

# *Tłıchǫ Traditional Methods used to Harvest Caribou*

*A Report for*

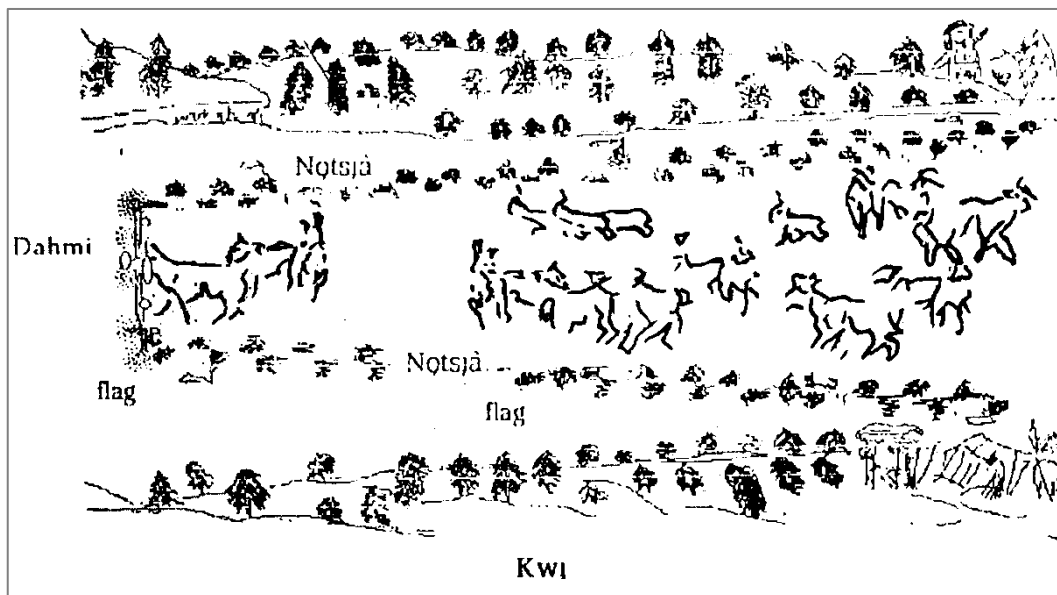
*The Dogrib Treaty 11 Council*

*and*

*The Department of Renewable Resources, GNWT*

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Kwı — a funnel shaped structure used to drive caribou towards a set of caribou snares known as dahmi.

Notsjà — the sides of the kwı where the flags and ribbons are put to flap in the wind.

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The original report (March 1995) was prepared for the Tłıchǫ Government and Dene Cultural Institute by:

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- Alice Legat, Principal Investigator
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The update (August 2023) revises some of the terms and community names, to change them from English to Tłıchǫ. The exception to this is organizations from the past, such as the Dogrib Renewable Resources Board and Dogrib Treaty 11 Council.

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## ***Tłıchq Traditional Methods used to Harvest Caribou***

*“A long time ago when the caribou did not travel the trails to this area, the Tłıchq were starving. A man had a dream and the next day he walked straight to the barren lands and invited the caribou to follow him to this land ... ” (Romie Wetrade)*

### **Background**

During 1993-94 some Tłıchq elders commented that the caribou were not following their usual caribou trails. These elders suggest it may be due to the plastic ties used by prospectors to stake claims. These plastic ribbons are tied to trees and flutter in the wind. And the elders think the caribou are afraid of the fluttering ribbons, which causes the caribou to move away from them. These elders also think that since there are so many ties fluttering in the bush, the caribou have become confused, causing them to go in all different directions.

In 1994, younger members of the Tłıchq community claimed that the elders know this because they traditionally used the movement of trees and material to get caribou to go where they wanted them to go. They hypothesized that if movement could be used to redirect caribou during the traditional hunt, and if plastic ties fluttering in the bush can cause confusion when they are placed randomly, then movement may work to keep the caribou away from past, present, and future mine sites.

In February of 1995, the Dogrib Renewable Resources Committee proposed that preliminary research be conducted to document traditional knowledge associated with redirecting caribou movements. The Department of Renewable Resources decided to provide funding for preliminary research, which would take place over five weeks in February and March, 1995. And they agreed there is a growing recognition that there is a critical need for concrete information about traditional Tłıchq knowledge on caribou behaviour and migration.

