

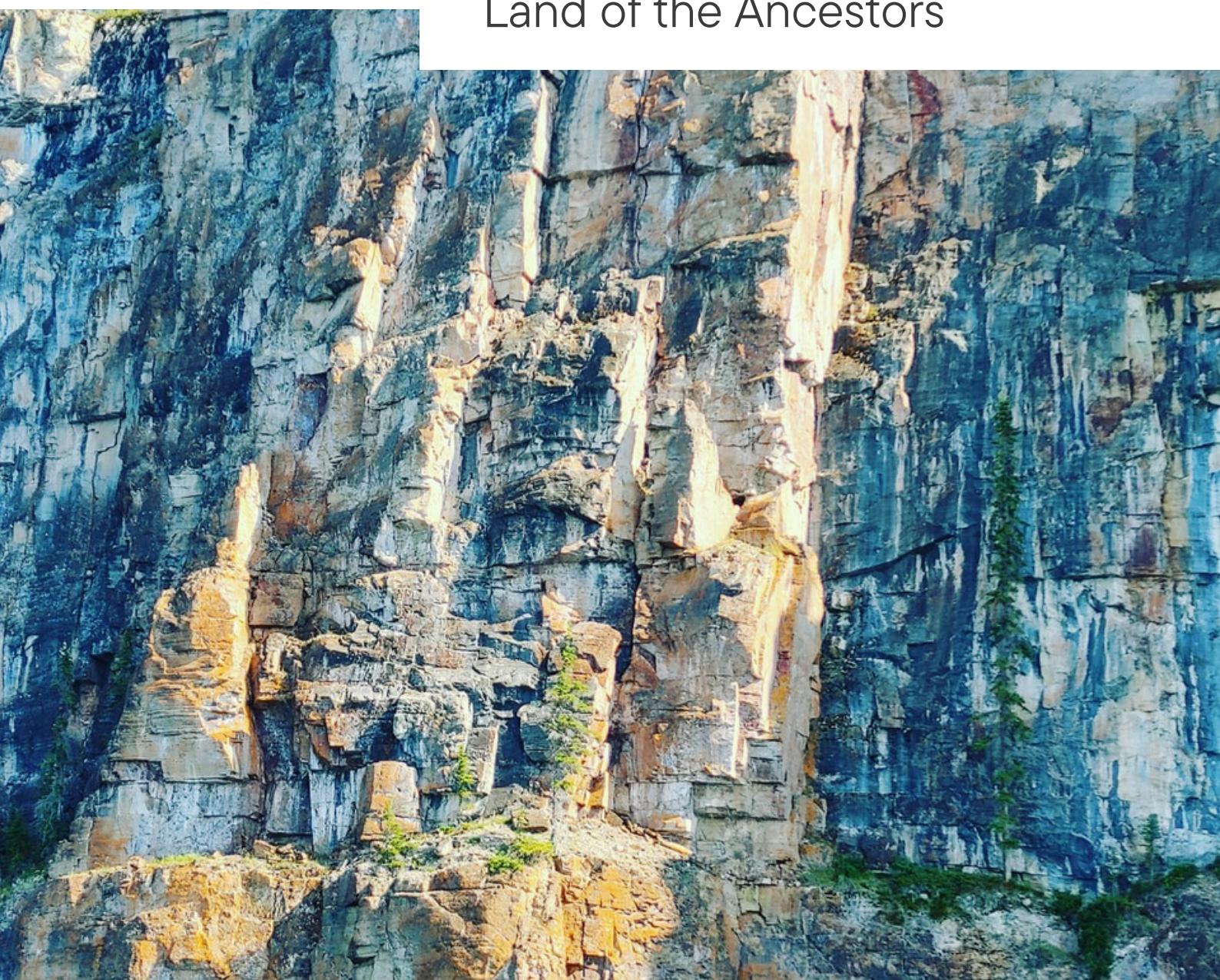


# Łutsël K'é

*The Place of Fish*

# Watchers of the LAND

Land of the Ancestors



Community Wellness Plan

2024-2029

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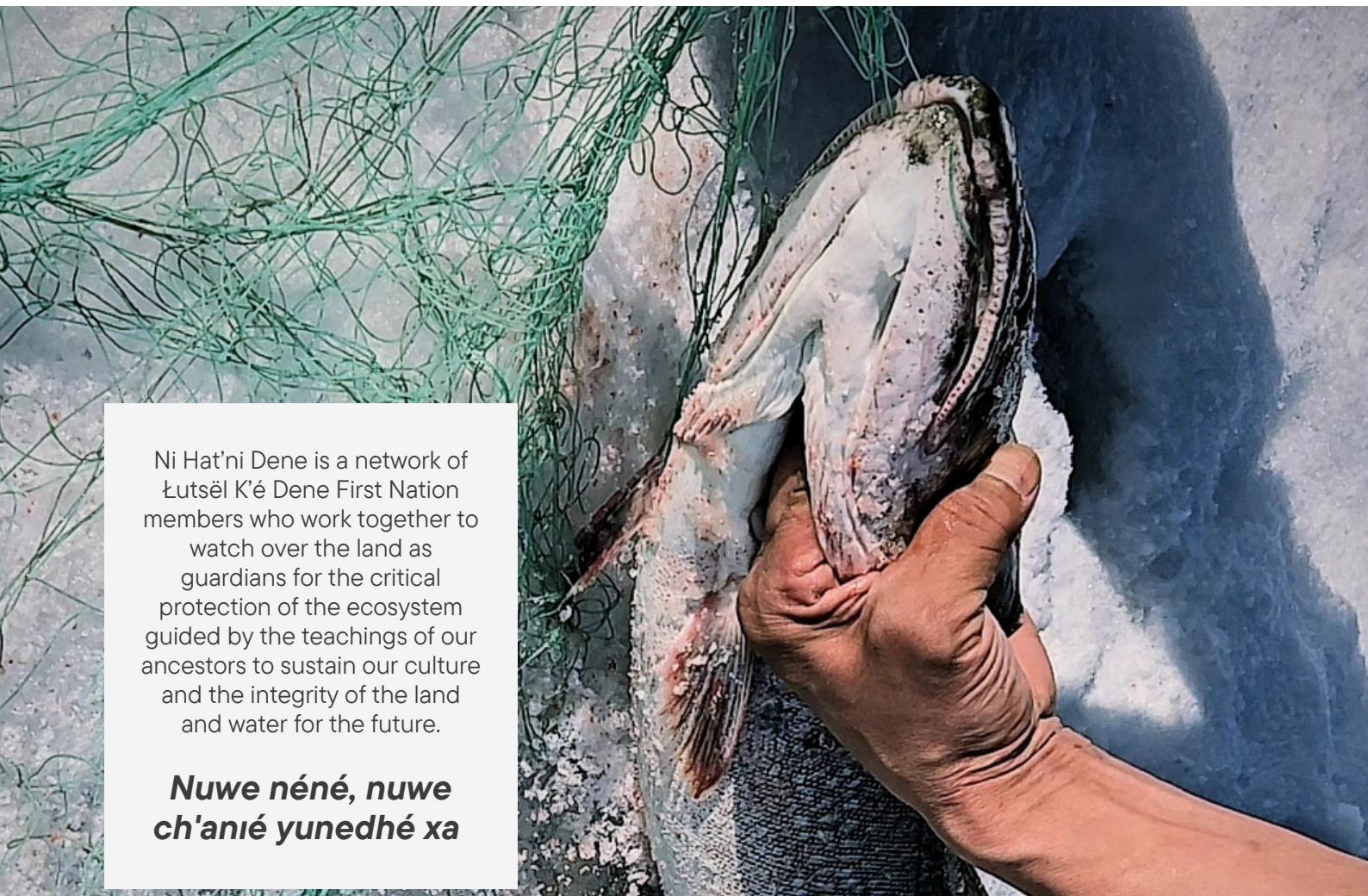
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# Introduction



Ni Hat'ni Dene is a network of Łutsél K'é Dene First Nation members who work together to watch over the land as guardians for the critical protection of the ecosystem guided by the teachings of our ancestors to sustain our culture and the integrity of the land and water for the future.

