



Selkirk First Nation

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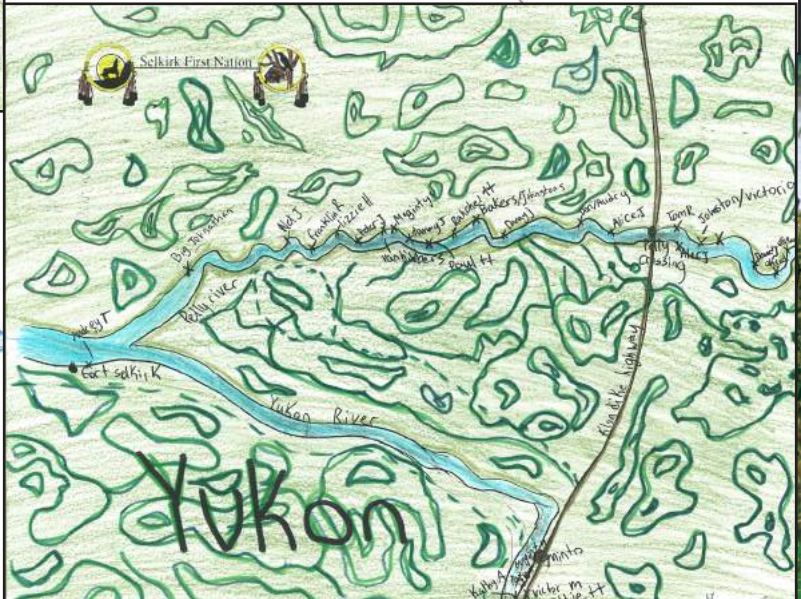
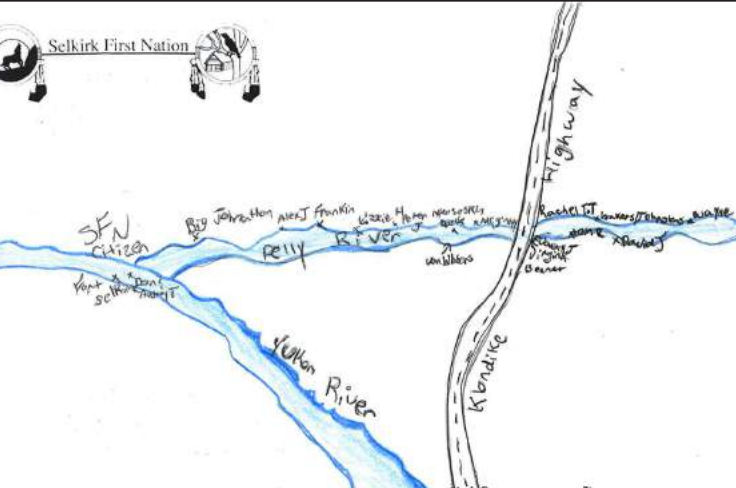
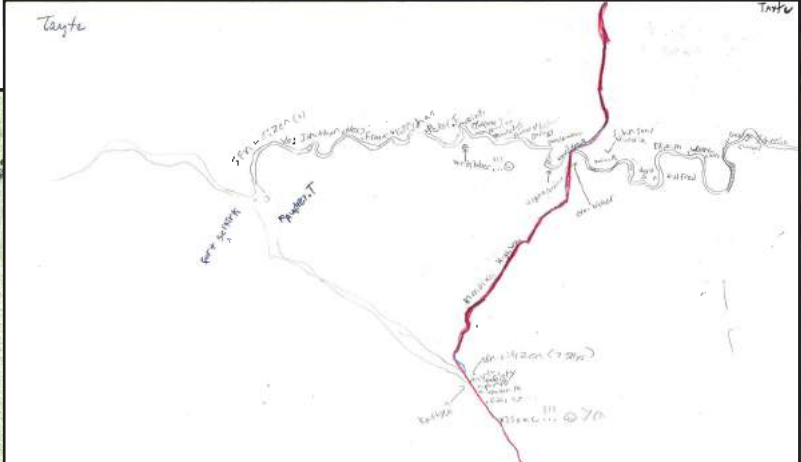
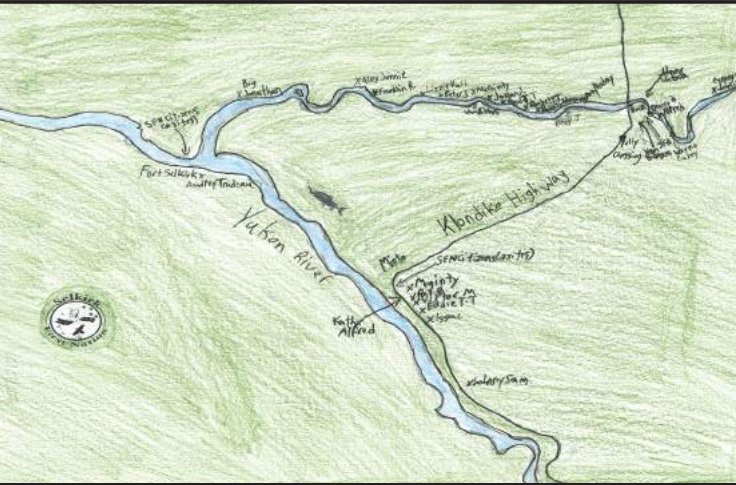
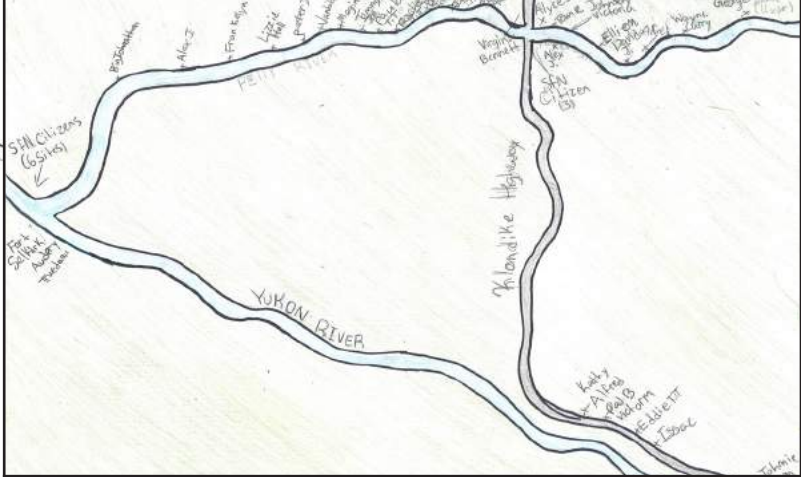
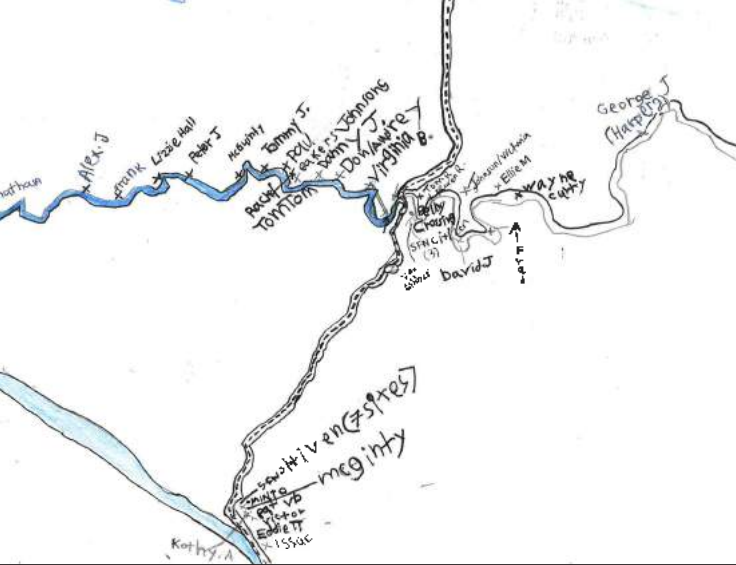