The need for information arises from increased mining activity in the Tłıchq region and the desire to keep caribou away from both active and inactive mines and the associated tailing ponds. There is much to suggest that traditional knowledge will play an important role in developing a

management plan during the next few decades, as territorial and federal governments continue to encourage mining activity.

The objectives for the preliminary research are to:

- Document methods used to redirect caribou movement.
- Document locations where specific methods were used.
- Document which methods were used at specific times of year.
- Compile information on who made the decision to redirect caribou and why.
- Translate the information into English for future education purposes.
- Transcribe the information into Tłıchq for future education purposes.

The first four objectives were met in a preliminary fashion. But the research team was unable to transcribe the information into Tłıchq. Transcripts will be completed in the new fiscal year.

## **Methodology**

For the purposes of this project, the Dogrib Renewable Resources Committee (DRRC) chose to use the Gamètì research team, who are presently working on documenting the elders' knowledge on traditional governing systems. This team was used because they are currently working with elders on decision-making and some of these interviews have focused on caribou.

The research team in Gamètì uses the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method. This method ensures ownership by community elders, who are holders of traditional knowledge. This method also ensures that community members receive on-the-job training as researchers. The research is usually directed by the Community Advisory Committee (CAC). But in this case the CAC and DRRC took specific roles to direct this project.

Both the CAC and DRRC have important roles to play. The CAC provides all policy direction, selects the researchers, offers advice on which elders are the most knowledgeable on any given subject, and approves the release of reports prepared by the staff. The DRRC provides direction on which

topics they need information on, and selects the community to carry out the research.

Due to time constraints, there were several modifications to the method. Professional translators Celine Football and Madeleine Chocolate were hired to help with translation. This allowed researcher Sally Anne Zoe and project director Alice Legat to concentrate on discussing the topics with the elders.

Group and individual interviews were conducted. Sally Anne Zoe continually returned to these elders to clarify information or place names: David Chocolate, Madeleine Drybone, Andrew Gon, Harry Simpson, Amen Tailbone, Rosalie Tailbone, and Romie Wetrade.

The report was verified by the CAC and the elders interviewed. First, the report was interpreted verbatim to them. This process took five hours over two days. Additional information was incorporated into the report.

The report was then read to all the elders of Gamètì. They verified the contents. This second reading took three hours. During the first reading the oldest elders clarified points. And during the final reading the younger elders told their own stories. Harry Mantla and Harry Simpson, both young elders, expressed how they were glad to be learning from the old people again because they both felt like they had all but forgotten many of the details about these things.

## Limitations to the Research

As with any community-based research, the agenda of the researchers and funders is not always the reality of the people living in the community. Two of the most crucial weeks of the five-week research period were when most of the people in Gamètì made a traditional trip to Deline, the first spring trip in four years.

The time frame also caused other difficulties.

- Not enough time to document, understand, and report on the elders' collective knowledge about redirecting caribou. In order to understand methods used to redirect caribou it is also important to understand why these techniques were used and to understand how caribou were viewed spiritually and how caribou behaviour was perceived.
- Not enough time to fully discuss concepts and verify translations associated with redirecting caribou.

