

# Guardians of the Territory: Dene Tha', Bistcho Lake, and Indigenous-led Conservation



By Phillip Meintzer, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

## **T**aking Things into Their Own Hands

The Dene Tha' First Nation (DTFN) are not waiting for Alberta's permission to start protecting their Traditional Territory according to Matt Munson, a Technician in the Lands Department with DTFN. The final version of the Bistcho Subregional Plan (SRP) was a massive disappointment in the eyes of Dene Tha' and Munson says that they "feel lied to and betrayed" by the actions of the Government of Alberta following the release of the final SRP. It is the opinion of the Dene Tha' that Alberta is not upholding their end of Treaty 8, and DTFN plan to charge on ahead to protect and conserve their own lands while various levels of government continue to delay on meaningful protections for the Bistcho Region.

Bistcho (known to the Dene Tha' as M'behcho) is located in Alberta's boreal region in the far northwest corner of the province and forms part of the Traditional Territory of the Dene Tha'. Bistcho Lake is the third largest lake that is completely within the borders of Alberta. The Bistcho region is important for many reasons both socio-culturally to the Dene Tha' as well as ecologically. It provides critical habitat for one of Alberta's threatened – and declining – woodland caribou populations, and the forests and peatlands store and sequester vast volumes of carbon, playing a crucial role in humanity's fight to minimize the harmful impacts of climate change. Bistcho is an incredible treasure for Alberta because it is still relatively remote with few permanent roads, and no all-season roads to the lake itself, which means limited

access for corporations who might seek to extract and exploit the intact natural landscape which makes Bistcho a place worthy of protecting.

From 2019 to 2021, Alberta Wilderness Association participated in the Government of Alberta's land-use planning process for the Bistcho subregion, alongside many others. The process was convened in November 2019 to ensure that activities permitted in the subregion will prioritize the recovery of woodland caribou. Under the joint Canada-Alberta Section 11 agreement for the conservation and recovery of the woodland caribou, Alberta is required to achieve and maintain a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed caribou habitat to improve their chances of recovery. Despite how remote Bistcho may seem from afar, currently only six percent of the Bistcho caribou range is considered undisturbed, thanks to the presence of legacy seismic lines, active or abandoned oil and gas wells, and forestry cut blocks. The final SRP is intended – in theory – to outline how the Bistcho region will reach that 65 percent undisturbed threshold for caribou recovery while still allowing for limited economic development and tourism, while also meeting the needs of local Indigenous communities.

During the SRP development process, Dene Tha' were hoping to see a commitment towards a process for developing some form of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (or IPCA) at Bistcho Lake and the surrounding area. An IPCA is a form of land protection where Indigenous laws, governance, and Traditional Knowledge systems shape how the land and ecosystems are protected and conserved. According to the Indigenous



*Bistcho Lake is the third largest lake entirely within the borders of Alberta and is part of the Traditional Territory of Dene Tha' First Nation. The remote location of Bistcho Lake in northwestern Alberta means that the area is relatively free from industrial development. Photo © P. Meintzer*

Circle of Experts (ICE) report, published in 2018, IPCAs need to be flexible to meet the specific needs of the Indigenous communities they serve, but all IPCAs typically share three essential elements. First, they are Indigenous-led. Second, they represent a long-term commitment to conservation. Lastly, they elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities.

Upon the release of the draft Bistcho SRP for public comments, AWA highlighted the glaring omission of a process towards an IPCA at Bistcho Lake, especially since it received consensus support from the entirety of the Bistcho Task Force – the group of stakeholders who participated in the planning process. The potential for oil, gas, and forestry around the lake is negligible, which means that protecting the lake is unlikely to have a noticeable economic impact and should have made protection a no brainer. AWA expressed that an IPCA would allow the Dene Tha' to assist with caribou conservation while pursuing their interests in landscape-level conservation, traditional uses, and sustainable economic activities. Given the Government of Canada's commitment to protecting 25 percent of our lands and oceans by 2025, IPCAs are an ideal candidate for expanding wilderness protections while also – hopefully – helping to advance efforts towards reconciliation on the part of settler-colonial governments. Yet the Government of Alberta seems to feel otherwise, as made evident by the published final subregional plan.

