

DEHCHO LEADERS' THINK TANK BEGINS BRIDGE TO REGIONAL UNITY

Someone had scrawled across a sheet of newsprint: "Land Management NOT Land Sale."

It stayed there at the front of the meeting room at the community centre here all last week as leaders of the Dehcho First Nations struggled intensely together with issues of regional unity, community fragmentation, the Dehcho Process, resource development, the on-going role of elders and community concerns.

Chiefs, elders and Métis presidents searched for a way forward for their people in times of enormous social and economic change and following difficult internal problems over the last year.

Interim Grand Chief Gerald Antoine reminded the 25 leaders that it was just over a month until the annual Assembly is held at Kakisa Lake June 22-29.

"How are we going to fix things? That is what we have to think about. We have to be honest and straightforward with each other as leaders. We are supposed to stand with each other but nothing got followed up, now we have to fix each other up before the Kakisa Assembly."

On a number of occasions Antoine referred to "lateral violence", a phrase picked up by others as the leadership sharing continued. Lateral violence refers to resentments, jealousies, individual and community gossip, and decisions based on rumour rather than fact. Antoine says it requires healing at all levels: "here in the leadership, in communities and in families."

The leaders responded clearly. For the first time in their quarterly meetings, they spent a full day in a think tank process sharing their concerns and worries before the actual spring leadership meeting got under way, hosted by the Acho Dene Koe First Nation and Chief Harry Deneron.

Deneron, often seen as going his own way, in terms of oil and gas development and a separate negotiating stance, set the record straight about "lateral violence".

"We [leaders and communities] don't talk to each other. When we get together all we talk about is papers, agendas, resolutions. We can't talk without these papers. We don't know what is really going on. We are divided as communities and we don't talk openly about these divisions."

Others spoke of fragmentation. They described their frustrations trying to meet expectations and keep to the agreements of working as "one house".

"I think we all want what is best for the Dehcho, after all we are the descendants of the Dene Nation and we are carrying that ideal along," Antoine said.

Elders expressed their concerns about the loss of identity with the land, culture and Dene language. Everyone agreed that elders remained the strength of the Dehcho First Nation.

Elsie Marcellias an elder from Nahanni Butte spoke in the Dene language of her pain at the loss of language, the school system that alienates young people from the elders.

“The Creator gave us this land to protect us. We are all as one, Dene people, but because of the schools, the young people don’t know how to speak to the elders, to say hello and shake hands. Sometimes I get very lonely.

“We have our differences but there’s lots of elders here [at Fort Liard] and that is good because the elders are the strength of the meeting. As Dene we should think one way together. This is our land and the Creator brought us here for a reason – the land provides for us – and we have to say thank you to the Creator because he knows what we are talking about. It is the white people who have made our land pitiful.”

For a full day this form of a think tank where all the representatives from the 10 communities and 13 organizations of the DFN listened and shared and when it ended late in the afternoon, they moved across the road to the Acho Dene Koe harbour for a solemn ceremony of drum prayers and feeding the fire.

“This is not the end of the think tank process,” Antoine said later, “it is just the beginning but we have taken a big first step towards unity and solidarity.”