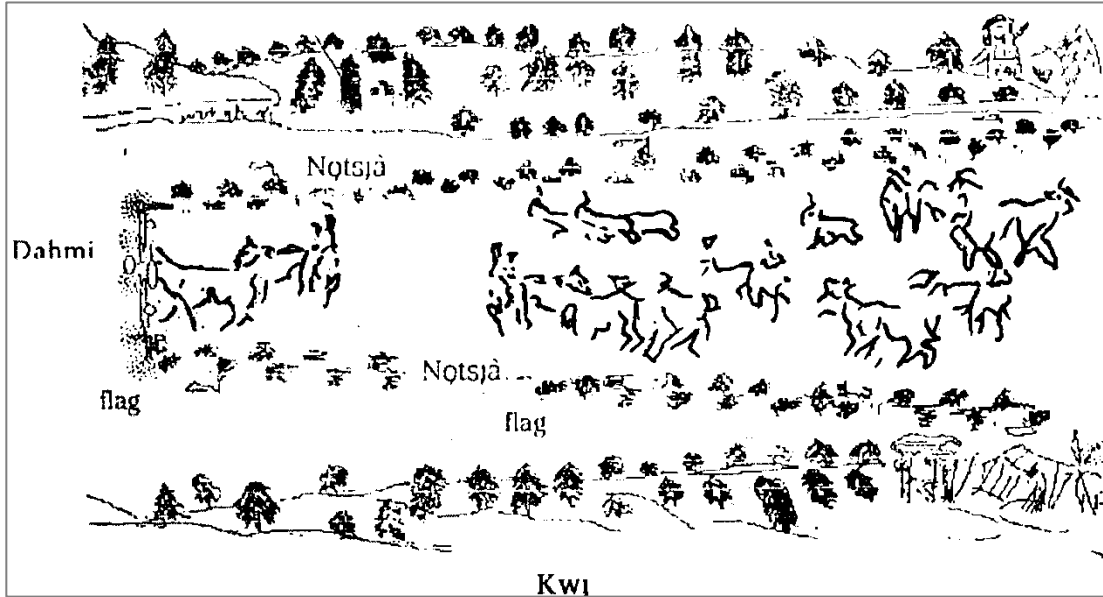
Another challenge was locating on topographic maps the places where kw̄ were constructed. The very old elders know the details of the land intimately and what takes place in any given location, but they cannot read maps. For this reason, it was necessary to record the information of the oldest elders and then use younger elders, who know the locations of the places, to mark the places on the maps.

This research is limited to discussing the caribou in relation to the nq̄ts̄à, which is one component of the kw̄ (caribou funnel and snare). It does not describe the elders' spiritual understanding of caribou and the relationships and responsibilities associated with killing caribou. Nor does this paper discuss the importance of this communal hunt to the traditional Tł̄chq̄ society.

This paper is limited to a description of the nq̄ts̄à and their size and geographic location, and the decision-making process associated with the construction of a kw̄. The paper also describes the weta de t̄, and how the Tł̄chq̄ acquired their knowledge of the caribou.

## Research Results

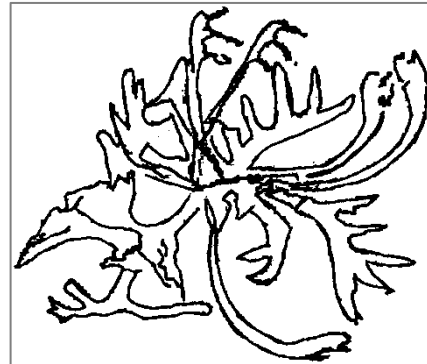
The research team found that waving flags, ribbons, or trees, and the sound of howling wolves were used in the spring to redirect caribou, whereas rattles were used in the colder fall months and winter.



Kwı — a funnel shaped structure used to drive caribou towards a set of caribou snares known as dahmi.

Notsjà — the sides of the kwı where the flags and ribbons are put to flap in the wind.

Weta de tlı — rattles made of caribou antlers





## Nqtsjà

The nqtsjà are the sides of the kwı — the fence-like structure that funnels caribou to the dahmı — a set of caribou snares. These nqtsjà varied in size but were often several miles long. They were constructed by pounding spruce trees into snow-covered open areas such as a frozen lake or the barren lands in spring. The spruce trees were placed in a zigzag fashion, rather than in a straight line. Spread among the spruce trees were sticks with flags or ribbons attached. At least one pair of sticks with ribbons was placed near the ends of the side opening of the kwı. Another set was placed about mid-point down the nqtsjà. And a third set was placed some distance from the dahmı.

All aspects of the nqtsjà were designed to scare the caribou, redirecting them to where the people wanted them to be. The fearful reaction of the caribou in the spring to movement, perceived movement, and sound was used to the Tłıchq advantage. The nqtsjà were only built in the spring.

