

Tłįcho Government's 2025 Dìga Harvesting Program



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Introduction

In 2019, Tłįcho Government (TG) and GNWT – Environment and Climate Change (ECC) submitted a 5-year Joint Management Proposal for Wolves (Dìga) on the Koketi Ekwò (Bathurst) and Sahti Ekwò (Bluenose East) winter ranges to the Wek'èezhìı Renewable Resources Board (WRRB). The main goal of the proposal was to sufficiently reduce dìga predation on the Koketi Ekwò and Sahti Ekwò herds to allow for an increase in calf and adult ekwò survival that would contribute to the stabilization and recovery of both herds. Field operations ended on March 31, 2024 and a technical review of the dìga management program is being conducted by GNWT and TG.

Based on recommendations from advising Elders and the decision from Tłįchǫ Government's Chief Executive Council (CEC), TG submitted a management proposal to the WRRB to continue wolf harvesting with the goal to help caribou recovery. The community-based Wolf (Dìga) harvesting program reflects TG's multi-year commitment to provide training and support for Tłįchǫ harvesters to participate in dìga management and increase their knowledge and skills for ground-based harvest of dìga.



Figure 1. Diga Harvesting crew with program manager at Mackay Lake on March 26, 2025 (left to right: R. Romie, S. Behrens, and E. Wedawin).

The traditional territory of the Tłįchǫ is vast, and the network of hunting trails extends far into every corner of our lands. The four Tłįchǫ communities of Behchokǫ, Whatì, Gametì and Wekweètì are located in the boreal forest, and the territory stretches far north of the treeline into the tundra, where many ekwǫ hunting grounds are located. The traditional land use areas of the Tłįchǫ is within the boundary known as "Mowhì Gogha Dè Niitèe," which was outlined by Chief Mowhì during the negotiations of Treaty 11 in 1921 (Helm, 1994). The traditional land consists of the area between Great Slave Lake and Great Bear Lake, from the Horn Plateau in the southwest, and as far north as the Coppermine River and Contwoyto Lake (Kokètì) (Tlicho Government, 2019). The modern treaty area of Mowhì Gogha Dè Niitèè (is described



in an illustrative map to the Tłįchǫ Agreement¹) was ratified in 2005 by the Tłįchǫ Nation and the Government of Canada. The Tłįchǫ Agreement is the first combined comprehensive land claim and self-government agreement in the Northwest Territories and established the Tłįchǫ Government's full powers and jurisdiction over 39 000 km² of Tłįchǫ lands, wildlife, and resources.

From time immemorial, the barrenland was populated with Inuit and Dene families. Several Inuit families lived and hunted along Kokètì as well as the many larger lakes further south to the treeline. From the treeline and north, Dene families lived and hunted as far north as Kokètì, and some harvested further north towards the Arctic coast. On numerous occasions, Inuit and Dene families met at many key hunting and camping locations on the barrenlands. For Tłįchǫ, an intricate network of placenames – known as the "trails of our ancestors" – established through their land use during pre-contact times reflects their generational use and intimate knowledge embedded in the biophysical and cultural landscape of key areas for hunting, fishing, and wildlife habitat (Zoe 2012)².

Following contact and expansion of the fur trade to northern Canada, Tłįchǫ families maintained their seasonal rounds to the barrenlands and travelled by canoe and canvas boat to hunt ekwǫ in summer and fall. While the women and children remained in camp, the trappers ran their dog teams along the shoreline of the large lakes further north towards present-day Nunavut. These harvesters also hunted ekwǫ and trapped dìga, white fox and wolverine throughout the winter months. When spring arrived with warmer temperatures and sunlight, the Tłįchǫ trappers and their families returned south while the ice was still strong enough to allow travel by dog team (Tlicho Government, 2019).

Since time immemorial, hozìı ekwò (barren-ground caribou) have been the main source for the Tłıcho diet; ekwò, is a keystone cultural species that connects Tłıcho to our culture, language, and way of life (Tlicho Government, 2019). Times have changed from when Tłıcho families lived on the land and travelled by dog team and canoed to the barrenlands to hunt ekwò. As communities became permanent in the 1970-80s, people started to spend less time on the land. Harvesters began using aircraft to fly to the barrenlands, instead of long journeys by canoe, to bring fresh ekwò meat back to the communities (Zoe 2012).

Over the past decade, the Sahtı Ekwò and Koketi Ekwò herds have declined rapidly necessitating significant harvest management actions. The Sahtı Ekwò population decline was determined after the 2013 survey which estimated 68,000 caribou following a herd estimate of 121,000 in 2010. Although we have been seeing this decline with the Sahtı Ekwò, we have actually started seeing the herd stabilize since 2018; herd estimates of the two recent surveys where in 2021 and 2023 were 23,200 (Boulanger, et al.,

