

REVIEW

THE GWICH'IN CLIMATE REPORT

Gilbert, Matt, compiler and editor, 2023. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks; 298 pages, black and white and color illustrations, maps. ISBN 978-1-64642-335-4 (paperback; \$35.00); EISBN 978-1-64642-336-1 (ebook; \$28.00).

Reviewed by Chris M. Cannon

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Indigenous peoples' observations and perspectives of northern environments are much needed for better understanding climate change and its dynamic effects at "ground zero." The Gwich'in Climate Report is a collection of transcribed interviews with 25 Gwich'in Athabascan (Dene) Elders and community members in Arctic Village, Venetie, and Fort Yukon, detailing their first-hand observations of the changing natural world in northern interior Alaska.

The report is organized thematically (e.g., rivers, mountains, weather, moose, fish, ducks, berries) and offers a comparison from two time perspectives, beginning with a larger set of interviews conducted in 2005 followed by an update in 2020 with a few of the same contributors and several new participants. An intervening 2013 "Climate Solution Statement" from Arctic Village separates the two major sections or interview periods. The statement provides an overview of climate-related perspectives and issues faced in Arctic Village and around the world and argues that while there are no quick or easy solutions, climate change is rooted in "the unhealthy and destructive lifestyle humans have adopted" (p. 174).

The report illustrates that while recent rapid climate change has resulted in some benefits (e.g., more moose in Arctic Village), the net result presents many challenges. The compiler and editor, Matt Gilbert, emphasizes that these challenges are compounded by the erosion of traditional Gwich'in lifeways. To mitigate both sets of problems, Gilbert proposes immediate efforts to reengage

with Gwich'in cultural practices and ways of knowing and being.

Although transcripts do not offer the most engaging type of reading, the strength of the report is the documentation of Gwich'in observations and interpretations of their changing natural world. The transcripts are supplemented by numerous figures and summaries of each theme. Significant attention is given to the increased prevalence and severity of thunder and lightning storms. The drying of lakes, changes in animal behaviors and diversity, and increased forestation and growth of shrubs in tundra areas that redirect the migration routes of caribou stand out as significant changes noted by Gwich'in participants. Observations about the appearance and disappearance of different bird species are interesting and noteworthy. Changes to the accessibility of hunting grounds is identified as the single greatest effect of climate change on Gwich'in hunting practices.

The report is highly readable for both academic and lay audiences. Another notable attribute is that the interviews and research were conducted by Gilbert, who is a Gwich'in community member, writer, and scholar, providing a welcome insider's contribution to the growing field of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Moreover, Gilbert includes his own observations. He is also the grandson of one of the report's leading contributors, Trimble Gilbert, a highly respected and prominent Gwich'in Elder.

Aside from the many notable contributions mentioned above, the report would benefit from additional cultural

context that better situates or explains the implications of a changing Subarctic environment to Gwich'in ways of knowing, being, and relating. With that said, the report is better suited for those who have some familiarity with Gwich'in or Northern Dene cultures, as the onus is largely on the reader to infer how the reported observations relate to Gwich'in culture and lifeways. A host of subtle references might also elude readers unfamiliar with Northern Dene cultures, such as the brief mention of "two winters" (pp. 18, 143, 196, 245), which refers to a massive climatic event (volcanic eruption) recounted in Northern Dene oral histories across the Alaskan and Canadian Subarctic that led to harsh, winter-like conditions for consecutive seasons. Prophecies and predictions about future world changes are welcome contributions provided in the report, but again, these would have greater relevance if better contextualized within Gwich'in worldview, cosmology, and spirituality.

Although the transcripts at the end of the book contain valuable Gwich'in terminology, they would have greatly benefited from a linguist's editorial hand to accurately render them in modern Western Gwich'in orthography.

Taken together, this book is a welcome addition to the growing field of TEK and will be an informative resource for those interested in descriptive observations of the changing Alaska Subarctic by a northern Indigenous people. This work also draws attention to the need for greater representation and inclusivity of Indigenous voices in management, policy, and science in the north. However, those looking for rich context that deeply situates the cultural basis through which some of these changes are perceived and interpreted may need to supplement this work with additional reading. Nonetheless, we are lucky that Gilbert has persevered through many years of work to make this documentation and research available.