## A New Wave of Indigenous-Led Conservation

Matt Munson, in an interview with CBC following the release of the final plan in April 2022, said that Dene Tha' felt blindsided by the exclusion of any mention of an IPCA at Bistcho Lake or of a process that might eventually lead to one. The subregional plan outlines a diverse range of hypothetical activities on behalf of industry, such as potential new access roads and forestry cut blocks, but no mention of any possible Indigenous-led conservation initiatives. This is why DTFN are no longer looking for Alberta's approval to proceed with their own plans for

protecting Bistcho Lake and the surrounding area. Munson says that Bistcho is the last area in Dene Tha's Traditional Territory that hasn't been destroyed by settlement and development. Alberta's jurisdiction in the area is governed by Treaty 8, and the lake and surrounding area are the only place left for the government to honour their agreements. If Alberta doesn't uphold their side of Treaty 8, then Dene Tha' may no longer recognize Alberta's authority at the lake. This situation echoes the sentiment of First Nations across Canada who are taking it upon themselves to protect their traditional lands with greater urgency than government bureaucracy allows for.

In September 2021, the hereditary chiefs of the Gitanyow First Nation signed a unilateral declaration to protect 54,000 hectares of land and water of Gitanyow territory, and in November 2021, the Mamalilikulla First Nation unilaterally declared their own 10,416-hectare IPCA on their Traditional Territory just north of Vancouver Island. More recently, in June of 2022 the Kitsoo Xai'xais First Nation declared an Indigenous-led Marine Protected Area (or MPA) at Kitasu Bay in the heart of their traditional lands for the purposes of community health, culture, and economy. Around the world, Indigenous lands occupy only 20 percent of the land, yet these communities steward

almost 80 percent of our remaining biodiversity. Indigenous-led conservation seems to be one of the best remaining tools that can prevent the destruction of wilderness at the hands of extractive capitalism and governments unwilling to interfere. The Dene Tha's ambitions for Bistcho Lake could provide another example within an Albertan context.

For Dene Tha' to begin reasserting their inherent sovereignty over their Traditional Territory at Bistcho Lake, they need to develop their own management plan for the region, which has included the establishment of the Guardians of the Territory (hereafter referred to as the Guardians) as a form of local compliance and stewardship body. The Guardians help to ensure that activities on the land are in-line with DTFN's goals and objectives – including boreal woodland habitat conservation and wildlife population recovery. A management plan and the Guardians program are two sides of the same coin for Indigenous-led conservation, as any effective management plan requires people-power to carry out the collection of baseline data for local ecosystems and to implement ongoing monitoring activities – both for conservation and territorial stewardship purposes. DTFN wants their data to be collected following established scientific methods while being informed by local Indigenous Traditional Knowledge



Matt Munson (pictured) is a Technician in the Lands Department with Dene Tha' First Nation. Matt and DTFN were disappointed that any mention of the possibility for an IPCA was left out of the final Bistcho subregional plan. Photo © P. Meintzer

provided by Dene Tha' community members to ensure that the management of Bistcho meets their needs. This initiative came to a head in September 2022, when a group of seventeen stakeholders comprising ten Dene Tha' community members and seven allies – myself included – made the trip to northwest Alberta to support DTFN in their efforts to protect Bistcho.

## The Journey to Bistcho

My trip north began with a three-hour bus ride from Calgary to Edmonton on the afternoon of Wednesday, September 14. Once in Edmonton, I joined up with Matt Munson (Dene name Yves Claus Didzena), the same technician from DTFN who had been critical of the Bistcho SRP and who coordinated the activities taking place at Bistcho Lake over the next seven days. Matt was accompanied by Jeremy Williams, an activist and documentary cinematographer from Powell River, BC, who had previously worked with Matt and DTFN on their original IPCA video following a previous trip to Bistcho in 2019. The three of us took turns driving along the eight-hour journey north to High Level on Thursday, where we were joined by the rest of the allies before embarking on our charter flight to the lake the following (Friday) morning. The group of

allies included me, Jeremy (Williams); Kecia Kerr – the Executive Director of CPAWS Northern Alberta, Gillian Chow-Fraser – the Boreal Program Manager with CPAWS Northern Alberta; Laura Golebiowski from the Government of Alberta's Indigenous Heritage Section of the Historic Resources Management Branch; Lauren Thompson – a fourth year PhD candidate from the University of Alberta; and Irene Fogarty – a PhD candidate from University College Dublin in Ireland. I enjoyed getting to know everyone in our group, but I found it especially nice to finally meet both Gillian and Kecia in person as I have worked with them fairly often over the past year and a half since I started my role with AWA.

