

Community Profile: Lutsel K'e, NWT

The Land of our Ancestors

On the south shore near the eastern end of Great Slave Lake, NWT sits the small community of Lutsel K'e. Its name means "place of the Lutsel", which is a type of small white fish, and is pronounced "Loot-sel-kay". Up until 1992, it was also known as Snowdrift (named for the Snowdrift River).

At first glance, Lutsel K'e might seem like many other very small northern communities. About 300 people live here, mostly members of the Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation (LKDFN), which is part of the Akaitcho Territory Government. There is a two person RCMP detachment and a health centre with one nurse for the community. There is a grocery store, the Lutsel K'e Co-op, a post office and a few lodges in the area. The community is not accessible by road, but has a small airport with daily scheduled flights from Yellowknife. Approximately 80 students attend Lutsel K'e Dene School (K-12), and there is a community learning centre run by Aurora College.

Sam Boucher is a Lutsel K'e Denesoline (Chipewyan) and BQCMB member who has lived in and hunted around Lutsel K'e all his life. The Beverly, Qamanirjuaq and Bathurst caribou herds migrate near the community, but "there was no fall hunt last year—we cancelled it because we couldn't find caribou," he says. The last community hunt with students and elders was in the spring of 2014. When caribou are scarce, residents hunt moose or muskoxen, which are plentiful in the area. True to its name, the fishing is also good. "East Arm of Great Slave Lake, there's lots of fishing," says Boucher.

What makes Lutsel K'e unique are its people and the area surrounding it, which includes

spectacular cliffs, the deep waters of Great Slave Lake, and both taiga and tundra. This area is the setting for a proposed new protected area called Thaidene Nene—"The Land of our Ancestors."

The people of Lutsel K'e want to establish the park in part to protect the area from mining development. In his book about Lutsel K'e, "The Caribou Feed our Soul", LKDFN member *Pete Enzoe* wrote "We know the best way to make sure caribou are here forever is to take care of our land. The people of Lutsel K'e have worked hard to keep our land healthy. We have not allowed mining companies to drill for uranium here, because we are worried it will poison the water and the land."

The community hasn't always accepted the development of the park, though—its roots date back to 1969. At that time, the federal government approached Chief *Pierre Catholique* to try to get First Nation support for the park. The Chief was flown to Ottawa to sign over land for the park to be established, but he felt rushed and isolated in Ottawa, and refused to sign the document. He was also worried that his people would be prevented from practicing their traditional way of life.

Catholique returned home and immediately called for a meeting of Dene Chiefs. He told them "never again will a Dene Chief be alone in a room with a number of government officials. In the future, we must be united—when there are 16 government officials in a room, there will be 16 Dene Chiefs". This group became the Indian Brotherhood, which later evolved into the Dene Nation, which includes the Denesoline.

"There was no fall hunt last year—we cancelled it because we couldn't find caribou."

BQCMB Member Sam Boucher

In the 1980s the Government of Canada tried again, and while the same uncertainties remained, the Dene recognized that the park could protect some of its traditional territory from potential mining development. Negotiations continued over the next two decades, and in 2004, Chief—and former BQCMB member—*Archie Catholique* and his council formed a partnership with the federal government for the planning, operation, and management of a protected area in the traditional territory.

The LKDFN and Parks Canada initiated the draft Thaidene Nene Establishment Agreement in November, 2013 and entered the final stages of negotiations to create Thaidene Nene National Park Reserve. The LKDFN is now also in discussions with the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) regarding land protection adjacent to the National Park Reserve using territorial legislation.

Establishing Thaidene Nene will also create much-needed employment in Lutsel K'e, through development of a tourism economy in the community and management and operations of the park itself. *Pete Enzoe* wrote that today, even former Chief *Pierre Catholique* supports the park. "He says the Dene people are in charge and that good jobs will come to his community, and he believes that Thaidene Nene will help keep the land healthy."

And by keeping the land healthy, the residents of Lutsel K'e are ready to welcome the caribou back so they can continue teaching their children and grandchildren their traditional way of life. •

For more information, visit:
<http://landoftheancestors.ca/>
<http://cpawsnwt.org/campaigns/thaidene-nene>

Photo by Leslie Philipp