Pelly Crossing, Yukon, Canada



KEEPING OUR TRADITIONS AT THE FISH CAMPS

OUR ANCESTORS' GIFT TO OUR YOUTH



PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The traditions and values of the Selkirk people can be found in Northern Tutchone culture. The health and wellbeing of our people is linked to the land and to the traditional ways of our ancestors which are held by our traditional knowledge keepers. The use of family fish camps is at the heart of how this knowledge is passed on from one generation to the next. It is where our youth prepare for a changing future. It is in the fish camps that the cultural principles of the Northern Tutchone are taught, questions are answered, and guidance is provided.


This guidebook is intended to help keep these traditions alive and to suggest teaching opportunities to aid in these time-honoured processes. It is hoped that its contents will spark conversation, stories, and teachings amongst the Selkirk people.

*What Elders pray for...
Hope for my grandchild –
to walk here where I have been.
Lucy McGinty*

Bringing traditions alive like a flower
blooming in the summer



*Every salmon season, being at fish camp was like coming
alive of ourselves and our traditions – “like a flower
blooming in the summer, in full bloom” – a time to learn
and carry on old Tutchone traditions. Look, learn, and do.
Roger Alfred*



*Caring, sharing, respect,
and teaching.
Respect is the number
one traditional law.*

Danny Joe

HISTORY OF FISH CAMPS

Selkirk people have used fish camps along the Pelly and Yukon Rivers since time immemorial.

The traditional territory of Selkirk people spans 15,000 square miles and is home to many lakes, creeks, and three major rivers. During the summer season, fish camps came alive with everybody pitching in to set up camp, getting ready for harvesting salmon and putting up food for the winter.

Elders remember the large camps of families at Victoria Rock near Fort Selkirk. They knew all the best fishing spots all along the rivers. Groups of families would join together to camp and fish all along the rivers.



We camped on an island below Selkirk. We were told to make noise so the fish would go on the Victoria Rock side of the river. We had a rowboat to run the net. The net was down river from the island. My father would run it and then Johnny Tom Tom would bring us back up stream because his boat had a motor. We would stay all summer drying fish. Sometimes we would get a moose on the way back to Minto. We would camp right there and dry the meat.

We came every summer and stayed most of the summer.

Maria Van Bibber

What is the history of my family's fish camp?

What sort of tools and nets were used long ago?

How did families get to the fish camps?

What kinds of boats were used?

How long did families stay at the fish camp?

OUR TRADITIONAL LAWS: DOÒLI

The age-old practice of harvesting salmon at fish camps has continued because of the use of customary and spiritual laws (Doòli laws) which have guided Tutchone people for thousands of years.

We always used the four perspectives of our laws: respect, sharing, caring, teaching. Use and understand the teachings of language and culture. When fishing was done for the day, we would not go and lay down in our tent. We were expected to be together. We would do stick gambling, storytelling, use picture books or old picture albums for stories. Never talk ahead of an Elder and older person. Learn to listen and do. Keep in your mind and remember how fish camps were run in your younger years. Watch for traditional knowledge signs to tell you about salmon. Ice, weather, bees, soapberries, tree sap, kingfisher, bears. These are signs to tell about the salmon.

Roger Alfred

Doòli – You have to grow up with it. As soon as you're small, they teach you. I grow up with it; I got respect for land, animals, everything right now. It just automatic in me, being an Indian person. When I'm out there, I just join right in with animals. I can hear every sound. I know what they are, what's going on or anything coming — you can feel it and know.

