

GLOBAL WARMING: A THREAT TO DOGRIB BURIAL SITES

A Proposal for 2007-2008 International Polar Year

from

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In September 1999, two Dogrib community researchers and myself met with the Dogrib Regional Elders Committee to document the type of research they wanted done. The Elders' Committee had already been instrumental in the formation of partnerships between their Band Councils and the Arctic Institute to do PAR (participatory action research) research on traditional justice (in Wha Ti) and traditional governance (in Rae Lakes), and the participation of Dogrib Treaty 11 Council in the West Kitimeot Slave Study (WKSS), who funded: 1) their relationship with and knowledge of caribou, and 2) place names as indicators of bio-geographical knowledge. At the meeting in 1999, the elders' and harvesters decided the priority should be to document the location of burial sites as well as the relationship they have with their ancestors.

The Dogrib traditional territories includes the areas between Great Slave and Great Bear Lakes to the south and the north, the Mackenzie River on the west and Contwoyto, Alymer and Artillery Lakes to the east, and includes both the boreal forest and the barren lands. Their burials cover a vast area. Many of the current population of elders and harvesters know where the burials are located and wish to document their location so they will be protected under the laws of Canada.

The Dogrib's current interest in locating the burial sites has come from the much advertised issue of global warming and their own observations of the melting of permafrost, rising water level that could damage and destroy their ancestors' burials – erosion of some sites has already taken place. They are also very concerned that persons contracted by the diamond industry will not locate the burials sites. This fear has some validity the archaeologist hired by Broken Hill Property had missed the burial site we

located by following one of the elder's story. The fear is further enhanced by the fact that exploration teams are under no obligation to look for archaeological or burial sites prior to staking lands. This was particularly evident during the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board hearings where some staked land was on important Dene sites in the Drybone and Wool Bay areas, NWT where burial sites are located.

Locating the burial sites will also provide the research team with an opportunity to work with the elders and harvesters to better understand their current relationship with their ancestors, their mortuary practices and why it is so important to care for and protect the burial sites. In other words we will better understand how the care of the dead is integral to the Dogrib Dene dwelling harmoniously on the land. Furthermore this research will assist the Dene in explaining their relationships within the landscape to developers and government whose decisions are rarely based on an understanding of the social relationships the Dene have with the past as well as the present.