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**Research of the Doig River First Nations**

The Doig River First Nations Band is a member of the Treaty 8 First Nations. The members of the Treaty 8 First Nations include: Blueberry River First Nations, Fort Nelson First Nations, Halfway River First Nations, Mcleod Lake Indian Band, Prophet River First Nations, Saulteau First Nations, West Moberly First Nations and Doig River First Nations (Treaty 8 First Nations 2011). The Treaty 8 First Nations are located in north eastern British Columbia spreading from Fort Nelson in the north to Mcleod Lake in the south. For the purpose of this research assignment I will be focusing on the Doig River First Nations who currently reside on the Doig River Indian Reserve #206 approximately 30 km northeast of Fort St. John. The Doig River First Nations are one of four Dane-zaa communities, also referred to as Beaver Indian communities, located within the Peace River area. The Doig River First Nations band is composed of approximately 220-262 members. Of these members it is estimated that half live on the reserve. There are two reserves located on 1358.1 hectares of land. The land surrounding their community is rich in natural resources such as major oil and gas deposits. Known as strong hunters, their traditional hunting and trapping grounds extend in all directions outwards from their current reserve at Doig River.

The Doig River First Nation’s language is called Dane-zaa Záágéʔ which translates to “people-regular language” in English. It is also referred to as the Beaver Language. This name was given to the Doig River people by the Europeans during the fur trade. The Dane-zaa Záágéʔ language belongs to the Dene (Athabaskan) language family which is one of the largest in North America (First Peoples’ Language Map of British Columbia 2011). Currently, approximately 50 Doig River members are fluent and 200 somewhat understand or somewhat speak the language. However, English is the primary language of most Dane-zaa children and many of the adults in the community. This is a result of children being sent to government schools in the 1950s. A consequence of being orally based is that as fluent speakers pass away the language becomes increasingly endangered. In order to revitalize the Dane-zaa Záágéʔ language, Marshall and Jean Holdstock conducted orthographic work with the community (Doig River First Nations 2007). Since 1962 they have worked with fluent speakers at Doig River to analyze the sound system of the language in order to develop a writing system for it. Moreover, a Beaver Literacy Project was established between 1976 and 1994 and a dictionary and a number of introductory books were produced at this time. In 1999 the Beaver Literacy Project made materials available for use on computers. The community has also worked with the North East Native Advancing Society (NENAS), and with help from the Holdstocks, produced An Introduction to Conversational Beaver. Language experts continue to work with the community and linguists to document the language and keep it alive and well. In particular, the community members are documenting fluent elders telling stories, which are then being posted on the community project website.

Referred to as prophets in European cultures the Dane-zaa had what was called Dreamers whom received songs from Heaven in their dreams. These Dreamers would then draw their visions on tanned moose hides and on the skins of their drums. Now a days, elders and youth can look at these old drums and identify symbolic images and relate them to images that are central to their Creation Story. The dreamers received their visions in a variety of places due to semi-nomadic lifestyle, which has them moving season to season. They traveled throughout the Dane-zaa territory hunting moose and other game, trapping fur-bearing animals and harvesting plants and berries (Doig River First Nations 2007). Although the last Dreamer died in 1796, the Dane-ẕaa Song keeper, Tommy Attachie, and the Doig River Drummers continue to perform the Dreamer’s songs in order to provide strength to the Dane-zaa people help them face the challenges of today and their memories of the past.

 Prior to the mid 1950s the Doig River First Nations traveled seasonally within the Peace River country to hunt, gather and socialize with the other Dane-zaa groups. Soon after 1793 Simon Fraser and David Thompson crossed west of the Rocky Mountains thereby welcoming British Columbia to the fur trade (The Fur Trade 2007). In 1794 the Rocky Mountain fort was established in Dane-zaa traditional territory stimulating the Dane-zaa people’s participation in the fur trade. It was at this point that European culture slowly started to make an impact on the Dane-zaa people’s traditional way of living. Moreover, construction of the Alaska Highway across Dane-zaa traditional territory also caused a dramatic lifestyle changes. The Alaska Highway was constructed during World War II by the US Army Corps of Engineers. Following the end of the war, the highway allowed for the arrival of settlers and developers into the land. As a result, the Dane-zaa people were forced to settle on the reserves and send their children to government schools. In addition, the Department of Indian Affairs sold their first reserve at [Gat Tah Kwą̂](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Danewajich/english/places/montney.php) (Montney) forcing them to move further north to the land on Doig River, which is where the community is centered today. Having to settle down and live within the reserve eliminated their ability to live entirely off the land. At this point, the members were very restricted in terms of what they could and could not do. Settlers and developers actually threatened their control over their land base. Not being able to utilize their land and its resources in addition to the decline in the fur trade meant the loss of the Doig Rivers livelihood through trapping. Moreover, the Doig River members were stripped of many rights and forced to live in sub-standard houses that were provided by the Department of Indian Affairs for many years. Struggling to live in a growing non-aboriginal community, a lot of the Doig River First Nations people turned to alcoholism and depression.