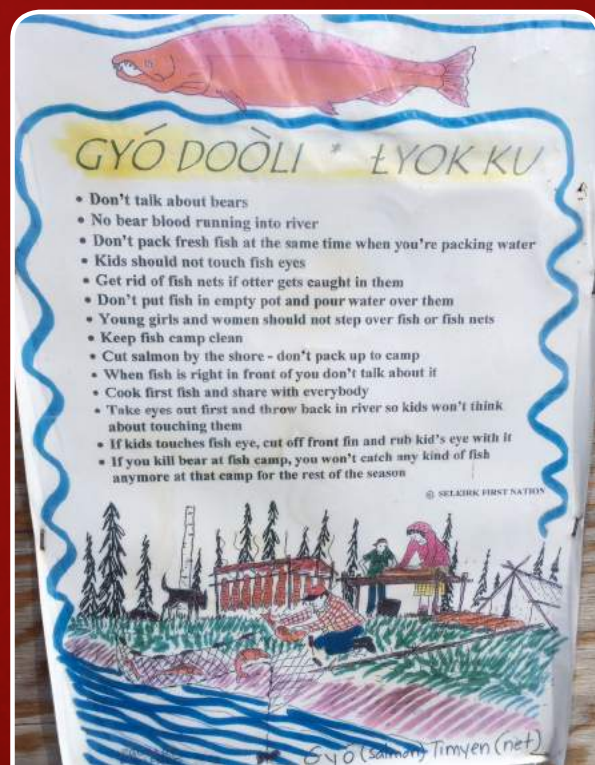
Franklin Roberts

What are the most important traditional laws (Doòli) that must be followed?

What are the stories behind the laws?

Who is the best person to teach me about Doòli?

How should I conduct myself at the fish camp?





THE CHANGING CLIMATE



Winters are now shorter and warmer and the overall average temperature in Yukon has already risen to maximum global targets. That is, over the past 50 years the temperature has increased by two degrees. While two degrees seems small, the impact is dramatic. Melting permafrost, more wind, later freeze-up, warmer winters, early ice break-up, changes to animal behaviour and stronger, bigger forest fires are some examples of the changes to our homeland.

Warming waters in oceans and rivers pose a real threat to all stages of the life cycle of salmon. The decline in returning Yukon River salmon is a major concern. Bear safety is a problem as bears move closer to the community and camps in search of food. Selkirk people are noticing many changes to the land and the animals and wish to share what bounty we have with each other and with future generations.



“We can’t give up. We have to keep going no matter what.”
Emma Alfred

The Elders talked about hard times are coming. Learning the traditional skills and old laws of conduct are the important things Elders are trying to teach. They talk about working hard and working together. It builds trust and creates a connection not only with each other and our families but also with the land and animals. That if there is a shortage of fish, even a small harvest is a way of teaching our youth; that we must do more than limit fishing, we must help with the spawning salmon by clearing creeks and monitoring and gathering data. We must speak up for the salmon. *We must not give up.*

“Put youth to work – teach chopping wood, gun-use, having clean poles, cutting and drying fish-this creates autonomy for youth.

And another thing, since we cut back on our salmon... We have lots of lakes here on our traditional land with lots of fish – good fish.”

Despite climate change and declining Yukon salmon, Selkirk people remain strong in carrying the age old tradition of fish camps. Everyone had ideas of what to do when the salmon harvest is low.

Hunting small game like rabbits, gophers and grouse

Hunting moose

Bush survival skills

Walking the land

Clearing the creeks

Culture camps at the fish camps

Monitoring the river

What other things can we do at the fish camp?

THE ROLE OF TRADITION AND YOUTH MENTAL WELLNESS

My dream: He tell me to go back and work with the young people. Help the young people. Don't give up on the young people. A long time ago, peoples' dreams came true...

Culture, traditions and identity are vital to the healing of past and intergenerational trauma. The legacy of colonialism has caused Indigenous peoples of Canada to encounter greater challenges to mental health compared to the rest of the population. Research has shown that healing can occur for our young people when they have opportunities to be on the land, stay busy, connect to their culture and benefit from strong communities and caring

relationships with family and friends. Learning life skills such as mindfulness meditation, communications and life skills, where being in touch with the present moment is not only a good bush safety skill but it also brings a more positive outlook on life. The connection to tradition can lead to successes in life such as good relations, education and self-determination.

Chief Kevin McGinty spoke to Selkirk youth about helping each other, and sticking together, as a way to build a strong nation. Education and learning the traditions of our ancestors will be what is needed when youth face future challenges.

Learning and practicing Northern Tutchone traditions is a gift from our ancestors. This will prepare us to meet the challenges in our future.



*"We are at a crossroads now, we can keep going straight ahead and bring back our culture but it has to be all of us to go forward as one people."
Franklin Roberts*

What can I learn about my ancestors at the fish camp?

How can I create good relations in my family and community?

If I am feeling in low spirits, what can I do?

What did my ancestors do to be healthy and mentally strong?

Can I practice mindfulness at the fish camp?





ADVANCE PREPARATIONS

In the past, people made preparations long before the first salmon reached the Yukon and Pelly Rivers each year. Today, it is still important to plan ahead. Traditionally, Selkirk people would carry out the spring beaver hunt to make enough money to pay for food, new nets, axes, and other tools needed at the fish camps. Nets and materials from the previous year would have been taken care of and stored away properly for the next season.

Today the spring beaver hunt is becoming an important climate change strategy. Elders and leaders are recommending the clearing of local creeks, currently blocked by beaver dams. This will help to open up the spawning creeks for both salmon as well as the Whitefish we call Tishra. It can also bring needed income to the hunters, trappers, and artists of the community.