***Nuwe néné, nuwe ch'aníé yunedhé xa***

## Dënesüłiné is language (yatié), homeland and community

We the Łutsél K'é Dene First Nation (LKDFN) are an Indigenous community located in Canada's Northwest Territories. Our traditional territory encompasses the eastern arm of Great Slave Lake, known as Łutsél K'é, and the surrounding lands. Our lands are rich with boreal forests, pristine lakes, and diverse wildlife. Our community has a deep and spiritual connection to the land and water, which is integral to our cultural practices and way of life. Recently, we established Thaidene Néné, a protected area that safeguards a vast expanse of our traditional territory, demonstrating our commitment to environmental stewardship and preserving of our inherent rights and ancestral lands for future generations.

This Community Wellness Plan serves as a dynamic, living document that can and will evolve over time based on regular input from our community members. Community gatherings provide a platform for members to share their insights, concerns, and aspirations, shaping the direction of this wellness plan. By engaging in ongoing dialogue, this plan can adapt to reflect the changing needs and priorities of the community. This iterative process ensures that the wellness plan remains relevant and responsive, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among community members. Through collaborative efforts, our community can collectively work towards enhancing overall well-being and resilience.

# Mission & Vision



Since the ratification of Thaidene Nëné and signing of the Establishment Agreements, community leaders now have the responsibility of carrying out a 25-year strategic plan, developing infrastructure for ecotourism and hospitality, and creating a thriving cultural conservation industry for residents. Our vision aims to build a strong nation, uphold land protection, to see the Łutsël Ké Dene way of life thriving, and to build first-class community infrastructure.

**Nuwe néné, nuwe ch'aníé yunedhé xa**  
**OUR LAND, OUR CULTURE FOR THE FUTURE**



# Values

## BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY ECONOMY

### NETS'Í K'IZÍ BET'Á PEGHÁLADÁ



Our values are the quintessential principles of our Dene Laws and way of life which is beneficial to our people and the environment. Yet, historically, these values have not been recognized or respected by crown governments and corporations. Our deeply engrained values include a spiritual and reciprocal relationship with nature through the protection of land, water and animals for future generations.



As Łutséł K'é Dene, we rely on *zéthén* (caribou) and other wildlife in our surrounding environment for our physical, cultural, linguistic, emotional, and spiritual sustenance. Our relationship with and responsibilities to the land, water and animals are established in histories and accounts that go back thousands of years. These relationships and responsibilities are the foundation of Dënesüłiné law and our historical management systems assuring that our language, cultural practices and legacies are kept alive.



LKDFN's stewardship is focused on building and sustaining relationships not only with people but with nature through reciprocity. As industry begins to shift towards ensuring that Indigenous peoples are engaged and consulted on as partners towards more sustainable infrastructure we are looking towards innovation for the future and must ensure that our territory remains pristine and our strong relationship with nature carries on for generations.



Our community has an untapped resource in our ability to utilize the tools we need from the land to survive, which is a skill set that has transitioned many of our community members into being revered for their abilities and in turn is creating for us a future full of opportunity, including ecotourism, hospitality, outdoor education, natural resource management, and conservation research.



**Our sense of identity is rooted in our connection to the earth**

# Programs



## Elders

The loss of many Elders within our community is keenly felt, as they carry invaluable knowledge and traditions. They have taught us an abundance of lessons through story and ways of knowing and being that must be passed on to the younger generations. Encouraging Elder participation in our programs and services and utilizing their knowledge in our programs and services, whether it be through cultural wellness activities or in schools, is essential for community resilience and knowledge transfer. To help acknowledge, honor and recognize the significance of our Elders and the efforts they have made to persevere despite the hardship they have endured through their lives, including residential school trauma, we have created special initiatives specifically geared towards their needs.