¹ Tłįchǫ Agreement – Part 3 to Chapter 1 - Illustrative Maps - p.17

² "But we know that from before contact -- people have always relied on caribou because not only us but a lot of Aboriginal people in the north who -- who have it as a staple for clothing and shelter, and everything else. That all their trails lead to the hunting grounds, and all the placenames describe the areas where the caribou cross, where the caribou -- caribou fencing is, where the wolf dens are, and how to get there. So the placenames really tell the story about what life was back then." J. B. Zoe, Senior Advisor, Tlicho government, in Digi-Tran Inc. 2016. Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board, Bathurst Caribou Herd Public Hearing, Yellowknife, NT., February 23, 2016
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2022) and 39,525 animals (ACCWM, 2024) respectively. For the Koketi Ekw $\dot{\phi}$ herd, calving ground surveys in June 2006 and 2009 indicated significant declines in breeding females (Nishi et al. 2007, 2014), with population size declining from 128,172 (\pm 27,229 SE) caribou in 2006 to 31,980 (\pm 10,853 SE) animals in 2009 (Adamczewski J. , et al., 2020). This is concerning because in the 1980's this herd was estimated at nearly half a million animals. The most recent Bathurst calving ground survey in 2022 resulted in a population estimate of 6,851 (\pm 1,787 SE) adult caribou (Adamczewski J. , et al., 2023).

Since its inception in 2005, the Tłįchǫ Government has been playing a direct role in wildlife comanagement and has been working with GNWT-ECC and WRRB to implement actions that will help ekwǫ recover. Tłįchǫ leadership has been instrumental in developing and supporting difficult but necessary actions to support ekwǫ recovery, especially with regards to harvest management³. In 2010, WRRB determined that resident and commercial (outfitter) hunting of Kokètì Ekwǫ be closed, and that subsistence harvest by Indigenous peoples - including Tłįchǫ - be managed through implementation of a harvest target of 300 ekwǫ and a recommended 85:15 bull to cow ratio (Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board, 2010). Since 2016, a Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) of zero has been in place for Koketi Ekwǫ. For Sahti Ekwǫ, the WRRB has determined a TAH of 750 (bull only) in 2016, and in 2019 it was reduced to 193 (bull only). In January 2025 following a population survey that showed the BNE was increasing, the WRRB increased the TAH for BNE caribou to 395, bulls only (WRRB 2025). In addition to harvest management actions, Tłįchǫ Government has been strongly supportive of increased harvesting of dìga on ekwǫ winter ranges to help the ekwǫ herds recover.

Through implementation of the Tłįchǫ Agreement, the Tłįchǫ Government and citizens have been undertaking programs that emphasize their role as stewards within their traditional territory. With an emphasis on direct on-the-land activities by staff and citizens, Tłįchǫ Government has implemented three innovative programs in Ekwǫ monitoring and Dìga management, respectively. The Ekwǫ Nàxoède K'è (Boots on the Ground) program was initiated in 2016 with the objectives to examine the conditions of and health of hozìı ekwò (barren-ground caribou) on its summer range, focusing on four key indicators: (1) habitat; (2) ekwò condition; (3) predators, and (4) industrial development. The program is lead by Tłichǫ Government, with collaborative support from GNWT-ECC, and WRRB (Tlicho Government, 2021) and initial funding support provided in part by mining industry. In 2020, the Tłichǫ Government implemented the Ekwǫ Harvest Monitoring program focusing our efforts on monitoring the harvest on the Beverly ekwǫ along the Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road. Objectives of the winter road program also focuses on educating and promoting traditional harvesting laws as well as ensuring Tłichǫ harvesters are following regulations of the "no-hunting zone' (Mobile Core Bathurst Caribou Management Zone). The third

³ "And so when we had the opportunity to - to have some, what are they called, the ceremonial tags, the -- the leadership decided that we -- we should take leadership, we should -- because we're one (1) of the primary users in the area. That it's serious decline, we're in an area that's unchartered territory and that if there's going to be any recovery we need to start right away. And that was one (1) of the reasons that zero tags was probably the best option at the time." J. B. Zoe, Senior Advisor, Tlicho government, in Digi-Tran Inc. 2016. Wek'eezhii Renewable Resources Board, Bathurst Caribou Herd Public Hearing, Yellowknife, NT., February 23, 2016 Day 1 of 2 pp. 181-182.



program is the Dìga Harvesting Program. In 2019, TG had implemented the Dìga Harvesting program with the main goal to sufficiently reduce dìga predation on the Koketi Ekwò and Sahti Ekwò herds to allow for an increase in calf and adult ekwò survival that would contribute to stabilization and subsequent recovery of both herds. This report summarizes the implementation of the community-based Dìga harvesting program for the 2024/25 season.

The Wolf (Diga) Harvesting Program

Prior to the 2024-25 winter hunting season, a meeting with the wolf harvesters and advising elders took place in Behchokò on December 19, 2024. In this meeting we decided to have a small crew focus efforts in the area around Wekweètì. In the previous year, there was not much wolf activity around Wekweètì and therefore no efforts were made there that year. Upon hearing from participants from Wekweètì at the meeting, we decided that we will spend some time hunting around the area because there was observed wolf activity around the community. The decision was made to spend some time harvesting around Wekweètì as soon as our proposal was approved until the Tibbitt to Contwoyto Lake winter road was opened. Once the road opened to Mackay Lake we sent a crew to focus efforts over there.