"Personal gear was gathered together, things like bed roll, tents, canvas tarps, cooking utensils, tools to process fish such as knives, big pots or tub (5 gallon pots), laundry soap, hand soap, basin."
Roger Alfred



"In May and June we would come back from the beaver hunt, sell beaver skins and save that money for the fish camp season to buy the food and supplies and everything needed for fish camp. In the meantime we have to get the boat ready and repaired (any leaks, new paint, etc.); mend net or get new net. We had 3 or 4 nets at each fish camp. Get tents, stove and any other equipment ready for fish camp. Nails, hammer, axe, saw, knives. Buy food for the camp too. Families in past times bought food and supplies in bulk – for example before the spring beaver hunt several families together bought supplies in bulk."

Roger Alfred

How do you set up a fish camp?

How do you make a fish net?

What tools and supplies are needed at a fish camp?

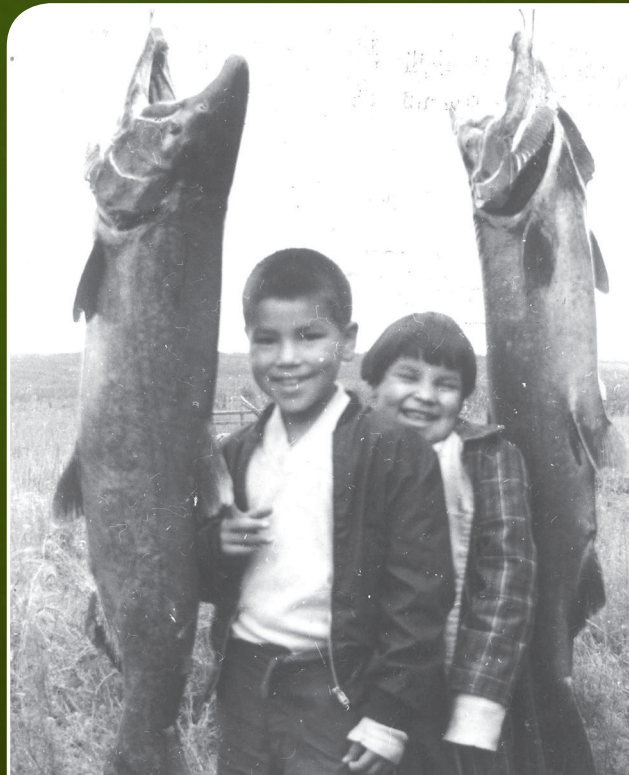
What foods can be bought in bulk ahead of time?

When is a beaver hunt carried out, and where?

"They used fish traps at Three Way Channel slough on the Yukon River. Fish traps were put there to hold the fish and then they gaffed the fish. Also used soft roots, long ones gathered from the mountains near Mayo, to make a net to block salmon, then the salmon were gaffed. There were no fish nets back then. When these root nets were finished for the season, they were put underground to keep them from drying out."

Franklin Roberts

"The fish were much bigger than now. Big, big fish."



SETTING UP THE SUMMER FISH CAMP



In early July, Selkirk people begin watching for the traditional signs of salmon. Today though, they also watch for reports from government agencies and Yukon Salmon Subcommittee to learn about estimates of returning salmon in the Yukon River.

The summer fish camp season begins in the community where the nets are taken out of storage and are made ready for setting in the river. The floaters and sinkers are checked, and placed in tubs for transporting. Families arrive with their food, camping gear, tools and supplies and importantly, enough family members to help set up the camp. The boat captain usually drives the boat from Pelly with the net ready for setting. Don't forget the gun!

*"When we do get to the fish camp, the camp is set up.
Everybody pitches in."*



Fish trap found at Three-Way Channel



*"New poles are cut or old ones brought back to
set up the drying racks in the smoke house."*

How do we know if the returning salmon are plentiful?


Where can we set a net?

Where do I find the wood for smoking fish?

What is the first fish ceremony?

What are some bear signs?

What do I do if a bear comes into camp?



SALMON TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

SALMON WEED


- on shore if lays over
less salmon

POPLAR SAP

- NO COLOUR = LESS FISH
- PINK = GOOD
(salmon blood)

PLANTS BY RIVER

- ENDS TURN YELLOW
- FISH ARE COMING



SALMON TRAD. KNOWLEDGE

FREEZE UP FALL

- ROUGH ICE = GOOD
- SMOOTH ICE = POOR

SALMON FLIES

- LOTS = GOOD
- FEW = POOR

SOAPBERRY

- Ripe = salmon here

BEARS BY RIVER



SALMON TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

BEARS BY RIVER

MANY = GOOD

FEW = LOW SALMON

WIND FROM NORTH

salmon coming

SAP TURN RED

salmon blood = co

SEAGULLS SCREAMING

SALMON ARRIVE

SIGNS OF SALMON

There are many signs that Selkirk people have traditionally followed to know when the salmon have arrived in the river.

Weather – First you get the north wind, the first north wind in July and then you get a big rainstorm in July that tells you that salmon is on the way.

Tree sap – In July, when you cut the bark off poplar tree and if you see that poplar tree water, that means the salmon are here, ready to harvest.

Bears – You see lots of bears, then the salmon are here.

Kingfisher – right after the wind and rain, the Kingfisher come out and if you see Kingfisher, the Kingfisher say the salmon are here. That is why they talk when they talk, they are telling the salmon are here, they are ready.

Soapberries – When they turn from green to red, the salmon are here. If you see lots of soapberries on just about every bush, it's going to be lots of salmon.

Northern Tutchone Elders at a May Gathering

KEEPING A CLEAN CAMP



"The first thing is to check out the camp for signs of animals and in particular bear signs. Bear-proof the camp with a clean camp."