All seven allies were participating in this trip through numerous projects that all intersect with (or support) Dene Tha's goals of Indigenous-led conservation at Bistcho. Jeremy's company – River Voices – was hired to film another short documentary film as a follow-up to the one produced in 2019. Kecia and Gillian have been involved with DTFN and Bistcho for many years, supporting the push for an IPCA and deploying an array of wildlife camera traps in the area to help monitor the movement of caribou. Laura was participating on behalf of the GoA to collect information on culturally important

sites to the Dene Tha', and Lauren was helping to collect water quality data as it relates to climate change, peatlands, thawing permafrost, and the release of mercury into the watershed. Irene's PhD project is focused on Indigenous Peoples' management of protected areas alongside federal and/or provincial authorities, while I was present on behalf of AWA through a grant from Fisheries and Oceans Canada that intended to improve DTFN's capacity to collect data on fish and fish habitat in their Traditional Territory. Matt somehow managed to bring all this important work together over the course of a single trip – an incredible feat of coordination on his part.

We departed from the CanWest airstrip in High Level on Friday, September 16. The flight from High Level to Bistcho Lake takes around 45 minutes, and as we climbed into the sky, we were treated to the beautiful changing fall colours of the boreal mixedwood forest spreading out across the landscape. From our cruising altitude, it became immediately evident just how widespread the issue of un-reclaimed seismic lines truly is. Seismic lines are narrow corridors cut into the forest for easier movement of survey equipment used in oil and gas exploration. On the flight to Bistcho, these corridors criss-cross the boreal forest whichever way you look and represent a significant reason why the subregion currently sits at only six percent for undisturbed caribou habitat. Seismic lines fragment the forest into a grid-like pattern, creating young (or seral) forest preferred by moose, while opening movement corridors for caribou predators such as wolves. Bistcho may seem remote when you look at a map of Alberta, but the footprint of industrial development is never far away.

## Getting Acquainted

The only permanently inhabited settlement at Bistcho Lake these days is a fly-in fishing and hunting lodge known as Tapawingo Lodge. The lodge has been owned and operated by husband-and-wife couple Steve and Debbie Overguard since 2006, and since their livelihood depends on visiting hunters and fishers, they both care deeply about protecting Bistcho Lake



*Seismic lines (pictured) are narrow corridors cut into the forest for the movement of survey equipment in oil and gas exploration. These features need to be reclaimed within caribou ranges for Alberta to meet the 65 percent undisturbed threshold for caribou recovery. Photo © P. Meintzer*

and the wildlife that calls it home. Tapawingo Lodge features a series of cabins with basic amenities (i.e., running water, gas-powered ovens, wood-burning stoves, limited WiFi internet etc.), and a large dock on the lake with more than ten small aluminum outboard motorboats for use by guests. Upon our arrival at the lodge, we organized ourselves into cabins – myself with Matt and Jeremy again – and immediately headed down to the dock for boat safety and lake orientation. After practicing our boat skills until we all felt comfortable navigating the water, we then spent the remainder of the daylight helping Jeremy capture some video footage for his documentary.

