

A Conversation with Chief James Ahnassay:

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By Ian Urquhart, *AWA Conservation Director*

Several features distinguished AWA's 2020 awards season. The coronavirus pandemic required a change in the format of AWA's annual lecture series. It demanded the virtual delivery of remarks as a replacement for our customary practice of gathering at our office in Hillhurst Cottage school. Although we've missed the face-to-face gathering and its accompanying conversation Zoom has allowed many more members from all over Canada and parts of the United States to attend our lectures. If more normal times are here this fall we'll merge both modes of delivery – meet in-person at AWA's office and Zoom the presentation across the province.

There were two other novel features of the 2020 season. This was the first year we invited more than one person to deliver a Martha Kostuch lecture. Kevin Van Tighem, Linda Duncan, and James Ahnassay all received Wilderness Defenders awards and were invited to deliver lectures. James' selection was novel, and special, in another way. It was the first time AWA had bestowed this award on a member of a First Nation.

During his years as Chief of the Dene Tha' First Nation James has championed conservation values and delivered conservation victories for the Dene Tha' and for the lands that are central to their identity.

Those accomplishments include playing a key role in creating the Hay-Zama Wildland Provincial Park in 1999. That park protects much of the internationally important wetland contained in the Hay-Zama Lakes Complex. It is one of only 37 sites in Canada distinguished as a wetland listed in



the Ramsar Convention. This international agreement seeks to conserve and use wisely “all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world.” Chief Ahnassay also worked hard to twin Hay-Zama with another Ramsar site half a world away – the Dalai Lake National Nature Reserve in Inner Mongolia.

James isn't finished with conservation yet. He is very interested in establishing the Bis-tcho Lake (Mbe'cho) Indigenous Protected Conservation Area. An IPCA there could be a vehicle for pursuing his interest in engaging Dene Tha' youth in efforts to conserve and manage traditional lands.

One of the first values to arise in James' conversation with AWA Director Cliff Wallis was humility. James started their conversation by saying how important Dene Tha' elders, Council members, and staff were to conservation efforts in his community.

He extended his appreciation to the companies and ENGOs that played a positive role over the years in bringing protection to the Hay-Zama Lakes Complex. “I just want to capture all the people involved, companies, entities because anything that needs to happen, that results in a favourable outcome... it takes a lot of people, a lot of work to get there.”

James was born in 1957 in Habay, Alberta – a Dene Tha' community on the northeast shore of Hay Lake that now “only exists in people's minds.” Located about 11 kilometres nearly due north of Chateh (formerly called Assumption), a major flood in 1962 forced the residents of Habay to relocate to Chateh to the south.

James has good memories of life at Habay. A canoe trip with his mother and cousin the year before the great flood stands out. So too do the spring and fall migrations of geese and ducks and how noisy they were to a four-year old boy. Today he misses that noise, misses those sounds. Dene Tha' grandmothers and mothers oversaw two of the major events of spring. They harvested eggs from nesting waterfowl and they trapped or herded molting ducks. The latter efforts led to major feasts of waterfowl in the spring.

After discussing James' early childhood Cliff asked how things changed and whether the Dene Tha' had much input into those changes. Petroleum companies discovered oil underneath the wealth of nature in Hay-Zama. Looking at Google Earth images of the area around Chateh and Habay today, dotted as it is with well sites – criss-crossed as it is by roads and seismic lines,

you start to appreciate the land rush that swept over Dene Tha' lands decades ago now. Dene Tha' elders worried about the arrival of the energy companies; they worried about all the cutlines that were cut into the earth. When energy companies moved onto the waters and surrounding lands in Hay Zama many things changed. Traditional pursuits, such as egg harvesting, suffered in the shadow of industry.

While wells and pipelines brought jobs for some community members they also brought tragedy. One of James' first memories of the oil and gas era came when he was in the Assumption residential school; a community member working on a pipeline construction crew became entangled in the machinery and died. A particularly evocative memory and story concerned Jean-Baptiste Talley. Talley (sometimes spelled Tally or Tallay in various documents) was one of the elders who played a role in furthering the community's interests in a variety of government/industry processes. For example, he presented to the Joint Review Panel established to study the Mackenzie Gas Project (the Dene Tha' had to go to the courts in order to be consulted about that project). Talley's trapline was

important to the community. In 2011, the Dene Tha prepared a report on traditional land use for TransCanada Pipelines and the National Energy Board. That report noted that at least 14 Dene Tha' trappers, in addition to Talley, used his trapline.