"No bears in camp because we clean everything, take all garbage, and use wind chimes."

Charlene Silverfox

Teaching Traditions... begins with the babies.
Audrey Baker

Most camps along the river are set up in the following manner: a cleaning table at the river's edge where the fish are gutted; the fish are then moved to an area near the smoke house where they are cut and readied for drying. The smoke house has a fire pit where alder and rotten wood is used to create the smoke needed to cure the fish. A kitchen and an outdoor cook area is set slightly away from the smoke house. Similarly, the sleeping areas are away from the cooking area and smoke house. The outhouse is set back away from everything.



"Small children have to learn to eat fish, teach them. Learn to eat our traditional food."

RUNNING A FISH CAMP

The fish nets are run in the morning and evening. Usually it is the men who run the nets and clean them, and the women cut the fish for drying. The daily routine centers on the salmon. The chores of harvesting and processing the salmon, cooking, gathering wood, and keeping the camp clean are shared by all.

Even young children have a role in keeping our traditions at the fish camp. The first salmon is celebrated with a ceremony that dates back to the time of our ancestors. Salmon are handled with respect and our sacred doòli laws are followed.

"Fish camps are just like a teaching place because you listen to stories at night... It's like a gathering—where people used to visit long time ago. Now people come to the fish camp. They sit around and talk. They talk about long time ago. They talk about what's going on with climate change and all that right now – how things are changing, how people are changing, how youth are changing.

You don't have stress here. Here you work. You have to cut your wood, prepare your wood, make your fires. You have to go out and collect things for your camp. You're always busy here, you're always doing something and that is good for your mental health and your physical and spiritual health."

Lucy McGinty





SETTING THE NET

The Elders know where all the good fishing spots are. They are in natural eddies or can be made with piles of rocks or use of logs to create an eddy where salmon can rest during the swim upstream. Nets are set in these eddies and each fish camp has their special fishing sites.

"No watch and no buttons when running a fish net because it could catch in the net and pull you into the water. The fish are strong and the river current is strong. Always wear a life jacket."

SFN Elder meeting 2016

Everybody had a job, working around the camp. Everybody harvested as a group. Salmon was the main food being harvested but harvesting also included berries, sap, spruce boughs, rabbits, gophers, etc. Salmon was shared evenly amongst all families.

Can you teach me to run the fish net?

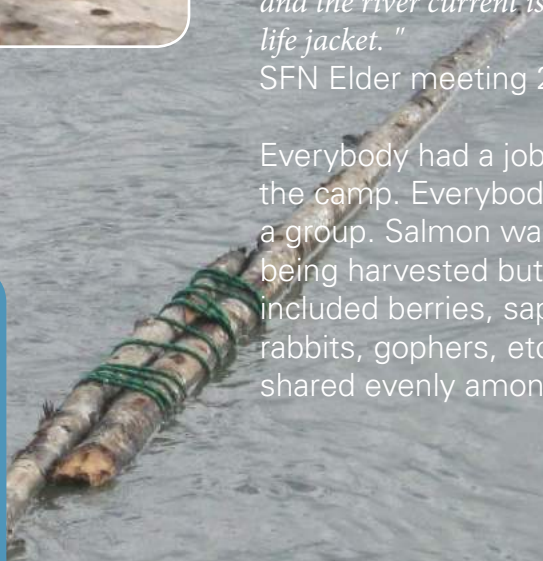
How do I handle salmon?

What kind of boat safety do I need to know?

How do I cut fish for drying?

How do I cook by campfire with only a stick?

What can we do at the fish camp for fun?







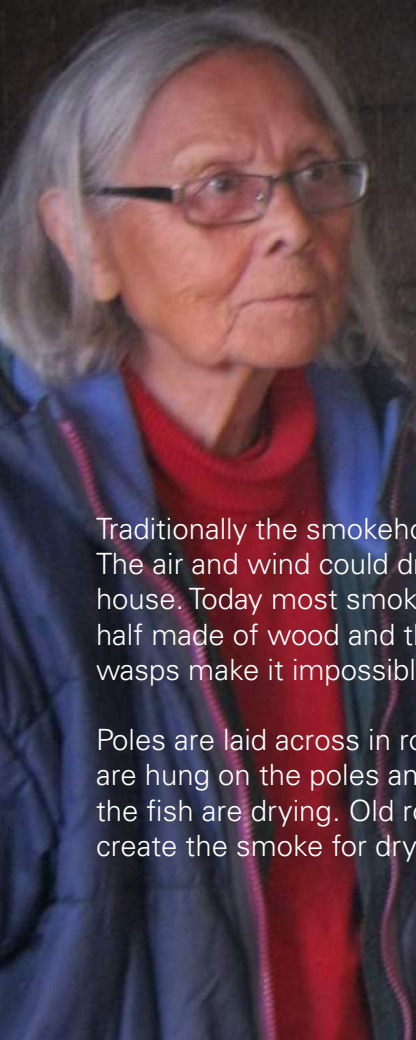
"There are many tips for best ways of cutting and hanging fish. Hang the cleaned fish for a short time before cutting – it makes it easier to handle."

"If the salmon is soft then cut in strips for drying."

"Some say doöli – stay on shore to clean fish; some say it's okay to take up to the camp and cut for drying. I started helping when I was 9 years old. I was the only boy with 4 or 5 sisters."



THE SMOKEHOUSE



"Oh, we get lots of fish. As soon as they're dry, we just put it outside and dry another one because those days, you got no deep freeze to put it in. So that's how we had to dry them all."

Betty Joe

Traditionally the smokehouse was open with a tarp over the top. The air and wind could dry the fish faster than inside a smokehouse. Today most smokehouses are closed in with the bottom half made of wood and the top made of wire mesh. Swarms of wasps make it impossible to hang fish in the open.

