



Elder Corrections Wilderness Camp Pilot Project – Spring 2006



Introduction

The Department of Justice piloted an Elder correctional wilderness camp program in Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories, during the spring of 2006.

The purpose of the pilot project is to have inmates return to their home regions and participate in a camp with a local Elder. They learn from their own Elders on their own land.

This project is distinct from the full-time correctional camp at Kozo Lake. At the full-time camp, inmates are able to practice their own religion and beliefs, but they are not necessarily surrounded by their own land or immersed in their own culture, nor is the operator necessarily of the same aboriginal descent. In addition, the pilot project provides much more one-on-one time with Elders because the smaller number of inmates mean more access to Elders.

Charlie Tobac, Laura Tobac and Angus Shae were in charge of the wilderness camp. All are highly respected Elders in the Sahtu region who are very active in the community.



1

¹ Photographs courtesy of Department of Justice (Corrections) and Angus Shae

2006 Activities

Department staff made contact with correctional facilities to find appropriate individuals for the camp. Staff also met with the Chief, Band Manager and community members to discuss the program at length.

Fort Good Hope RCMP were essential to the project. They provided escort services to the inmates and to Corrections staff who visited the camp.

The camp opened and closed by feeding the fire. Offenders received regular one-on-one counseling with the Elders. They also took part in traditional activities such as cutting wood and getting ice for camp, keeping the camp clean, hunting, moose-hide tanning and story telling. They learned traditional skills such as:

- Tracking animals;
- Finding the best hunting grounds;
- Operating a safe camp;
- Storing traditional food; and
- Practicing the Medicine Wheel.



Results

Two offenders attended the pilot program. The offenders were sentenced territorial inmates originally from the Sahtu region. Both were very interested in participating in the program.

Offenders provided the following comments (generalized for the purposes of this report):

- The program is important and offers something I can respond to;
- The program builds confidence in my abilities on the land;
- It is important to regain knowledge I should have as an Aboriginal person;
- I should know how to survive in the bush and how to handle a snowmobile;
- I would like to spend more time in the bush once I am done my custody;
- Although I have skills in the way of the bush, I still have things to learn from Elders.

Program staff / Elders provided the following observations (generalized for the purposes of this report):

- There was a real change in the offenders during the six weeks they were at camp, and that the land did this to them;
- Offenders were nervous, quiet and kept to themselves at the beginning of the program but became much more at ease and willing to express their thoughts and emotions as the program continued;
- Offenders became more confident in their abilities on the land;
- Perhaps the program should be a little longer in duration.



Future Activities

The program was very successful and will be attempted again during the winter of 2006, as soon as the Mackenzie River is safe to travel on by snowmobile. Corrections staff are identifying suitable offenders to participate in this upcoming program.

An evaluation of the wilderness camp pilot project will be completed after this winter's program.