*At about this time, the caribou's eyes become blind from the snow. It was said there was a lot of snow blindness back then. Because [in the spring where there are heat waves] it seems like they're seeing two things, so if there are any nqtsjà the caribou don't go near them. ... for that reason [the people used trees and flags that move in the wind].*

*... where there are dark things set on the lake, [the caribou] will not go near them. That's why they [our ancestors] made nqtsjà. In the ... [springtime] the caribou are afraid of the nqtsjà and in the winter they're not afraid of the nqtsjà. At the time when the caribou begin to migrate, the nqtsjà looks as if there's something moving ... because the trees look as if they're moving from side to side, and they look like it's something walking. ... so they're afraid of it.*

*... a stick ... with a ribbon ... it blows in the wind ... [and] the caribou are afraid of it. They do that for that reason. (Romie Wetrade, 03/16/95)*

During spring the lack of wind was not a problem. In fact, the Tłıchq name for the period of time that coincides with March can be translated as the 'time of the winds'. And the time that coincides with April can be translated as the 'time the sun dances'. The wind, heat waves, and apparent snow blindness of the caribou combines with the movement of the nqtsjà and creates a confusing environment for them. Amen Tailbone explained that to capitalize on this situation and increase the probability of caribou not escaping, the Tłıchq constructed the nqtsjà so that the trees were not in a straight line. This causes the trees to appear like a crowd of

people to the caribou, whose sight was affected by the heat waves and snow blindness.

The elders explained that there is a lead caribou who guides the other caribou back to the birthing grounds. For this reason, the nqtsjà was placed on well-known caribou trails where it was most likely the lead caribou would go.

*When the lead caribou goes into the nqtsjà the others follow. (Amen Tailbone, 03/10/95)*

Once the lead caribou entered the areas of the nqtsjà, the caribou were caught by the fact that they were trying to avoid danger. When the caribou ran into one side of the nqtsjà, they turned slightly but continued following the leader. If they turned too much, they eventually ran into more movement from the other nqtsjà. They turned again.

*[if the caribou started to turn completely around the people who stood blocking the wide entrance area of the kwı] ... started walking next to each other and they howled like wolves. The caribou kept moving because they were afraid. That's how our ancestors did it. (Romie Wetrade, 03/16/95)*

The sound and movement from the hunters kept the caribou from turning back and they were eventually snared by the dahmı — the snares set at the narrow end of the kwı.

*We don't mean that our ancestors always did this. Only when the caribou migrate. ... they may kill them like that once a year and sometimes not at all. In the late summer when the caribou migrate back to the barren lands they'll hide from the caribou and wait for the caribou. When the caribou begin to migrate, they move all at once and they swim at once. When they begin to swim, they [our ancestors] used a birch canoe to canoe after them. They spear them in their rib cage. They would pierce them through and take the caribou out of the water and bring the caribou there [on the land]. (Romie Wetrade, 03/16/95)*

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### Size and Location of Nqtsjà

Nqtsjà varied in size depending on their location. Nqtsjà located in the boreal forest were often placed in bays or between land masses where the land features could be used to help with funneling caribou toward the dahmı (see maps 1 and 2). The elders explained that the nqtsjà on the frozen lakes were large because they didn't want the caribou to walk past.

*They know [the general area] where the caribou are going to migrate and they know where the caribou trails are. They made the nqtsjà structure all the way*

*across because they didn't want the caribou to go the other way [and miss the dahmj]. (Dave Chocolate, 03/21/95)*

Amen Tailbone describes coming across the remains of a very large nqtsjà north of Gots'qkatı (map 4).

*I cannot make up stories and talk about it. Over at Gots'qkatı [Mesa Lake] ... there's a tıda [long narrow lake] ... There's lots of hills and we paddled to the shore. After we paddled to the edge of the barren land we camped there. It was fall. There was no wood so we went up the hill to get wood. Spruce trees don't grow sideways and those logs did that. ... [Our ancestors used to pound] the spruce trees down [into the snow] for the caribou and then the spruce trees [would die] and start to fall over. ... it was like that all over the hill ... and we used to take wood from it. we took the big logs and that's how I came to see [the remains of the nqtsjà].*

*That old nqtsjà wasn't on water [frozen lake]; it was on the land. And they had the spruce trees standing and the structure was maybe one mile. (Amen Tailbone 03/05/95)*

According to Amen Tailbone (03/05/95 pers. comm.) this particular nqtsjà may have been the one used to funnel herds moving from the southwest to the northeast, as well as those herds moving from the northwest to the southeast, just before their migration route turns northeast again. The research team remains uncertain as to the location of this particular nqtsjà as Mr. Tailbone was uncertain as to whether he was describing the nqtsjà north of Gots'qkatı or another one north of Tatsqı (Grenville Lake).