Our community thrives to continue to provide dedicated housing for Elders, separate from long-term care facilities, where their comfort, safety, security and well-being can be ensured without burdening them with maintenance responsibilities which give them the time and space to contribute their valuable teachings through visiting with relatives and participating in activities with the wider community. Establishing seniors' homes or apartments can provide a supportive environment for Elders while also fostering intergenerational learning opportunities. However, the impacts of climate change continue to pose a pressing concern, affecting wellness activities and traditional practices tied to the land. Community-wide efforts are being made to address these challenges, including developing plans to mitigate the effects of climate change and ensuring preparedness for emergencies through evacuation and disaster plans where Elders and children are our main priority.

# Programs



## Adults

In the aftermath of the large fire evacuation and subsequent food shortage, the community rallied together, demonstrating resilience and solidarity in the face of adversity and expressing how we live out the Dene laws through sharing with one another and helping each other in our time of need. These challenges persist, particularly in housing shortages, which have led to a concerning number of individuals experiencing hidden homelessness. To address this, initiatives are underway to accurately assess the extent of hidden homelessness and provide support through men and women's groups, fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility.

Amidst these challenges, the community remains committed to preserving cultural traditions and spirituality. Ceremonies, feasts, and community hunts continue to strengthen bonds and reinforce cultural identity. Efforts are being made to establish a wellness center offering trauma counseling both online and in person, with a focus on healing programs rooted in cultural belief systems and practices. Moreover, initiatives to promote independence and self-determination are being pursued, including human resource development, business opportunities to stimulate the local economy, and advocacy for improved housing conditions free from mold. It is recognized that the burden cannot solely fall on the shoulders of the chief and council; community members are encouraged to volunteer and contribute to collective solutions, fostering a sense of empowerment and collaboration in addressing community challenges and we rely on the adults in our community to provide support.



# Programs



## Children & Youth

We have established a youth center which was a priority from our last community wellness plan and now serves as a safe space. Going forward we would like to continue to teach children about respect. Internet services have improved significantly in the community since star link was set up and this has caused a change in the activities of our children and youth. We would like to ensure that children are still participating in activities outside of screen time through sports, arts and building social and life skills such as learning how to budget or learning how to cook. In terms of education we want to amplify our celebration of student success and offer an after school program to incentivize student attendance. We will continue to encourage our youth to learn cultural practices such as medicine teachings, language, and invite them to attend community hunts to build up self-esteem and self worth. In order to ensure that youth and children wellness programs continue to run effectively we need key people in the community to lead the work. We will continue to find new ways to get youth more involved and attend events. To address the educational deficit and foster a sense of connection to the land and cultural heritage, we will strengthen hands-on experiences on the land, such as skinning muskrats and working with fish, to ensure that traditional knowledge is passed down to our younger generations. Teaching practical skills like meat preparation and safe travel on the land can also counteract the negative influence of technology, which has led many youth to prioritize gaming and internet use over community engagement. Moreover, it is important that there be a palpable amount of respect and kindness among children, so as to curb lateral violence within the community. Healing initiatives are urgently needed to address many issues that can surface such as mental health supports that can facilitate a more supportive and communicative environment for all.

# Major Milestones & Achievements



Thaidene Nené Xá Dá Yálti is the operational management board of the Thaidene Nené Indigenous Protected Area. Thaidene Nené Xá Dá Yálti means “the people that speak for Thaidene Nené” in Dene yati.

Thaidene Nené is an Indigenous protected area that was designated by the Łutséł Ké Dene First Nation using our Dene Law in 2019. In partnership with the Parks Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories, portions of the Thaidene Nené Indigenous Protected Area have been designated a national park reserve, a territorial protected area, and wildlife conservation area.

The Watchers of the Land maintain the integrity of cultural sites and the natural beauty within Thaidene Nené, welcome visitors and offer interpretation of the area, monitor and document visitor activity, cultural features, and the land and wildlife and transmit cultural and scientific knowledge to younger generations.



Ni Hat'ni Dene means watchers of the land in Dënesüłiné yatié. Ni Hat'ni Dene are the stewards of Thaidene Nené. They assert the Łutséł Ké Dene First Nation's Indigenous rights and authority in Thaidene Nené through their presence and activities on the land and water. Ni Hat'ni Dene crews practice a traditional subsistence lifestyle, maintaining the integrity of cultural sites, conducting environmental monitoring, and interacting with visitors to Thaidene Nené.

