

## WE ARE DĚNEZHU. WE LIVE TR'ĚHUDÈ

We are DĚnezhu, the people of this land We are Tr'ondĕk  
Hwĕch'in, the people of this river following the ways Tsà'  
Wĕzhè traveled and remembering his journey and the living  
inheritance he left us – Tr'ĕhudè, our way of life and our  
law.

We are DĚnezhu, the people of this land  
salmon people and caribou people  
weather-watchers and story people.

Ours is a constitution of stories and promises – a promise to  
listen to the land a promise to act humbly and show gratitude  
for the gifts that sustain us a promise to take care of each other.

The promises Tsà' Wĕzhè made in the long-ago times are the core of our identity  
as DĚnezhu the source of our wealth, the reason we endure  
and the root of our kinship with the land and our animal  
relatives those with fur or fins or feathers leaves or  
needles or berries or flowers two legs or four legs, more  
legs or none who taught us how to survive, but also how to  
live. These promises are happy obligations because when  
we look after our relatives, they look after us.

Tsà' Wĕzhè used his wits to make the world safe  
for us so we live Tr'ĕhudè to protect the balance  
he made still telling the stories that bind us to  
this land and keeping our promises so the  
animals keep theirs – for all the generations yet  
to be born.

That is what we mean when we say we are DĚnezhu, the people of this land  
That is what it means to be Tr'ondĕk Hwĕch'in, the people of this river.

# Traditional Knowledge and Heritage Perspectives on Defining Reclamation and Restoration

## Opening Remarks

In this document, we are sharing a definition of reclamation and restoration that is grounded in our way of life. We are Dënezhu, the people of this land, we are Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. Our culture mirrors the rhythms of the land, its complexity and balance. Out of the Spirit of the Land come four foundational values: integrity, respect, interconnection and justice and we support the Commission's inclusion of them in the Recommended Plan. These values are integral if we want our land, our culture, and our community to survive. The Dawson Regional Land Use Plan (DRLUP) must be grounded in Dënezhu values, stories, and language, and therefore our definitions of reclamation and restoration are based on perspectives that are often missing from such definitions.

In addition to this document, we have included a reclamation guide created by Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government applicable for placer mining in 2017 for reference for the Cumulative Effects Working Group to review. In this way, we acknowledge that the care and stewardship of this land must consider the different worldviews of all that live and work in the region.

**The quotes and traditional knowledge shared in this document is not to be shared beyond the DRLUP Cumulative Effects Working Group. These are provided to contextualize Denezhu ways of knowing and it is important that before sharing beyond the group, the owners of this knowledge can consent they're happy to share it.**

## Tr'ëhudè

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*"The most important thing when you take from Mother Earth, you put something back,"*

*- TH Elder Peggy Kormendy*

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Dënezhu way of life is informed by the concept of Tr'ëhudè ("living in a good way"). Tr'ëhudè is how we conduct ourselves and how we are in relationship with one another – those who have come before us, the spirit world, the land, the water, and more-than-human animals. Tr'ëhudè is passed on through Dänojà (long ago) foundation stories, Indigenous Science (Traditional Knowledge), family stories, and individual experiences. Tr'ëhudè is taught by example – our community, ancestors, the land, and all our relations demonstrate to us how to live in a good

way. It is our job to share this knowledge with our children and grandchildren so that our sacred relationships with land, water, and all inhabitants remain intact.

Within this wholistic perspective, we believe that both restoration and reclamation must consider all interconnected activities and spheres, rather than being limited to direct impacts to the land, animals, and water.

Through a Tr'ëhudè lens, land would be considered reclaimed when all aspects of our relationship with the land are in balance and when we are "living in a good way". Our Elders suggest that the concepts of restoration and reclamation need to expand beyond the notion of making severely degraded land fit for human use or cultivation. As a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder shared:

*"When we try and protect our land, it's not just for us or the land alone, it's a lot of other things,"*

This refers to the totality of our relationship with the land and all it includes, such as our relationship with the spirit world, our ancestral ties to place, and our responsibility as stewards of this land.