According to Gamètı elders, the seven most important locations for nqtsjà can be found on maps 1, 3, and 4. These locations were also important for other survival reasons, such as important locations for finding birch to use for building canoes, and for fishing, so the people could eat if the caribou chose a different trail. As Romie Wetrade explained ...

*... wherever there were [caribou] trails people lived there. ... but some of them we're not too sure about. But the ones that we know and the ones that were told to use we can talk about them. Just like over here, my dad had said, "over there they used to make dahmj for caribou and the people used to get together ... and they made a dahmj and they killed a lot of caribou here ... [at] Wogwe Ndilq. They know that [where the caribou will travel] and that's why when the caribou migrate back to their birthing ground they camp here [Gahmjı] throughout springtime, and they would make birchbark canoes. ... that's why they would camp out here waiting for the caribou [to go through]. That's the*

*way the stories are and that's how I heard the stories about it." My dad said that.*

*And over there [Wogwe Ndilq] there's a good spot for fishing and it is also where they know the caribou will migrate. So that's where they prepared everything for the caribou. It is where the fish are when it gets warmer and where there's lot of fishing spots. They knew all that. And if there's now caribou they would get together to stay through springtime [to do fishing throughout the spring].*

*They lived at the camp until they finished making canoes and after they finished making canoes they would paddle [to another spot]. That's what they did a long time ago. The people did not stay in one place only. (Romie Wetrade, 03/05/95)*

The structures built in the boreal forest were much smaller than those located on the barren lands, where the nqtsà were often several kilometers long (see map 4).

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### **Decision to Build a Kwı**

The decision to build a kwı and the incredible work it took to build the nqtsà was made by the group. To make sure this decision was right for the group, all individuals present were part of the discussion. They discussed where to place it and whether it was necessary. But the most knowledgeable person, usually an elder, made the final decision and gave the instructions.

*Concerning the make of a dahmı, whenever it gets warm, the people talk to each other and they make a naawo [agreement] and then they wait for the animal [caribou]. ... Those who were elders and knew about the things of the past would sit with the other people in the group and they would discuss it first. And then they would get ready for the caribou. ...*

*We're not talking about a few people. Many people were involved, helping each other. All who are capable of working, they all help in making the naawo and then they wait for this animal because that is all they live on. Whoever knows spoke, and they believe one another. That was how they worked.*

*... they lived according to an elder who possessed that knowledge. ... and using this knowledge, while sitting together [and discussing] they made a decision. ... whoever was an elder and who knew and lived by this knowledge, that one was like a k'awo [boss or camp organizer]. ... they regarded him as a k'awo for as an elder he had a lot of knowledge. They worked according to this. (Romie Wetrade, 03/06/95)*

*They discussed it among each other. ... there was lots of discussion about it. sometimes these structures were not put up because the caribou did not always migrate on those trails. (David Chocolate, 03/21/95)*

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## **Weta de Tłı**

Whereas the movements of ribbons, flags, and swaying trees, and the sound of wolves caused the caribou to move away, the weta de tłı drew the caribou toward its sound. This device was used in the winter when the caribou and hunters were in small groups or alone and when it was necessary to draw the caribou closer.

*[The weta de tłı is a rattle made from] caribou antlers [which are] all cut off and all tied up with strings.*

*We walked [when we] hunted and we carried a small bundle of antlers all tied up together in our pack sack. If we saw a caribou, we made a racket with the caribou antlers. And ... if the caribou hears it, the caribou comes to us. (Amen Tailbone, 03/10/95)*

At the verification meeting Andrew Gon stated that this device was only used in the very cold weather. The other elders seemed to agree. But the research team was unable to determine if they meant the coldest part of the year or if they meant the coldest part of the rutting season, because the elders also explained the weta de tłı sounds like caribou fighting during the rut.