The following day was marked by the arrival of the Dene Tha' community members to Tapawingo Lodge. These eight Dene Tha' drummers were invited to participate in the trip to Bistcho Lake as a way to reconnect and bring drumming back to their traditional land, as well as to assist with any scientific data collection being conducted by the various allies, which could then be guided through their input of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge. This also formed part of the effort by DTFN to build out their Guardians program within their own community. This group included Roy Salopree, Joe and Gordon Pastion, Felix and Kyle (Sonny) Seniantha (Felix had actually traveled with us the day before), Thomas and Doyle Ahkimmachie, Floyd Apannah, and Lawrence Denechoan. Many of the community members who joined us have connections to Bistcho Lake, whether through their own personal experiences or through relatives and/or ancestors, while others had never stepped foot on their Traditional Territory until that day. For example, Roy had last visited Bistcho Lake in 2019 when the first IPCA documentary was filmed, while Lawrence told me that he hadn't visited in 25 years. Including Matt, this brought together seventeen partners – ten Dene Tha' and seven allies – to collaborate on this single trip.

After a quick round of introductions, the Dene Tha' moved into their lodgings and we all reconvened down at the lakeshore for a ceremonial prayer and tobacco offering for good luck, good health, and

for everyone's safety during our stay at Bistcho. The power of this ceremony was immediately evident as a fish leaped out of the water just as Roy had finished saying his words which seemed like a sign of good luck for the days ahead. The calmness of this spiritual moment served to contrast the rather comical chaos which was soon to ensue as we attempted to carry out our fieldwork.

## Fieldwork Peculiarities

As we learned later in the trip, there had been a slight miscommunication between the organizers and the community members regarding the overall intent of the trip. The drummers thought that they were only there to spend some time on the land, do some fishing, maybe some hunting, and to perform their drumming for the rest of the participants – rather than play an active role in the data collection that needed to take place. The remainder of the trip became a case of chasing the Dene Tha' community members around the lake and encouraging them to collaborate on each of the research projects being conducted by the group of seven allies. Most of the work got done in the end, but every deliverable might not have been executed exactly as outlined to our various funders.

Using my own experience as an example, after lunch on Sunday, September 18, it became evident that the DTFN community members were planning to imminently depart to do some fishing near a small island to the west known as Dog Island. Meanwhile another group consisting of the rest of the allies plus Matt, Thomas and Felix were planning to visit the camera traps that had been previously deployed by CPAWS (Gillian and Kecia) on the island closest to Tapawingo Lodge. The day was looking like my only opportunity to get out with the Dene Tha' to collect fishing data, so while the others got ready for their trip to the cameras, I quickly hurried down to the boats and joined Roy Salopree – the eldest of the community members – and we set off in pursuit of the community fishermen. Despite the mayhem, this day ended up being one of the real highlights of my trip to Bistcho as I got to spend an entire afternoon – almost six hours – alone in a boat with one of the community elders.

As someone who cares deeply about advancing reconciliation, I hope to avoid the same mistakes that have been made throughout our colonial history including those of parachute journalism. This means that I will refrain from sharing intimate details of my discussion with Dene Tha'



*I had the privilege of spending an afternoon on the water with Roy Salopree (pictured) as we followed other Dene Tha' community members and collected data while they fished. Roy shared his childhood memories of Bistcho with me, and we talked at length about his hopes for protecting the lake and the surrounding area. Photo © P. Meintzer*



Four northern pike (*Esox lucius*), locally known as jackfish, that were caught by Dene Tha' community members during our afternoon of fishing on Bistcho Lake. Photo © P. Meintzer

community members without their consent, while still trying my best to express the ideas that were shared during our conversations that week. I do not wish for any of the information shared with me to be used in a way which might exploit the Dene Tha' any further than they have already experienced at the hands of settler colonialism and extractive capitalism.

Roy and I discussed at length our shared hopes and dreams for the preservation of Bistcho's wilderness including the surrounding watershed. Roy expressed to me his sadness at the loss of Traditional Knowledge that would have once existed about the lake such as shared names for locations which would have aided navigation while traveling the area. He likened this to losing one's own place within the broader cultural history of the land. The discussion then touched on the idea of Dene Tha' Guardians who could collect data and conduct monitoring activities around the lake and surrounding area. He feels that we need to start collecting data for all parts of the lake and its ecosystem to better understand our current situation – what western science would refer to as establishing baselines. Roy insisted that the data be collected everywhere because maybe we will find important cultural areas. We need to understand the needs of every little tree, because to understand where a tree is

going helps tell us where we are going as well.