When we work on healing the land, we are not only looking at what needs to be done to reclaim or restore the land itself, we are also taking a close look at ourselves and our actions. While western notions focus reclamation/restoration efforts on land and water quality or species health, we know the only thing we can control is human action. It is important for us to address the root of our problems rather than solely focus on the symptoms, otherwise we will never improve upon our relationship with the land and one another.

As one of our Elders has shared:

*"We need to control ourselves, not the land or the animals. Land and animals will take care of themselves,"*

### **The Importance of Water as an Indicator of Land Health**

Several of our Elders and Citizens have spoken many times and in different contexts regarding the health and well-being of the land. A resounding similarity from individual testimony is that water is the primary indicator of the land's health. Their voices were loud and clear that:

*Water is the most important resource – all other things depend on it.*

In other words, if the water is not healthy, there is no possibility that all other aspects of our relationship with the land can be in balance.

Therefore, from our perspective, the preliminary assessment of an area's health following industrial development must focus on water quality. From our perspective, if the water quality in the area is poor, we cannot proceed with further assessment.

## Restoration

The quote above, from respected TH Elder Peggy Kormendy, demonstrates the integral TH value of balance – when we take something from the earth, something must be given in return. Thus, a TH concept of restoration would include a gift for the land, an acknowledgment of what was taken, and thanks to the land for continued sustenance.

Through a Tr'ëhudè lens, land would be considered restored when all aspects of our relationship with the land are in balance and, as respected TH Elder Peggy Kormendy says above, when something has been put back to balance out what was taken.

In this way, restoration can be understood as not only a returning of land to its previous state, but an improvement of that land and an exchange for what was taken. In keeping with Tr'ëhudè, when any land use is undertaken, restoration is our ultimate goal.

## Reclamation

For Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, reclamation means a return of lands and waters to their predevelopment state, in a way that will support TH way of life, including all natural resources. Reclamation can be a step in the process of Restoration.

The guiding value of integrity can be used to illustrate our concept of reclamation. Integrity with the land, with all users of the land, and with agreements that govern our use of land. When individuals, corporations, agencies, have had the privilege of using land within TH Traditional Territory for any purpose (harvesting, resource extraction, recreation, spiritual experiences, etc.), that land must be reclaimed in such a way that enables TH citizens to maintain or renew their relationship with that area and all of its inhabitants.

Demonstrating integrity in terms of land use, and integrity in terms of upholding TH agreements with other governments is an essential element of reclamation.

## The TH Assessment Process

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in hope the Recommended Plan embraces a *two-eyed seeing, or walking in two worlds* approach. This means giving equal weight, significance and value to both Indigenous Knowledge and Western Knowledge. The land includes the spirit world, culture and history, and these seemingly intangible aspects must be assessed with the same rigor and weight as is given to chemical analysis of water or soil.

The true test of whether the land has been restored or reclaimed rests with the assessment of TH Elders and Citizens. When TH Citizens return to an area from which they were previously alienated, we know that they feel safe visiting that part of their Traditional Territory. When TH Citizens again begin to harvest from a region, they demonstrate that the land can sustain them, and in their careful assessment of the animals and plants harvested, we learn about the health of the land.

One way for TH to assess the restoration or reclamation of lands would be to form a committee of knowledge holders specifically chosen and tasked to make such assessments. When a disturbed area is undergoing the process of reclamation/restoration, the committee would travel to the site and begin their evaluation. Such an evaluation might include sampling the water to determine if it is fresh and healthy; sampling berries and other vegetation to see if the taste is correct; and surveying the landscape to see if the spiritual realm is in balance. If the Elders recognize that we are in balance with the land, the site would be considered healed (reclaimed or restored, depending upon the definitions used).

Both Indigenous and Western science recognize that restoration or reclamation of disturbed land does not follow a specific or predictable timeframe. The healing process takes as long as is needed for the water to be clean and, subsequently, the land, vegetation, and animals to be healthy. Attempts to impose an artificial schedule or structure would not prove beneficial.