Poles are laid across in rows above the fire pit. The filleted fish are hung on the poles and checked regularly to ensure all parts of the fish are drying. Old rotten wood and alder is mostly used to create the smoke for drying the fish.



"Long ago the fish were bigger and oilier, and would take 10 – 12 days to dry real good. The salmon used to be cut in one piece rather than sliced in two like we do now.

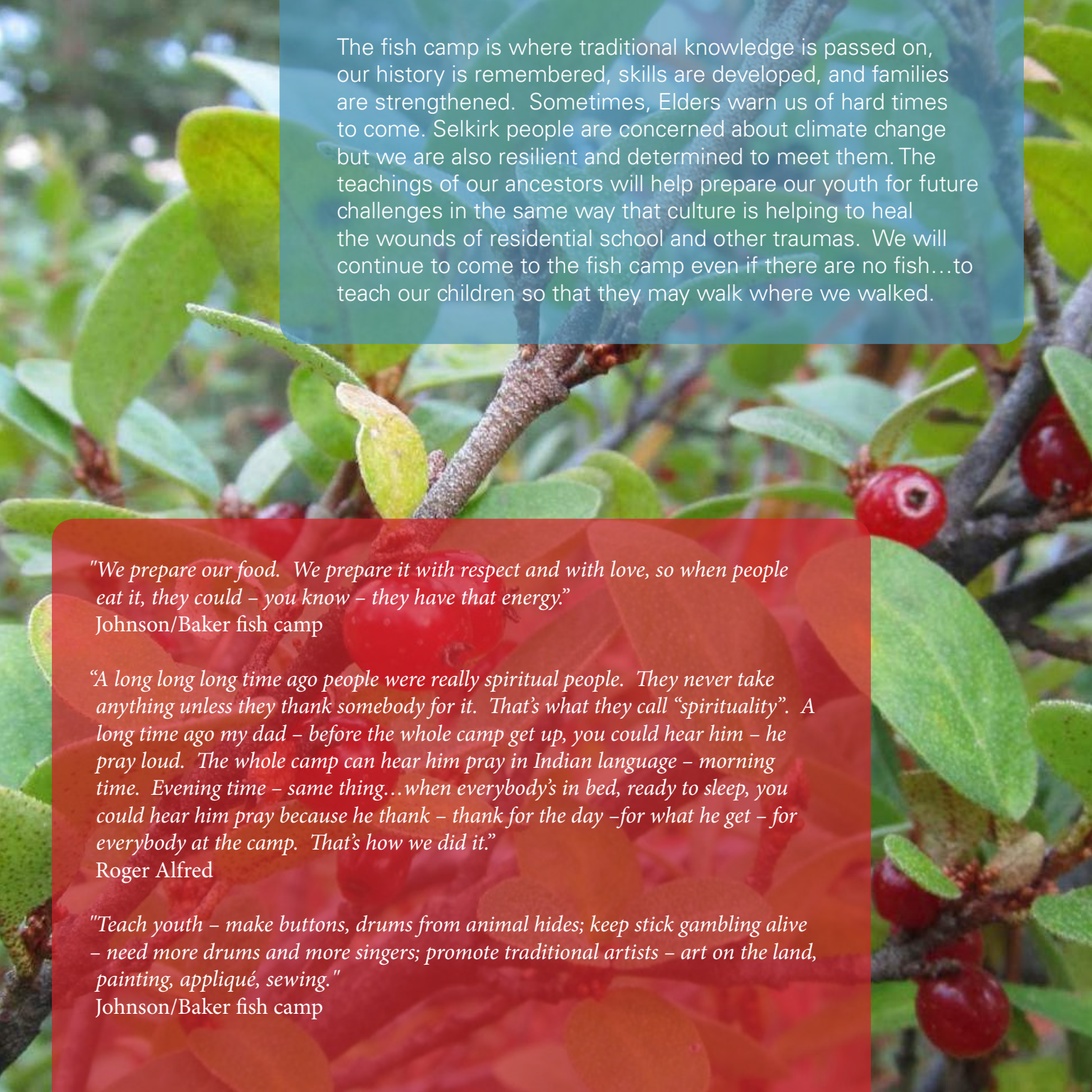
The fish...they bundle it in canvas, skin to skin – like that. They pile it up 15-20 fish in one bundle. And then they fold it in canvas and tie it up with a rope real tight, ready for transport to the high cache."

Roger Alfred





Painting by Blair Thorson



The fish camp is where traditional knowledge is passed on, our history is remembered, skills are developed, and families are strengthened. Sometimes, Elders warn us of hard times to come. Selkirk people are concerned about climate change but we are also resilient and determined to meet them. The teachings of our ancestors will help prepare our youth for future challenges in the same way that culture is helping to heal the wounds of residential school and other traumas. We will continue to come to the fish camp even if there are no fish...to teach our children so that they may walk where we walked.

"We prepare our food. We prepare it with respect and with love, so when people eat it, they could – you know – they have that energy."
Johnson/Baker fish camp

"A long long long time ago people were really spiritual people. They never take anything unless they thank somebody for it. That's what they call "spirituality". A long time ago my dad – before the whole camp get up, you could hear him – he pray loud. The whole camp can hear him pray in Indian language – morning time. Evening time – same thing...when everybody's in bed, ready to sleep, you could hear him pray because he thank – thank for the day –for what he get – for everybody at the camp. That's how we did it."

Roger Alfred

"Teach youth – make buttons, drums from animal hides; keep stick gambling alive – need more drums and more singers; promote traditional artists – art on the land, painting, appliqué, sewing."
Johnson/Baker fish camp

THE VALUE OF FISH

"Salmon is a highly nutritious food! It is high in healthy proteins, healthy fats, vitamins, and minerals necessary for a healthy body.

