



Response to COVID in Délįnę, NT: reconnecting with our community, our culture and our past after the pandemic

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Délįnę, a community of approximately 600 people, is located in Canada's Northwest Territories. This small Indigenous community is the only settlement on Great Bear Lake, one of the largest and most pristine freshwater lakes in the world. The lake and the surrounding landscape play an important role in the lives of the Sahtúot'ine Dene, or Bear Lake People. It is a source of spiritual well-being and the basis of the community's food system and livelihood.

Délįnę depends on traditional food from activities like hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering from the surrounding boreal forest ecosystem. The alternative is expensive food from the local stores which is often unhealthy, over-packaged and not fresh. Now the impacts of climate change are also having negative impacts on the food system creating yet another barrier to accessing the land for food. The community is actively implementing self-government, which took effect in 2016, has been implementing numerous programs aimed at benefiting the community, creating economic opportunities and employment, and adapting to the impacts of climate change.

Délįnę is not immune to the impacts of COVID-19, with the territorial government closing borders to all travelers and implementing social distancing measures including working from home. The Canadian Federal government announced support for Indigenous communities being out on the land during this time. So those who have the means to, meaning access to tools and transportation, left the community and are social distancing at cabins or camps around the lake. For many, it is an ideal way to pass the time, being on the

land and reconnecting to cultural and traditional practices. But for others, who don't have access to transportation (a snowmobile, or boat if the weather was warmer) or a cabin or camp on the lake, find themselves stranded in town. With jobs and activities closed or winding down, many community members are finding it difficult to cope with the new realities that this pandemic has brought.

While COVID-19 has put a pause on activity in the community, it offers time to reflect on community projects and priorities. For many, those with jobs, the pressures of employment and participating in the formal economy have been decreased and they are now able to spend more time immersed in traditional activities and cultural practices. But for others, it shows the barriers to accessing traditional food sources. These barriers are the result of decades of colonialism and trauma resulting from forced assimilation and policies that have eroded and interrupted ancient old intergenerational lines of knowledge transfer and flow. This loss of connection to rich histories, knowledge and, most importantly, language and spirituality, has been detrimental to the community's overall health and makes many people in Délįnę vulnerable to COVID-19.

This pandemic has created a state of nostalgia and déjà-vu in the community. As all the false senses of security in the settlement begin to fall away, many in the community are realizing what is truly important. It is not a coincidence that the first response to the declaration of a global state of emergency was to go back to the Land. It was instinct. The traditional way of life provides the ability to both survive and thrive on the land. The complex and rich knowledge system holds all the information and skills needed to take care of the community including the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. However, resources and programming are needed to support the most vulnerable in the community, and particularly the youth who are the future leaders of Délįnę. More opportunities to learn traditional skills and cultural practices, better access to training and tools, and mentorship and support to learn the language and spiritual

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connections to the land are key pillars of the community working together to address these challenges. In other words, the way forward is to strengthen and preserve the way of being as Dene and remember again how to walk in the footsteps of grandfathers and grandmothers. This is the message from the community's Prophets, Elders, and Ancestors and the very message that has echoed through eternity since the beginning of time: Hold on to your way of life and hold on to the Land and you will have a good life in the future for yourselves and for your children.

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