

The 13<sup>th</sup> North American Caribou Workshop  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

## Tłìchq stories for Ekwò management<sup>1</sup>

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**Rangifer**, Special Issue No. 20: 49–51

### Introduction

Masì, thank you. My name is Joseph Judas. I come from the Tłìchq Nation, from the community of Wekweèti on Snare Lake, north of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. I'm Chair of the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board. I'm a hunter, I'm still trapping. I still like to go out on the land, make campfire, and cook meat and fish. I still do that. I'm proud of it. I'm most comfortable speaking in my language, but I'm sharing this with you in the English language.

Our community was established somewhere after 1974. Before that, we used to come back and forth to Rae, Behchokò, for the spring hunt. Then in the fall we would go back to Wekweèti. Every year in the falltime we used to see the Bathurst herd travelling across Snare Lake. It's a narrow lake that we're on, but it's more than fifty kilometres long. From 1962 to 1990, the herd used to cross Snare Lake near Wekweèti before freezeup. In those days, even with dogteams and dogs eating meat, we still had lots of ekwò.

<sup>1</sup> *This paper is adapted from contributions to the NACW Aboriginal Talking Circles, as well as the author's contributions to two co-authored presentations: "Using dual knowledge systems to inform management decisions: a Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board example," with Jody Snortland; and "Monitoring Caribou and People," with Alice Legat and John B. Zoe.*

Eventually the elders talked about it and decided that we can't keep going back and forth. Stuart Hodgson used to be a government leader at that time. One time when he came to the community, our people asked for a school. So we got a school first, and then the store and the freezer. That's three things that came in first. After that, we got a few more things.

We've been hearing about the decline in caribou populations over the last number of years. We're just talking about only one caribou. The caribou, ekwò, are all the same, the way I look at the picture. Ekwò are all one, just one animal. I can go back to 1962, and I've observed that since 1990, the population has really been going down.

Within the last number of years I have not seen ekwò close by Snare Lake. Last year in spring, somewhere around March, that's the last time we saw ekwò when they're going back to the barrendground. Since then we haven't seen that migration. They must be going somewhere else. I didn't see this happen in the last number of years, so it must be decline, that's how I see it.

Our survival depends on the survival of ekwò. We've tried to work on a solution together with all our elders and our people back home. The elders have got long vision, they can see for the future generations, and they're talking for the younger people.

They've got lots of stories, lots of history to talk to us about. We are the ones that are supposed to be listening. We should be really listening and using our language. Right now where I'm from there are no elder men anymore. We had three elder men who are now gone. Just elder women left in our community of just over a hundred people.

We're trying to work on science and traditional knowledge together. Science has a lot of tools to work with. But we're not going to give away the knowledge, we're not selling it. We keep it and pass it on to all the generations of the future. That's my traditional knowledge. That's how strongly I feel about the knowledge that I have.

During the three cold months, January, February, March, ekwò are heading back to the barren-grounds. Some of the bulls stop halfway, and others follow the females to protect them as they travel to the calving grounds. In falltime, August, September, that's when they come back this way and meet the other bulls halfway. That's how I've been taught traditional knowledge by elders. Science and our history and our knowledge are going to meet. We are trying to work together and try to make a better solution for us.

## Raven hides Ekwò

I want to tell you a story about ekwò that my father told me. In those days fox and wolf used to be people. There were wolf and fox and raven, and all these animals. The raven was always asking the elders for stories, because he was flying. The other animals travelled on the land.

One cold winter month, the younger wolves that hunt tried to find ekwò, and they couldn't find anything. Nothing. I don't know how many days they searched. All the women and men and kids were starving. The kids couldn't play outside anymore because they were starving. No meat, nothing. Just little animals, like grouse (what we call chickens) and hare (what we call rabbit). The people started hunting every day, but they didn't get any ekwò.

So one time the raven was coming back and forth and saying he was so happy just flying around. This old wolf said to him, "Raven, you know, you're so happy flying around. I see you almost every day. Our people are starving. The kids are starving. Everywhere it's all the same. There's nothing to eat. How can you be so happy?"

Then the wolf elder thought to himself, "Maybe we should just follow him some day. But how?" They had medicine power in those days, so they had to use that power. Raven took off that evening and they followed him, led by the old wolf. It was cold that day,

but they kept following him. The old wolf couldn't keep up with the raven because it was too far for his medicine. So he asked for the ashes from the fire to be strewn right around that tipi. In those days, they used tipis made of branches, not the canvas tents that we use now. Then he put the ashes right on their eyebrows so they could see further, and they kept following this raven. But still he couldn't keep up with it.