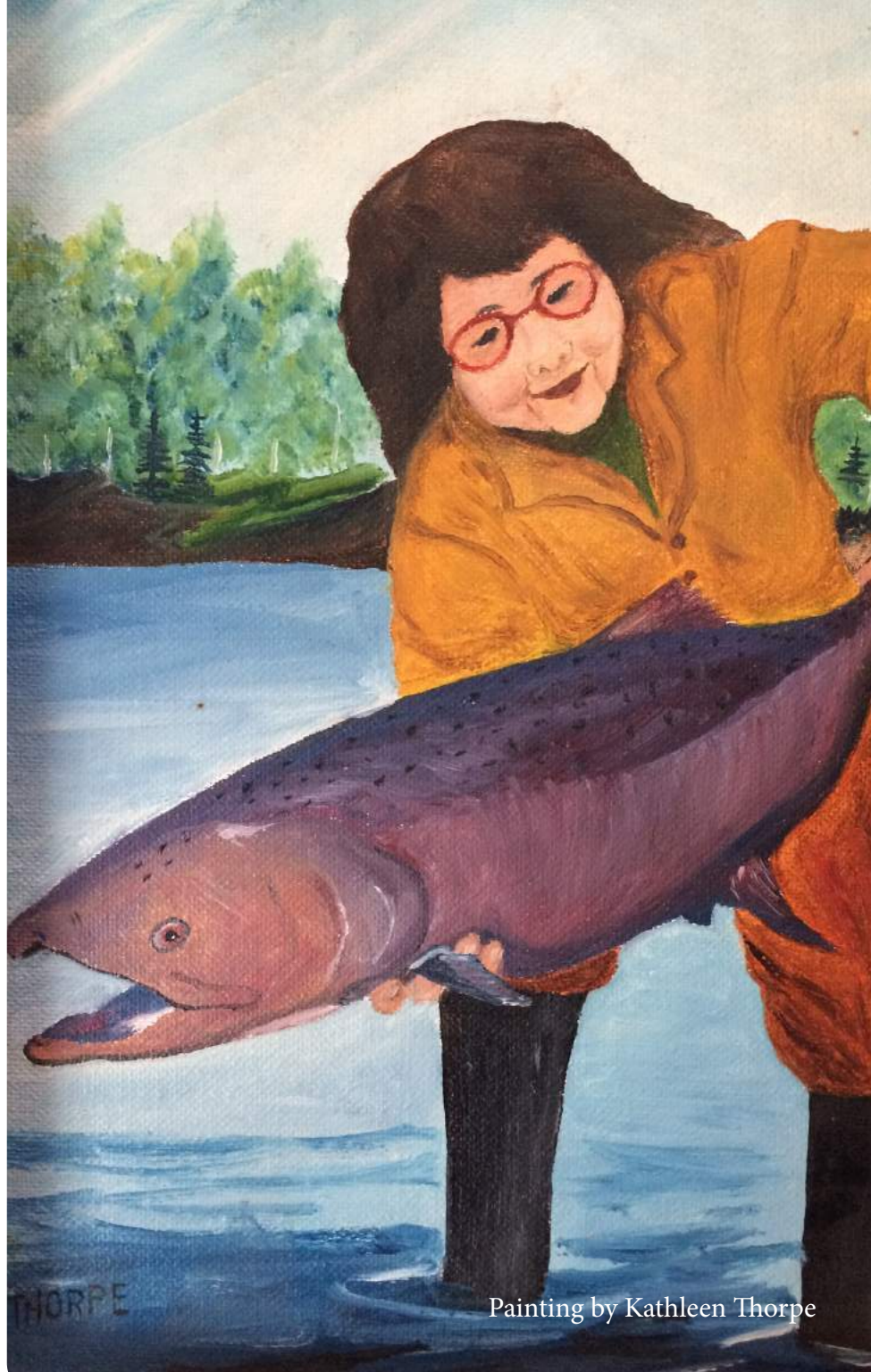
The healthy fat in salmon is Omega-3, which is an essential fatty acid, good for brain development, decreasing inflammation in the body, improving mood, and improving heart health. Eating canned salmon with the bones is high in calcium. Salmon is also high in B12, vitamin D, Selenium and other vitamins and minerals. The benefits of eating salmon are numerous and it tastes good!"

Dr. Georgia Kyba



*"First fish ceremony: drum
prayer – give thanks. Have
a feast and share first
salmon. Come together
with stories and food."*

SFN Elder meeting 2016



Painting by Kathleen Thorpe


CLOSING DOWN

When it comes time to close down the camp, the same rules apply for bear-proofing – make sure the camp is clean and all food and any products that can bring a bear into camp are removed. Store all tools, equipment, tents, and bear-proof the buildings. Each camp would store the dried salmon in a cache and take it all back home for storage at the end of the season. Today the freezer is used to preserve the fresh and half dried salmon. Some people even keep their dried fish in the freezer for the coming winter. This is the time when fish can be shared with those who don't have a fish camp or chance to harvest salmon. Before everyone leaves the camp, a final prayer of thanks is given.

"Every Elder, every young family... should get salmon. It is respect. Give widow family members fish, have to look after all family. It is part of the tradition. People come – don't want to ask. Got to share what you have."

Johnson/Baker fish camp





Who can show me how to pull the net and pack it away?

Can we make a checklist for closing the camp site?

How do I bear-proof the camp?

How do I store supplies and tools?

"They clean all the poles that they took all the salmon off. They clean all the poles for next year's use. That's how they do it. Keep camp clean. All your brush is put away – way back in the bush under a tree where you got it from. When you undo your camp, you stand up all the poles against the tree or else your cache. Everything put away neatly. Your pots and pans – everything like that – from the weather. Some people got a little cache and that's where they put their stuff for next year."