In 1900, the original Treaty 8 was signed with the purpose of preserving their land and natural resources from outside interests. The establishment of Treaty 8 was to provide the 7 of the 8 (excluding Mcleod Lake) First Nation Bands Members with a voice in discussions with BC and Canada outside of the treaty process. The Treaty was originally a treaty settlement negotiated between the Government of Canada and the First Nations in northern Alberta, northwest Saskatchewan and the southern Northwest Territories (Treaty 8 First Nations 2011). It wasn’t until 1899 that it was extended into BC to include the 8 First Nations bands in the northeast corner of the province. As of recent, Canada has accepted the treaty land entitlement claims of the Doig River First Nations. Since 2005, Treaty 8 First Nations have signed oil and gas consultation agreements with the province to increase clarity in the consultation process. On May 20th, 2010 Chiefs from three Treaty 8 First Nation bands, including Doig River, signed a final agreement which united the amended economic benefits agreement with resource management agreements. This final agreement affirms a new and ongoing relationship between the Treaty 8 First Nation bands and Canada for the purpose of maintaining mutual respect and understanding between the two parties.

 Revitalization of the Doig River First Nations community started in 1998 when they were compensated for their loss of their mineral rights at their original reserve at [Gat Tah Kwą̂](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Danewajich/english/places/montney.php) (Montney). Compensation for the loss of mineral rights in combination with recognition of wrongdoing has been very important for the renewal of the Doig River community. Furthermore, building of the Cultural and Administrative Centre in 2003, confirmation of their right to hunt throughout their traditional territories and development of The Project has been very good for the community. The cultural centre includes a museum, gym, administrative and health care offices, community gathering spaces and outdoor rodeo grounds. The purpose of the centre is to provide a place to gather and to dance to their dreamers’ songs and where they meet politicians and developers so that they can assert their right to their land. Settled on the Doig River Reserve, the band members continue to travel and hunt game throughout their traditional territory. The project is an online exhibit created by the Doig River members. The project shares oral histories about the stories, songs, people and experiences that connect them to their land. The stories introduce people to the long line of Dane-zaa dreamers thereby providing them with a strong sense of pride for their culture. Their current focus is to strengthen their economic base, improve the health of the community and maintain Dane-zaa traditions and language. Furthermore, their focus is to continue to maintain their connection to the important places around them, in addition to protecting their aboriginal and treaty rights to the land.

As a potential teacher for the Doig River First Nation’s children I believe it is very important that I am sensitive and encourage open discussion of the Dane-ẕaa’s culture, traditions and beliefs. I believe establishing the classroom as a place where we respect ourselves, each other and the community is a good place to start. Respect is a core concept in Aboriginal tradition, and I believe it should be strongly established in the classroom. I think the students would really enjoy if I or themselves invited older family and community members into the classroom on a weekly basis. For example, if we could invite an elder every Friday to share a story with the students in the traditional Dane-zaa Záágéʔ language not only would it give the students a nice break from typical school curriculum, but it would also encourage the revival of their historical language. Also, it is a common practice of the Dane-ẕaa culture to pass on knowledge and practical skills from generation to generation, so this weekly presentation would help strengthen that practice. Additional traditions enjoyed by the Dane-ẕaa community include song, dance and art. These traditions are drawn from the practices of the Dreamer’s who would share their dreams by singing, dancing and drawing (Dreamers and the Land Learning Resource 2007). I would incorporate this into this classroom in two ways. First off I would have the students practice a specific dance as a component of the physical education curriculum. I would also have the students work on the song that accompanied that dance in addition to the instruments involved. The goal of this assignment would be to perform the songs and dances to the community at the cultural centre. In order to address the art tradition I think it would be neat to incorporate it with the Dane-ẕaa tradition of change from season to season. This would be accomplished by changing the art within the classroom as the season changes. Not only would art in the classroom give the students a sense of belonging and pride, but it will also give them an opportunity to express themselves.

There is no question that the Dane-ẕaa community went through incredibly hard times in the past. As a result, I think it is very important that the students are aware of the past, and how their community has persevered. I would make sure to incorporate information on the fur trade, having to move to the Doig River reserve, government schools, and treaties, and address the implications the Alaska Highway had on the community. Moreover, I would also have the students keep up to date on the current events occurring within the community and around the world. Since they live so far north it is easy to become separated from the rest of the world, but I think it is important that they are aware of what is happening around them. Findings could then be presented orally to the class and I would make sure to encourage dialogue during this process. For myself, I think it is important that I remain unbiased during these discussions because they may be very emotional topics for some of the students. I would try and ease into it. Therefore, slowly introduce these topics, but ensure that the students understand the full story. I would make sure to highlight the respect rules prior to beginning just so that students are aware that they are in a comfortable environment and should feel free to ask questions, provide comments and voice their concerns.

I would also make sure to utilize the cultural and administrative centres gym and gathering spaces. In doing so, I would hope that it would make the students more comfortable with the building and the people of the community. Lastly, I believe that the community is doing an incredible job at promoting their culture, traditions and beliefs to the world. In particular, the development of the project website has done wonders for moral of the community. In order to help build and grow this project I would introduce the students to a variety of different multimedia resources that they could use to help contribute and potentially enhance the website even further.

**Resources**

(2007) *Doig river first nations*. Retrieved February 7, 2012, from <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Danewajich/english/project/drfn.php>

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