# Health is Wellness



Medical travel can be a daunting ordeal for our residents. The current health care system often falls short, leaving our members feeling neglected and unsupported. Poor health care experiences exacerbate the stress and discomfort that our members may be having when seeking medical treatment. Adding to the strain is the alarming cancer rates in our community, compounded by concerns over contamination of our water and land stemming from historical events and current environmental impacts. Comprehensive cancer support programs are needed so that individuals diagnosed with cancer can build a peer vital support network. Recognizing the importance of preventive measures, there's a growing interest in land-based foods to combat health issues like cancer. Embracing land based, harvested diets enriched with Indigenous medicine and locally sourced food from hunting, fishing, trapping and berry picking is a reclamation of health and decolonizing diet and our community is on the path to a resurgence of cultural well being. The wellness center should no longer be run by the GNWT but run by LKDFN.



LKDFN is embracing wellness as an expression of self-reliance and self-determination. We will continue to work together to redefine healthcare paradigms and ensure that individuals receive the support they need when facing diagnosis and medical emergencies. Essential discussions between leadership and the GNWT must be taken towards realizing meaningful change in healthcare delivery and outcomes of our community members.

Accessing traditional healers advocating for streamlined procedures and promoting the value of traditional healing practices within healthcare systems and increasing awareness about available services through a variety of prominent signage for resources, can empower communities to seek assistance when needed. Addressing mental health concerns is paramount. In small towns, accessing support can be particularly challenging due to trust issues within close-knit communities. Establishing easier access to counselors and support systems, whether through more frequent visits or virtual sessions, can bridge this gap. Additionally, integrating psychologists or therapists into community healthcare services can provide essential mental health care.



# Priorities



Priority will be given to initiatives that place emphasis on being outside, on the land, and immersed in cultural practices, as well as addressing the healing of trauma, addictions, and the effects of residential schools. Creating aftercare services for individuals returning home from treatment should be established alongside efforts to deal with the housing crisis to ensure adequate wellness within the community. Revitalizing and consistently incorporating culture, traditions, and language within programming is essential. Additionally, working towards self-determination and independence within wellness parameters is paramount. Access to counseling programs or healing centers must be increased, ensuring they are open, welcoming, and easily accessible. Barriers, such as extensive paperwork and government-run centers, must be mitigated to provide effective and immediate support to those in need.

Incorporating that national park has proved successful and this is particularly evident in the thriving tourism sector. However, housing remains a stagnant issue within the community, impacting overall wellness significantly. The lack of housing progression restricts band members from returning home despite their education and job experience, contributing to homelessness within the community. Addressing the housing crisis requires innovative solutions to prevent the burden from falling solely on leadership. Housing is a fundamental human need, and its absence impedes progress, emphasizing the urgency of finding viable solutions. Mold infestation exacerbates the housing problem, with instances of families enduring mold-related illnesses for years without adequate resolution. Advocacy efforts, including engagement with elected officials, have yet to yield tangible results. Prioritizing senior housing, such as apartments, can alleviate burdens on Elders, ensuring their well-being and relieving them of maintenance responsibilities. Additionally, the community grapples with the legacy of residential schools, recognizing the need for healing and resilience. Embracing land-based activities and cultural practices offers avenues for healing and spiritual connection, acknowledging the profound role that the land and water plays in facilitating recovery. Despite these challenges, the absence of a key roles due to a lack of capacity in the community can exacerbates the community's struggles, highlighting the need for dedicated support personal to contribute to sustainable growth. Lastly, addressing climate change further compounds these issues, necessitating proactive measures to safeguard wellness activities and community resilience against environmental impacts.



# Conclusion



This Community Wellness Plan could not have been made possible without the collective input from the community through a round of effective engagement gatherings where feasts and feeding of the fire were held. We acknowledge all those who helped to bring this ever evolving plan to fruition and will continue to revisit the plan in the years to come to ensure that it is being put to use and that our goals and targets are met and or reinvested into other areas as needs arise.