

DEBORAH SIMMONS (1962–2022)

Deborah Simmons grew up spending time on the land with Dene families while accompanying her father in his research on Dall sheep for the Canadian Wildlife Service. After having been born in Arizona, she moved to Fort Smith and Yellowknife, and her early years connecting with Dene families had a profound influence on her, shaping the trajectory of the rest of her life. She became intensely interested in anti-colonial thought, eventually pursuing a PhD at York University. Deb's (1996) dissertation, "Against Capital: The Political Economy of Aboriginal Resistance in Canada," sought to identify the limitations of dependency theory to understand Indigenous oppression, while also seeking to develop an alternative theory that centered Indigenous agency and traditional knowledge. Following her graduate work, Deb returned to the Northwest Territories and began working with the Sahtú Land Use Planning Board and the Déłı̄ne Uranium team, returning south only for a few years to teach Indigenous studies at the University of Manitoba. In 2012, Deb became the executive director of the ʔehdzo Got'ı̄ne, Gots'é, Nákedı̄ (the Sahtú Renewable Resources Board [SSRB]), a co-management board established by the Sahtú and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (1993:57) "to be the main instrument of wildlife management in the settlement area. The board shall act in the public interest." Over the following decade, Deb worked tirelessly with harvesters and the five Sahtú Region communities to assert SSRB jurisdiction over wildlife harvesting and develop a multifaceted program that included, among other things, community-lead wildlife monitoring and research, community-based environmental planning, and land-based training for Dene.

The energy and passion that Deb brought to her life and work was evident to anyone fortunate enough to spend time with her. Deb was able to stretch and bend the worldviews of those she worked with. She lived between two worlds and blended aspects of two cultures in her approach to activism, policy, and scholarship. She didn't understand cultures in an essentialized or static form but rather saw them as open and changing as a result of the agency of Indigenous peoples to continually create and re-create their own worlds. Her creativity and ability to re-frame perspectives enabled her to bring people together towards shared understandings. Deb's distinct worldview also drove her to push the boundaries of policy and scientific institutions by advocating for Indigenous voices and knowledge systems to play a leading role in environmental governance. Not shying away from confrontation, in her role with the SSRB, Deb advocated for wildlife harvest limits to be based on hunters' knowledge and agreements rather than set by government, challenging current management paradigms, and asserting the board's responsibilities in wildlife management.

Deb's efforts to challenge the dominance of Western institutions and ways of knowing also extended to her



Deb Simmons (Photo by Micheline Manseau).

collaborative work with scientists in academia and government. One particularly impressive example of how Deb worked to centre Indigenous voices in scientific spaces was her intervention in the biannual North American Caribou Workshop (NACW). Prior to 2010, attendees of this meeting were primarily non-Indigenous scientists and policymakers. Believing that Indigenous knowledge holders needed to be better recognized for their role in caribou research and governance, Deb advocated for a conference program that brought Indigenous knowledge and experience to the forefront. Upturning the traditional way of doing things, the conference fostered unprecedented Indigenous participation and created a more appropriate space for knowledge sharing. Deb's emphasis on cross-cultural dialogue in caribou management in this instance and others contributed to a paradigm shift among policy makers and academics. This shift included identifying intersections between Indigenous knowledge and scientific approaches, respecting Indigenous languages and traditions, and emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans, plants,

and animals in the ecosystem. It also included reflecting on the role of Indigenous youth as present and future caribou stewards, and building skills in evidence-based and culturally appropriate conservation planning. In 2018, this shift manifested in an Indigenous call to action for caribou that again brought together Indigenous knowledge holders, Indigenous organizations, scientists, policymakers, and non-profit organizations (Indigenous Statement Working Group, 2018).

Collaborating with Deb was fun, inspiring, and intellectually invigorating. Her creative thought process, equally shaped by her experiences with the SSRB and with Dene culture and by academic training, often pushed projects in new and different directions. She was a wonderful listener who loved to learn by talking to people, as her copious notes and recordings of conversations can attest. She always scheduled long meetings, and they never seemed long enough to capture all ideas. Most often, the discussions continued over walks, through lunch, or while driving to another place.

Her scholarly interventions mirrored her work in real life, critiquing how state and corporate driven governance processes sideline traditional economies by centering resource extraction and emphasizing the agency of Indigenous voices in environmental governance. Perhaps more importantly, Deb always ensured that Indigenous researchers be included in all aspects of the research process from design to analysis and co-authorship.

Deb shared her life and energy with an impressive social network of people both within and outside of the Arctic for whom she was often an inspiration. She had a rare ability to lead with passion while also displaying a humility uncommon among academics and policy leaders. She was a bright spark, able to challenge ways of thinking with energy and charm. She dreamed of establishing a “Centre of Excellence” which reflects both her passion for the North and her interest in collaborative work as she loved making connections and bringing people together.

More personally, Deb always pushed us to expand the boundaries of our work and our thinking and inspired us to look and feel beyond the status systems of academia. For us, as for many others, she was a colleague, a mentor and most importantly a friend.

Deb passed away from cancer on 28 October 2022 surrounded by family. She will be missed dearly.

REFERENCES

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