After reading this I wasn't surprised to hear James say that his story about Talley involved a situation when Talley, "as usual," was out on the land. He was returning from the lakes in the southwest corner of the wetland complex. Thirsty, tired, he came across a clearwater spring. Since the water was very clear and cold Talley thought it would be okay to drink from it. Shortly after dipping his cup into the water and drinking...Talley lost consciousness and fell down. He was lucky not to have drowned in the shallow water where he collapsed. When he came to he realized just how lucky he was to be alive. He has told James that story a few times over the years and, to this day, James still wonders what could have caused that. Were there traces of a petroleum gas in the water that led him to collapse? "Those are the kind of profound moments," James said, "where the effects of the activity on the lake really come out to face you."

Cliff asked James to reflect on the aftermath of creating the Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park in 1999. Have governments respected Dene Tha' aboriginal and treaty rights within the 486 square kilometre park? Does the Chief regard the creation of this park as a positive accomplishment? For James, this was certainly a good thing to do together. While the process was long and sometimes difficult, in part due to the revolving door of oil and gas companies involved there, he feels good about what the Dene Tha', AWA, governments, and the petroleum industry accomplished there.

As for aboriginal and treaty rights, I could hear the steel in James' soft-spoken words when he said the Dene Tha' will never shy away from insisting that government respect those rights. Early tensions, when government was on the verge of charging Dene Tha', were resolved. But James made it very clear that, if those sorts of tensions arise in the future, the Dene Tha' will insist that government respect what it agreed to. When James used the phrase "we were there from time immemorial" he talked about the Dene Tha', Hay-Zama, and traditional territories as if they were one. Robbing the Dene Tha' of their lands erodes the essence of who they are as a people.

The Chief joined Cliff and AWA's Christyann Olson in 2009 in Inner Mongolia where they celebrated the 2008 twinning of Hay-Zama with the Dalai Lake Nature Reserve, another Ramsar Convention site. One of the aspects of the trip that impressed James was the tenacity of his Indigenous counterparts in China. He smiled when he recounted the feast on the grasslands their hosts provided them with. The scale of the grasslands in Inner Mongolia/northern China is simply mind-boggling. They cover 400 million hectares, 40 percent of China's land mass. The 87 million hectares found in Inner Mongolia "is a significant constituent of the Eurasian Steppe – the largest contiguous biome in the world." The feast symbolized the efforts of Mongolia's Indigenous population to hold on to their way of life despite the ravages of industrialization and land conversion. That's exactly how



Oil rig in the Hay-Zama wetland complex. Securing the agreement of oil and gas to leave these wetlands helped to make the creation of the Hay-Zama Wildland Provincial Park a major conservation victory in 1999. PHOTO: © AWA



A marsh in the Hay-Zama wetland complex. PHOTO: © C. WALLIS

James sees his own people.

That feast and, more generally, that cross-cultural experience affirmed for James just how important intact wild spaces are for all peoples, Canadians as well as the Dene Tha. Valuing our ancestors' experience becomes a powerful reason for wilderness preservation as it will help present and future generations appreciate what our ancestors enjoyed.

The conversation ended with James reiterating the message of hope he had shared with Cliff and me in an earlier discussion.

The Dene Tha's Mbe'cho/Bistcho Lake Indigenous Protected Conservation Area (IPCA) project is one vessel where that message appears. For James, the IPCA is a way to engage Dene Tha' youth to acquire the knowledge and background needed in order to work on the land in a fashion that respects traditional knowledge and western scientific knowledge. He imagines a future where the Dene Tha' youth of today acquire those knowledges and assume prominent positions as conservation officers, fish and wildlife officers, archaeologists,

and geologists. He is encouraged by the University of Alberta's interest in developing a curriculum where future conservation officers would be informed with an Indigenous perspective that would complement the usual western approaches. Traditional knowledge would become part of that training.

Wilderness protection, tradition, science, and education all are important pillars in the better world Chief Ahnassay imagines. This is a dream AWA shares and will try to contribute to making a reality. ▲