REVIEW

THE UPPER TANANA DENE: PEOPLE OF THIS LAND

By William E. Simeone, 2023. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks; 320 pages, 125 color photos, 97 b&w photos, line art, appendices, references, index. ISBN 978-1-64642-490-0 (hardcover) \$95.00; ISBN 978-1-64642-333-0 (paperback) \$34.95; EISBN 978-1-64642-333-0 (ebook).

Reviewed by James Kari

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This book is the most comprehensive source on the people, cultural beliefs, land use, and ethnohistory of the Tanacross and Upper Tanana Dene language areas. Anthropologist Bill Simeone has worked closely with four generations of Dene people from Alaska's upper Tanana River region since he was a Vista volunteer in 1971 in the village of Tanacross. There are 10 thematic chapters, covering the Dene seasonal round and food resources; kinship, marriage, and training of youth; *xaskee'*, chiefs or rich men; and *tjiił*, the eastern Alaska Dene potlatch system. Simeone's photos and comments on the Upper Tanana potlatch provide an insider's point of view. Chapters 8 to 10 cover the historic period: the fur trade, the role of Episcopal Church, the American period, and Noodlee, "those who come and go," describing three gold rushes, early and recent efforts to define Dene land and subsistence rights, and the impacts of World War II.

Simeone has assembled extensive sources for these two Dene languages areas, from publications and primary notes of deLaguna, McKennan, Goldschmidt, Guédon, Mishler, Easton, and others. He also cites government, church records, and archival collections at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, including materials in the Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives, such as the Episcopal Church Archives in Alaska, and at the Alaska Native Language Center). From 1980 to 1987, Simeone conducted 33 ethnographic interviews with prominent Dene men and women of Tanacross and Upper Tanana communities. The book presents 16 accurate Upper Tanana texts in alternating line format. These are from

files that Deneologists Olga Lovick and James Kari shared with the author (David 2017; Sam et al. 2021; Tyone 1996). Two highly important texts from the 2021 book are Avis Sam's (pp. 26–30) *Dineh iin hihdiitsii dq'* / When people were hungry, which recounts memories of her family's survival skills in the Ladue Hills in the 1940s, and Darlene Northway's ode to her departed husband Teddy (pp. 86–94), *Hudziit hahaeeyh* / You should teach them. This was the last recording that Lovick made with Darlene, who died not long afterward in 2012.

The book is nicely laid out with an impressive selection of over 220 captioned color or black-and-white photos, maps, and document scans. The book's themes are highlighted by 14 color photo montages by Anchorage photographer Hal Gage that combine portraits of many Dene leaders with artifacts, caribou fences, fish weirs, and other images.

In the concluding chapter (pp. 195–199), Simeone summarizes:

The significance of this book is the voice of the elders. Taken together their voices present a chorus that speaks to more than 100 years of events, people, places, values, and changes. On one level their stories are about everyday life; on another they reveal remarkable resilience, often in the face of extremely challenging circumstances...

In the Dene tradition, the relationship between humans and animals is based on a covenant in which humans are obligated to respect animals and in turn animals will allow themselves to be killed.

This covenant is sustained through injih: knowing what is and is not acceptable. Injih governs every aspect of Dene life.

There are four appendices that complement the book's themes: Appendix A contains Paul and Margaret Kirsteatter's letters to Robert McKennan on the Healy Lake band. Appendix B is a detailed summary of the main sites and place names for the six territories of the Tanacross and Upper Tanana bands. The network of ancient mountain place names that have been recognized in potlatch oratory is traced on the six band territory maps. Appendix C, on the fur trade, presents several documents from 1929 to 1940, including Alaska Commercial Company records and materials from the John Hadjukovich Collection at the Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives. Appendix D consolidates U.S. federal census records plus those of the Episcopal Church in Alaska from the communities of Healy Lake, Ketchumstuck, Mansfield or Tanana Crossing, Tetlin, Last Tetlin, Upper Nabesna River, Shushana, and Northway (lower Nabesna). The book's index (pp. 291–304) cites all personal names mentioned in various interviews. It also has about 60 Upper Tanana or Tanacross lexemes for major place names and ethnonyms and spiritual and social concepts such as *injih/ijih* (forbidden behavior) and *xáxkeh/xaskee* (rich man, chief).

This book reflects the author's career-long dedication to the people he has learned from. Simeone's integration of unique regional sources will stimulate comparative Dene ethnologic, ethnogeographic, linguistic, and genealogic research. This book will be appreciated by the Alaska public as well as by Alaska Dene readers.

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Boreal Imagery



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