After about an hour of travel by boat, we finally caught up with the others at Dog Island and I was able to successfully identify (to species) and measure some fish between there and another spot known as Jackfish Point. The community members managed to catch 12 fish over the course of the afternoon – nine northern pike (*Esox lucius*), locally known as jackfish, and three walleye (*Sander vitreus*) known as pickerel. Roy also explained to me that the lake contains a few other species of fish which he called losh (burbot), whitefish, bluefish, and suckers which I assumed to be some form of sculpin. The data was then uploaded to Dene Tha's Survey123 mobile application which was designed for the specific purpose of collecting cultural and ecological data across their traditional lands. The mobile application uploads newly collected data into a database which you can then view as GPS points across a map of the landscape. The intent of the application is to give DTFN community members a chance to engage in a form of citizen-science, and to give them a sense of agency with collecting and reporting the data that is important to them.

### The Best Monday Ever

Following breakfast, the next morning, all 17 of us gathered in a small wooden

gazebo, centrally located within the cabins at Tapawingo lodge, for presentations by allies on their various projects and to foster a group discussion around the issue of protecting Bistcho Lake. This was the first time during the trip where allies had the opportunity to provide a clearer explanation of our work, and what specific data needed to be collected over the course of the trip. After each presentation, there was an opportunity for questions, and for the Dene Tha' drummers to provide their opinions or suggestions for the work being conducted. One concern that was shared by the community members was the need to educate others within the DTFN community on the issues facing Bistcho Lake – especially youth. They also felt that DTFN's Chief and Council need to be included in the planning and implementation of any initiatives for the protection or conservation of Bistcho Lake to ensure that there is buy-in and approval from those in leadership positions. There was a lengthy discussion about the hurdles to protecting Bistcho, including a seeming lack of interest from the Government of Alberta, the difficulty enforcing reclamation back to pristine conditions, and how settler-colonial laws – specifically those around resource ownership and development – can make progress seem impossible at times. Despite these concerns, the meeting ended with a collective sense of optimism for the future of Bistcho and the work being done by all parties, with both Roy and Gordon expressing their hopes to eventually rebuild a Dene Tha' community at Bistcho where people could live and support themselves again.

This sense of unity and optimism seemed to carry forward and permeate the remainder of our trip. I say this because on that very same afternoon, after we had spent the day visiting the Bistcho Indian Reservation, the community members spotted and killed a moose on their way back to Tapawingo Lodge. According to the drummers, this moose was a two-year old buck (or "yearling"), and the successful hunt signalled the start of an evening of celebrations on our final night together before the community members departed the following (Tuesday) afternoon. As



*Traveling upriver as our group departed the Bistcho Lake Indian Reservation back to Tapawingo Lodge on our final day together with both allies and community members. Photo © P. Meintzer*

someone who has never witnessed a moose kill before, I was surprised by how quickly and efficiently the community members were able to gut and clean the animal in preparation for cooking – less than an hour from first cut to barbeque. That evening I had the chance to sample both barbequed moose shoulder as well as boiled moose ribs (the ribs were far superior) and given the massive environmental footprint and animal cruelty issues associated with modern industrial farming, it felt good to eat wild-hunted meat by comparison.

The celebrations didn't stop after supper as the party eventually made its way back to the gazebo where we had the opportunity to participate in Dene Hand Games. Hand Games are a traditional Dene game where two teams line up kneeling across from each other – in this case five people per team. Each participant carries with them a small token or object like a pebble, and the objective of the game – at a very high level – is to hide your token in either your left or right hand while a “shooter” on the opposition team guesses where it's hidden. The game is played to the music of continuous drumming, which creates a dance-like, rhythmic, performative atmosphere. The score is kept using sticks which are exchanged as the shooter guesses which players and/or hands are hiding the tokens. I found it difficult to keep track of the diversity and combinations of hand signals used to designate who and/or which hands is being selected

by the shooter, but it kept me entertained as I struggled to learn through watching the others compete.

