

THE HISTORY

Historically there have been many fires in the Fort Nelson First Nation territory, some natural and some man-made, including one notable wildfire in 1942 that was so intense it blocked the sunlight for one month and left an ash layer 2-inches thick. This made travel extremely difficult, especially on the river.

Family participation varied in age and gender in regards to burning practices, but there are a number of themes that were acknowledged in every interview, including:

(1) Fire is a necessity, (2) The art of tending fire should be taught at a young age, and (3) Fire is a serious and respected art to the Dene people.



The Dene have a long-standing cultural interaction with fire. Fire is a vital practice that must be continued and passed down to our future generations.

Dene Fire Project Research Team:



Leloni Needlay
Eva Needlay
Katherine Wolfenden
Sonja Leverkus



In memory of
Charles Dickie

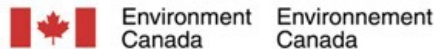
For more info, please contact:

The Dene Interaction With Fire:
A Traditional Perspective Amongst
Recovering Wood Bison Populations

Shifting Mosaics
CONSULTING
Natural Resource Ecology and Management

PO Box 3857 | Ft. Nelson, BC | V0C 1R0
Tel: (250) 774-5069 | Cell: (250) 709-5118
E-mail: shiftingmosaicsconsulting@gmail.com

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THE DENE FIRE PROJECT



Fire Teachings

The relationship between Dene people and fire is culturally complex, and dates back thousands of years. Its use in facilitating communication may be a practice from a bygone era, but many traditions that live on to this day include use of fire in:

- Supporting fertilization and re-growth of vegetation
- Hunting and survival
- Comfort and aesthetic practices
- Ceremony

HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY USES:

Grass Burning and Clearing:

Burning eliminates duff, dry tinder, fuel, and brush to prevent the risk of wildfire, and also burns up thorny plants and stinger bushes. Trails and areas around settlements were burnt to keep them open and made traveling much easier.

Vegetation Re-growth:

Burning provides good re-growth and grazing areas for animals such as: rabbits, birds, deer, moose, elk, bear, and horses. Animals appear to eat the new growth after the fire within 2 weeks. Fire produces more berries such as strawberries, saskatoon and raspberries. Because ashes from the fire act as a fertilizer for the plants, vegetation grows vigorously after a fire.

Aesthetics:

Burning was used to keep the area clean and clear around village sites and hunting areas.

Spiritual/Ceremonial:

One elder suggested that when you feel bad you should go around the fire, as it helps your spiritual well-being. Fire is important for ceremonial gatherings, as well as the offering of food to the fire.

Hunting:

Burning along the rivers would produce willows and new growth that would entice moose and deer to the area. Burning would also provide sightlines which would make hunting easier.

Protection from Animals and Insects:

Fire was used to maintain and clear areas so that approaching predators such as bears could be seen. Smudges were built to discourage mosquitoes and flies from humans and horses. Fire was also used to prevent mice infestations.



Warmth and Cooking:

Fire was used to smoke and dry meat like moose, beaver and fish. Fire was also used for tanning hides and cooking.

Communication:

Campfires were used as indicators that people were in the area as well as smoke signals were sent to communicate between groups.

Light:

Candles were made out of moose grease, birch bark and poplar roots. Fabric and buttons were also used with animal fat to create make-shift lamps.

AREAS WHERE PEOPLE BURNED:

The Dene people traditionally burned hillsides and hay meadows, around cabins and camp sites to keep areas open for various reasons listed throughout this brochure. They were always careful not to burn near bear dens, fox holes or bird nests.

Some of the specific locations that were traditionally burned include: Fontas, Old Fort, Kahntah, Nelson



Forks, Snake River, Sikanni River Hills, Muskeg Creek, Pettitot River, Francois, and Maxhamish Lake.

TOOLS USED TO CONTAIN FIRE:

Some tools used by the Dene people to control fires include:

- Pails
- Buckets
- Hoses
- Wet towels and blankets
- Gunnysacks
- Shovels
- A sheet of plywood.

CONDITIONS TO START A FIRE:

People burned in early spring while snow was still on the ground. Most typically, burnings were practiced in the afternoon or evening, in low wind. Fall burns were rare but were done to burn off dying grass.

HOW TO START AND MOVE A FIRE:

- Dene fire recipes include: matches, bow flint, rocks (flint), magnifying glass, folding grass together in bundles (gasoline was never used to start fires).
- Birch, dry spruce twigs and fungus were used as fire starter.
- Some methods for transporting fire were: Smouldering diamond willow fungus with grass wrapped around it and hot coals in a bucket.
- Rotten wood was used for smudge and hide tanning fires whereas alder was used for cooking.

“Naturally occurring fires, including Dene fires, should be let to burn as long as property and lives are safe.”

Dene fire is naturally occurring because the people are part of the ecosystem.