The sound drew the caribou toward the hunters, who used spears and arrows or snares in the bush. And before the wide-spread use of skidoos, it was used in recent times to draw the caribou toward hunters using guns.

Madeleine Drybone also mentioned that the yigq was used to call caribou. This is a toy made of caribou hooves that the player tries to swing onto a bone peg. The men disagreed with Madeleine. And the research team was not able to go back and discuss it with her. It is possible that since the yigq makes a loud rattle sound, it was used by women in camps when they were alone. Certainly, the weta de tłı was used by women. As one young woman said, "I remember my mom sitting in camp and if she saw a caribou, she would rattle this big bundle of caribou antlers to draw the caribou towards us."

## Acquiring the Knowledge

During one of the later interviews, Sally Anne Zoe asked how their ancestors first learned about using movement and sound to redirect the caribou.

*[their ancestors did not have guns or skidoos] ... so how were they going to kill an animal? ... they observed the animals. They used their minds. And they found ways to survive on the caribou. I know this from listening to [the stories of my ancestors]. (Romie Wetrade, 03/16/95)*

The elders stressed that by watching the caribou their ancestors learned that the caribou are social animals who like to be with each other during migration to and from the north. They also like to be together in the barren lands. But they move in smaller groups when they winter among the trees. Caribou choose a leader and the other caribou follow the leader. So, if the leader goes into the kwı, so will the others. They also noticed that the caribou had a hard time seeing in the spring due to a combination of snow blindness and seeing double because of the heat waves. And that they are attracted to the sound of antlers knocking against each other.

Amen Tailbone asked his own questions about why caribou might move through a nqtsıà under certain situations.

*A caribou, if we chase a caribou, even if there are clothes hanging, it will wander past. ... it does that too. Even so ... in late summer some caribou wandered to where there was a point. It was a point with a short portage and there ... we canoed ashore, and at the point where there were caribou, and there, they were about to go into the water, so we walked towards them. ... but then at the point we noticed some caribou jackets, blankets, and things like that which were hanging. About six [items] that had straws sticking out of them and they appeared like they were people standing. Despite that, the caribou ran ashore. We shot at them so the caribou ran ashore.*

*... the caribou ran in between them and that's how it was. I know for I saw with my own eyes and that's what I'm talking about. I don't talk with uncertainty. What do you make of the information anyway? (Amen Tailbone, 03/10/95)*

This statement seems to mean that Amen Tailbone was telling Sally Anne Zoe that to understand the caribou you have to ask questions when they behave in a way that you do not expect them to behave. Why were they acting in that way? He was also explaining to her that movement does not seem to work as well in the summer as in the spring when the snow is bright.

Another example of this is when Amen Tailbone explained to us that the caribou are currently traveling in a wide arc to the west, away from the ice road.

*Why do you suppose they are doing that? Because of the traffic on the ice road. This year there are a lot more big trucks for the diamond mines. So, the caribou will probably not come close to it. it looks like they are making a big arc. (Amen Tailbone, 03/30/95)*

As Amen Tailbone demonstrates, traditional Tłıchq knowledge provides information for solving problems, and provides baseline data with which to make predictions and hypotheses. He also stresses the importance of observing and questioning when you see something that does not make sense or is not consistent with past behaviour.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