Hand Games can last for quite a long time, so at one point I decided to take a stroll down to the lake and admire the stars in the clear night sky. While we were there, Jupiter was clearly visible with the naked eye, and it was so bright that it even cast a reflection across the surface of the lake – like the moon sometimes does on a calm night. As I turned to head back to the lodge, I noticed the beginnings of the *auroa borealis* to the northeast of the lake. The northern lights had been visible a few nights earlier at around two o'clock in the morning, so most of us had missed them, and once the Hand Games had finished, most of the others had joined me down on the dock to watch the show. What happened next was one of the most incredible and also one of the most unbelievably cliché nature moments someone could ever imagine. Picture this – a clear starry night over the lake, the water dead calm reflecting the stars. Jupiter rising to the southeast with a dancing aurora to the north. There were around ten of us down on the dock, all watching in perfect silence, and suddenly an opera of wolf howling broke out across the lake. First from the northeast and in the direction of the aurora, and then two or three more groups of howls from the south and the west. I was so grateful to experience that moment with that group of people because – other than them – nobody will every

believe me when I tell them this story. I joked with everyone afterwards that this was the best Monday I have had in ages. It's experiences like this that remind me that we need to protect these places for so many reasons. For the clear night sky, for a space of genuine silence, for the wolves and the trees, and for people – us and future generations – to enjoy in perpetuity.

## **Forward Momentum**

Monday evening felt like the emotional climax of our trip to Bistcho, as the Dene Tha' community members departed on Tuesday while the rest of us rushed to complete the last of our deliverables. I spent most of the day providing boat assistance; in the morning with Lauren and Matt as they collected water quality samples near Dog Island and the Muskeg River, and in the evening to help Jeremy collect footage for the documentary while Matt deployed wildlife audio recording units in various locations. It was an emotional goodbye for everyone involved when the Dene Tha' had to depart from the lodge, as people took turns sharing their feelings of gratitude for each other and for this amazing experience we shared together. I feel incredibly grateful that I had the opportunity to learn from the Dene Tha' about Bistcho Lake and about their connection – both past and present – to the area. Wilderness places exist as more than just ecosystems and biodiversity. The land also serves an important socio-cultural purpose that connects

people like the DTFN to their ancestors and their history. I hope that I was able to express my gratitude during our goodbyes to one another and I hope that this article and my future actions help in some way to protect both the ecological and cultural values of Bistcho Lake.

I care a great deal about the work that I get to do as part of Alberta Wilderness Association. I know that the work we do to help protect and conserve Alberta's wilderness and biodiversity is important, and I am grateful that I get to do work that's in line with my own personal values. That being said, I feel like my experience at Bistcho might have been one of the few times in my relatively short career where I have felt such a strong emotional attachment to my work. My trip to Bistcho has left me with a stronger sense of obligation towards a specific place and supporting the people that call it home. The attachment I developed for Bistcho makes me feel like I have a stake in the struggle of the Dene Tha' because I want Bistcho to exist in a way so that all people and future generations may have the chance to experience the same joy that I did from that place.

Although I still hold out hope for a different future, if we are going to continue under this colonial regime of extractive capitalism, then Indigenous communities



*Experiencing the beauty of genuine wilderness places firsthand helps to create a sense of attachment to these wonderful places. At Bistcho we experienced the northern lights (pictured) on many occasions, and on one such night it was accompanied by a chorus of wolf howl around the lake. Photo © L. Thompson*

expressing their sovereignty over their traditional lands (and wildlife, foods, medicines, etc.) seems to be the most powerful tool to genuinely expand protections for wilderness. The experience I shared with the Dene Tha' helped to renew my own commitments to reconciliation and reinforces the need for the environmental movement to centre Indigenous voices, to support Indigenous sovereignty and Traditional livelihoods, and to fight for the protection of Treaty

Rights in all the work that we do. This trip was only the beginning of something greater that the Dene Tha' are hoping to build towards and I'm looking forward to supporting them in whatever way I can. I have been formally invited to return next year as an honorary Guardian, and as a Guardian I am now obligated to fulfill my duties to the land and to the Dene Tha'. I'm excited for what the future holds, because Indigenous-led conservation is our best way forward. 🐾



*The Guardians of the Territory. A group photo of everyone who was present during our time at Bistcho Lake, including Dene Tha' community members, allies, and Steve and Debbie from Tapawingo Lodge. Photo © River Voices Productions & J. Williams*