Roger Alfred



WINTER FISHING

Tatla'mun is known as the “bread basket” of the Tutchone people. Our ancestors have fished and hunted and gathered medicines at this lake. Today a large wilderness camp was established for the benefit of our people, to come to hunt, to fish, and to feel the healing nature of the land. Tatla'mun holds much potential for teaching youth the history of our ancestors, the old ways of setting a net under the ice, trapping, winter survival, along with contemporary skills. Skidoo safety and maintenance, cross country skiing, boat safety, canoe skills and hiking across the land are some of the ideas youth have put forward.



"Nothing comes easy on the land...but if you know the skills and practice them, the bounty of the land will provide for you. It is about being prepared."
Chief Kevin McGinty

A photograph of an elderly man with grey hair, wearing a striped shirt, looking towards the right. He is in a wooden structure, possibly a fish processing area, where several pieces of salmon are hanging from wooden beams. The salmon is bright orange and appears to be smoked or dried. The background shows wooden walls and windows with greenery outside.

DECISION MAKING

We used to decide when to fish. We have signs to tell us when the fish are coming, when the fish are plentiful.

We have rights to fish as First Nation people... it is our culture. This past summer we were held back and then allowed to fish late in the season. Something is gone when there is no fish camp – When it is suddenly taken away.

Today we are working with other governments in developing a proactive salmon management plan, one that respects our traditional knowledge, our Dooli laws, and our local knowledge. We are working with youth and Elders to implement this plan.



“With our agreements we have opportunities to be caretakers of our sacred resources.”

Eugene Alfred

“We signed a self-government agreement. In the past, Indian Affairs told us what to do. Now we are responsible for ourselves.”

Lucy McGinty



KEEPING OUR TRADITIONS

Practicing our Doòli
Support for cultural activities

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Help the fish make it to the spawning grounds
Trading with other First Nations

SELF DETERMINATION

Make decisions on when and how much to fish

What changes to the land
are you noticing?

**How do youth prepare for
climate change?**

How does climate change
effect harvesting practices?

ADAPTATION STRATEGIES



CONNECTING YOUTH TO THE LAND

Youth camps, and life skills and communication workshops
Annual winter fish camp for students

RAISING OUR VOICE

Against open seas fishing or over fishing
Research traditional knowledge; gather our own data

FOOD SECURITY

Develop our own food security strategy

How can I help to stop/
slow climate change
affecting our land?

**Why is it important
to keep our traditions
even with climate
change?**

What can I contribute
to adapting to climate
change?

CULTURE AT THE FISH CAMP

Tutchone people have followed ancient rituals and ceremonies to mark our close connection with the land and animals. Traditional medicine and ceremony are important resources that promote health and wellbeing. The beaver is known to be a hard worker so when a beaver tail is tapped on the back of a child and the paws are touched on the child's hands, they will grow up to be hard working in their life.



What are some traditional medicines?

What is the story behind the beaver tail ritual?

What are some other traditional ceremonies?

Do we have a coming-of-age or puberty ceremony?

"Fish camps really mean lots to young students. Time for fish camp! My grandchildren get off school in the summer and the first thing they say is 'when are we going to fish camp?'"

Danny Joe

"Where the richness is – is in the bush. It is your culture camp."

"No, it's not boring. But you should also learn to go with others, not just your family. You go with other people, you get to know their families. You get to know something new. So, it's just little like – a little exchange. So, you learn from other people that you might not learn from your family, you know, you learn other things."

McGinty fish camp



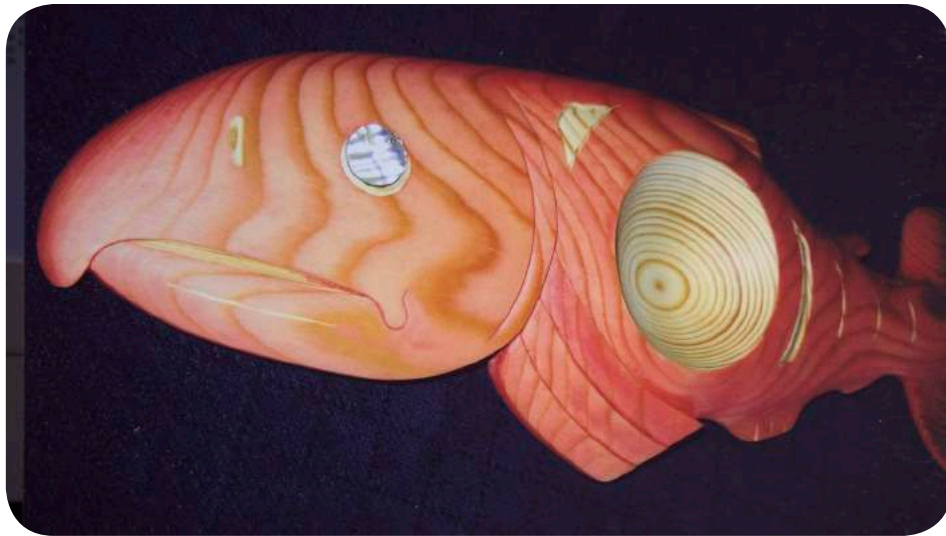


GIVING THANKS

*Come out here all the time. I can
feel the spirit of the land, hear
wind, the birds, see animals and
it lifts the spirit up.*

Charlene Silverfox





Selkirk First Nation

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Arctic Institute of
Community-Based Research
For Northern Health and Well-Being



Health Canada Santé
Canada Canada

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The views and opinions expressed in this book are solely those of the authors, and may not reflect the views and opinions of Health Canada.