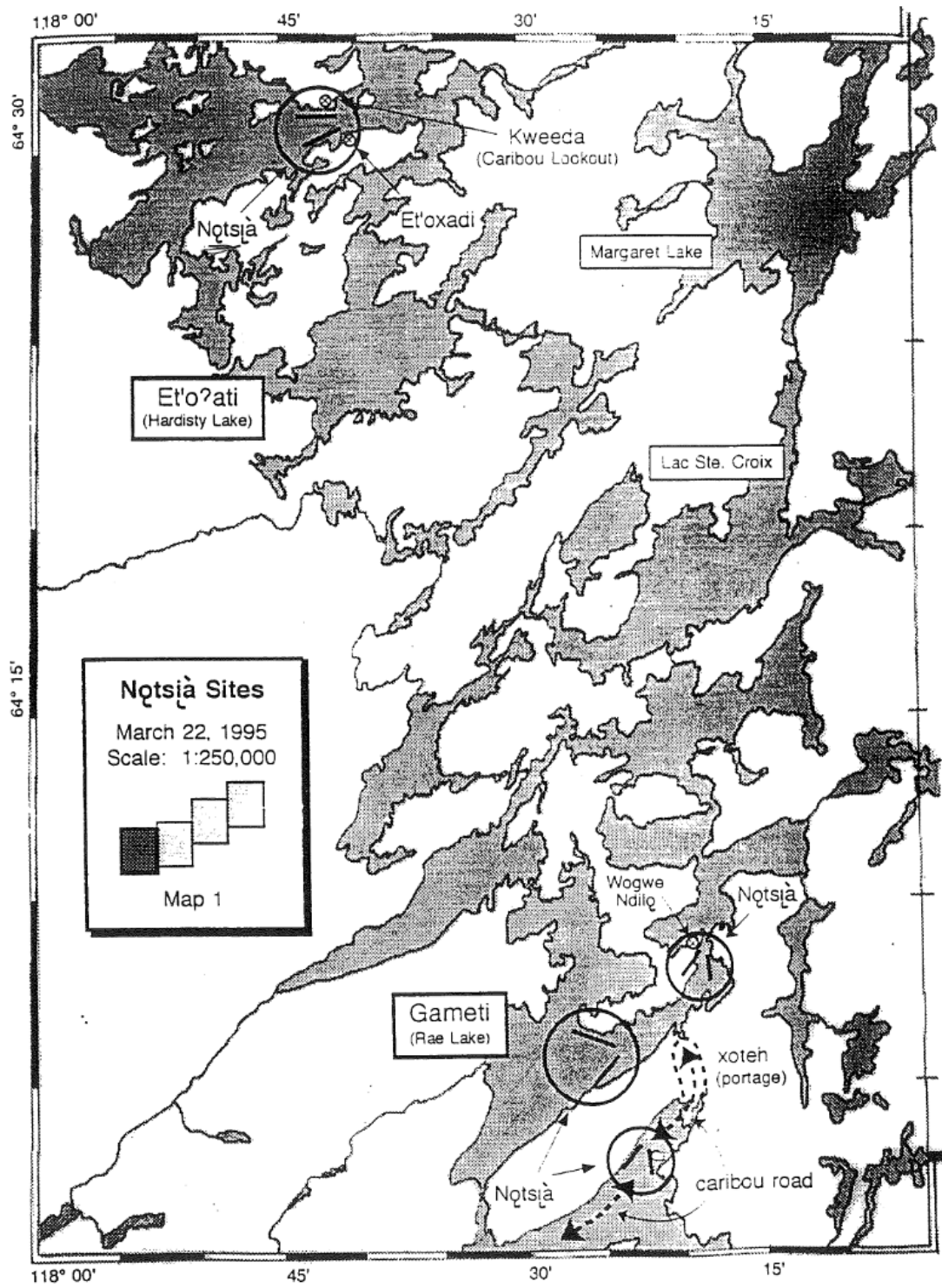
Historically the Tłıchq used sound and movement to redirect caribou to specific locations. But caribou were not redirected to keep them safe, as in keeping them away from pollutants, tailings ponds, or large open-pit mines. Rather, the caribou were redirected towards an area where food, clothing, and tools were secured for the Tłıchq by killing as many caribou as needed.

Knowledge about caribou behaviour and how to move the caribou into particular locations has been remembered and transmitted to the next generation through oral narratives. The techniques used were not designed to change the migration routes, but to redirect the caribou away from one spot on the caribou trails to a more desirable spot for snaring or hunting. Decision-making included all members of the group and was never left up to one or two individuals.

Based on this preliminary evidence it appears that a management technique could be developed using sound and movement to keep the caribou away from past, present, and future mine sites, or any other undesirable or polluted area. Based on the statements made by the younger elders, that they are now learning from the very oldest members of their community, it appears important to have the very old involved in the design and decision-making process concerning caribou management.

