 miles southward into BC from the NWT/BC border. However, this proposed Hunting Reserve was never established.

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Figure 4: Patrick Moore and Angela Wheelock 1990 (editors). *Wolverine Myths and Visions: Dene Traditions from Northern Alberta*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press. P. xv.
Figure 6: Map of 1934 proposed transboundary “hunting reserve” set aside “exclusively for the use of Treaty Indians at Hay Lakes and Upper Hay River [Dene Tha’].”

Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. RG 10, Vol. 11, 947, file 147/30-1
Figure 7: “Area claimed for Hay Lake Indians [Dene Tha’].” British Columbia Archives, Victoria. GR 1085, Box 2, File 8, Hay Lakes Indians, 1932-1934