So he asked for help. Another elder had come along, and he helped the old wolf with medicine power. Finally when that raven went back, he got into a foggy cloud. Raven's vision must have been getting old from the medicine power. So the wolves were able to catch up with raven.

Eventually they came upon a fence. The old wolf circled around the fence and discovered a whole bunch of ekwò trapped inside. That raven had been hiding all ekwò in a corral. Raven went inside his little tipi made of branches. The people peeked in the doorway and saw a big stash of ekwò eyeballs. Then they saw that raven was smoking meat. He had a lot of meat. Raven was the only one who was happy, because he was hiding ekwò.

After they saw this, the people went back to their camp. That night the younger wolves that hunt couldn't sleep from the excitement of having found ekwò. So the next day everybody went to where the raven was hiding ekwò. "Now who's going to do something to set these ekwò free?" they asked.

Then the fox said, "I can probably do it. I'll try. I'll do it. But how?" The old wolf said, "Put your tail in the fire and run around ekwò, and then ekwò might stampede out of the fence." That's what the fox did. So that's how ekwò stampeded out.

Now all these wolves and other animals that had been starving got ekwò back. And the raven was squashed in his tipi, because ekwò ran over it when they escaped from that corral. When they saw that, the elders said, "I guess we can't just leave him like that. Maybe we should make him human again." So they collected the feathers of the raven and they made him a raven again. That's the story I wanted to share with you.

I think that the raven tried to manage ekwò within the fence. He was trying to keep the wolves and all the other animals from killing the ekwò.

It's good to listen to elders, the way that the animals used to listen to their elders. They said, go follow the raven. That's why the younger people followed the raven, and they found ekwò again. It's no good to be greedy. It's not good that raven wanted to keep everything for himself. He should be sharing with the wolf and fox. But wolf and fox got together and went after raven, and that's how they got their meat, finally.

## A law for Ekwò

Our Tłı̄chǫ people have a law for ekwò. Older people still observe the rules that people used and lived by on a daily basis. Even though life may be tough, especially in winter when it's super-cold, they still continue to observe how you treat ekwò after it's killed. Even to the point where other types of leather, especially from beef, even buffalo and woodland ekwò are not allowed to be carried to the barrenlands, because it's considered something that makes ekwò go away.

In those times the elders were really protecting the animals, they really watched everything. For each animal from the hoofs to the antlers, they would use everything. They made tools from it, they ate the meat, and they made clothes from the hides. They made dry meat. They would even make lard from the bone marrow. Ekwò brain is like ice cream, I cook it and I eat it. They used the whole thing. That's why they were really lucky with the animals in those times.

Forty-five years ago, I was using a dog team, hauling and hunting ekwò for my family. I would walk in front of the dogs. I would chase ekwò with snowshoes too. They weren't using the fast equipment. In those days, even though we would travel slow with the dogteam, we still had a lot of ekwò with us.

Nowadays we're using skidoos and all those fast motors. But sometimes we're not lucky because the machine is loud and ekwò won't go near. When we used to travel with dogs, there was no noise. The dogs were like our radio-collar for finding ekwò. When the dogs would start sniffing, we would know that there was something there, maybe animals like ekwò. That's how we would know where ekwò were. But right now, we've got radio-collars and we know where

all ekwò are migrating, so if we want to hunt we can just go in front of them and then wait for them until they get there.

It was really tough work sometimes in those days, but it was worth it because the people got so much from each animal they harvested. And they managed their wildlife well. They wouldn't shoot lots. They would just shoot enough for themselves, enough for their living.

### Ekwò in the moon<sup>2</sup>

There is a story told by the elders about an elder woman who had no husband or children. She did her best to keep up with everyone, but they didn't help her and left her behind. She discovered a child sitting between the hoof prints of ekwò. So she picked it up and raised it until the child could be a good hunter. And he became a gifted hunter, because he came from the ekwò hoofprint. He provided well for the mother that raised him.

But the people he lived with became complacent. One of the rules was that you're not supposed to step over the blood of ekwò. Once people started stepping over the blood of ekwò, he became frustrated and went away to the moon with a bucket of ekwò blood. Even until today, on a good day you can see him up there with his bucket of ekwò blood.

<sup>2</sup> This story, told during the session on Traditional Knowledge and Science, was interpreted by John B. Zoe.