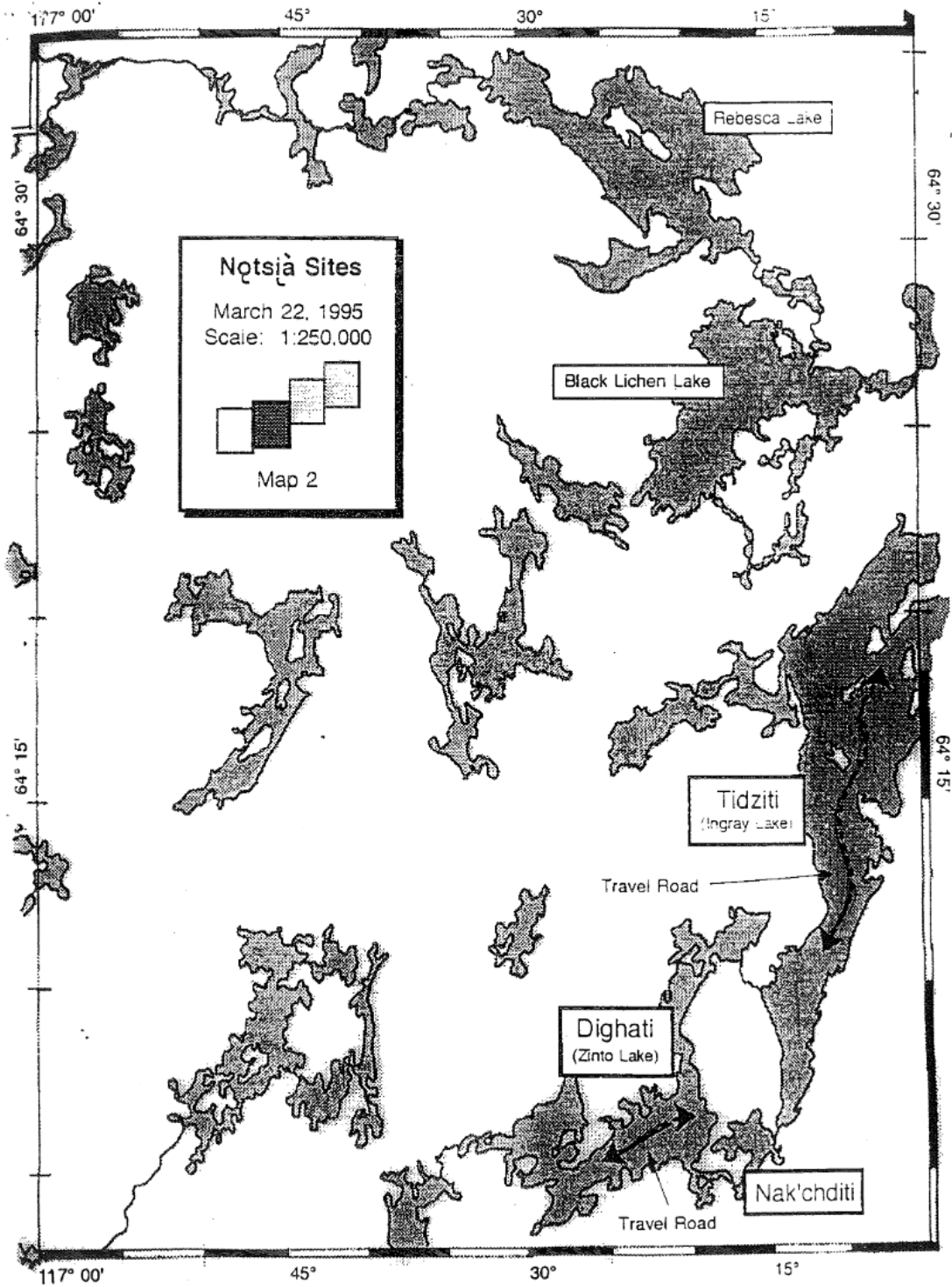


## Four Maps of Nǫtsjà Sites





Tłıchǫ Traditional Methods to Harvest Caribou



Tłıchǫ Traditional Methods to Harvest Caribou