Figure 2. Participants of programming at Wilderness First Aid training in Behchokò on January 2025.



There were many factors considered in planning this field program, but a key consideration was weather. And because weather is so unpredictable we developed contingencies. Our initial plan was for the Wekweètì hunters to travel to Behchokò by plane for safety training and travel back to Wekweètì with snowmobile, surprisingly everything went accordingly. The two hunters travelled back to Wekweètì from Behchokò immediately after completing their training and started hunting on 19 February following the WRRB's approval of the proposal on 14 February.

After hunting for a few days with no sign of fresh wolf activity, they went out to the Mackay Lake area with an additional hunter from Behchokò on a 10-day rotation. Once their rotation was done, we had three other hunters head out to Mackay Lake. The wolf hunters were set up at True North Safaris for accommodation and went out daily depending on the weather searching for wolves. This timing from when our proposal got approved until the hunters went out to Mackay Lake gave us time to hear from the caribou monitors and hunters in how much wolf activity there was in that area.

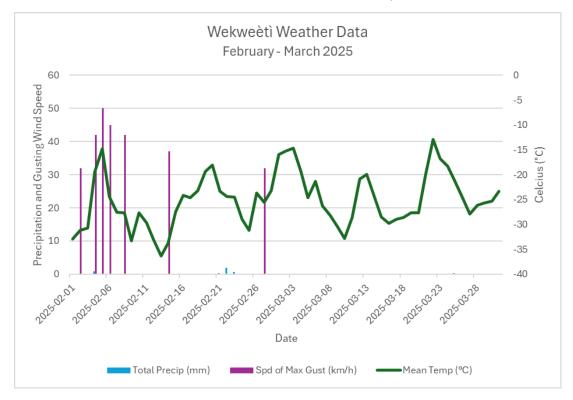


Figure 3. Weather data for Wekweètì, NT during February-March, 2025.

Figure 3 shows the mean temperatures for Wekweètì, which has a similar latitude and climate as the Mackay Lake area and therefore, the weather experienced in Mackay Lake would be similar to that of Wekweètì. Trends in daily temperature at Wekweètì ranged from -37°C to -15°C in February; normally, February is expected to be the coldest month of the year. The temperature was relatively mild, we had only a few occurrences where it was below -30°C. Earlier in February, we had quite a bit of windy days, which delayed the opening of the winter road and our start date by a few days. Typically,



when there are high winds, the winter road shuts down due to unsafe conditions from blowing snow and low visibility.

There was high anticipation from caribou hunters across the territory leading up to the Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road (TCWR). Hunting of caribou occurred as soon as the road opened until the road closed - the TCWR was operational from 4 February 2025 to 28 March 2025. We wanted to wait until the caribou hunters have hunted and left their gut piles behind to use as bait before we sent out the wolf hunters. By not sending the wolf hunters out as soon as the road opened allowed for those gut piles to build up but also allowed us to hear from the caribou monitors and hunters if it was worth while to send out hunters and where all the wolf activity was; this helped our wolf hunters determine where to focus their hunting activity.

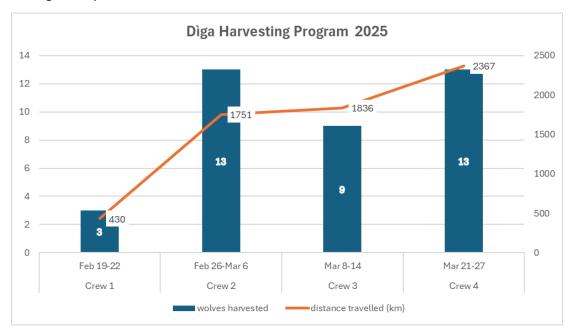


Figure 4. Data collected during the Diga Harvesting program in 2025; this includes the number of diga harvested, and the daily distance (km) travelled by hunters.

Our first crew of two started hunting around Wekweètì on February 19 and harvested 3 wolves on the first day they went out but didn't see anymore afterwards (Figure 4). One of the hunters had been a participant of our wolf harvesting program since it began in 2019 and the other hunter was new to the program. This pairing allowed the experienced hunter to share his knowledge on how to harvest and handle wolves according to Tłıçho protocols.

The Tłįchǫ Ekwǫ Harvest Monitoring Program started on February 8, a couple of days after the winter road opened. We wanted to get insight from the ekwǫ crew on abundance of dìga in the area before sending out a dìga harvesting crew. There was a lot of feedback from hunters and the ekwǫ monitors indicating that there were a lot of dìga in the Mackay Lake area. We sent out the same guys from Wekweètì to Mackay Lake where they set up camp at the True North Safaris Lodge on February 26 (Figure 2). There was an abundance of ekwǫ hunters in the area at the time, community hunts were



occurring, so there was a lot of activity occurring at that time. There were lots of gut piles left behind on the winter road and surrounding area so it was actually pretty easy hunting for the wolf hunters. The wolves were approaching areas where there was a lot of caribou hunting and they were not afraid to approach kill sites to scavenge from.

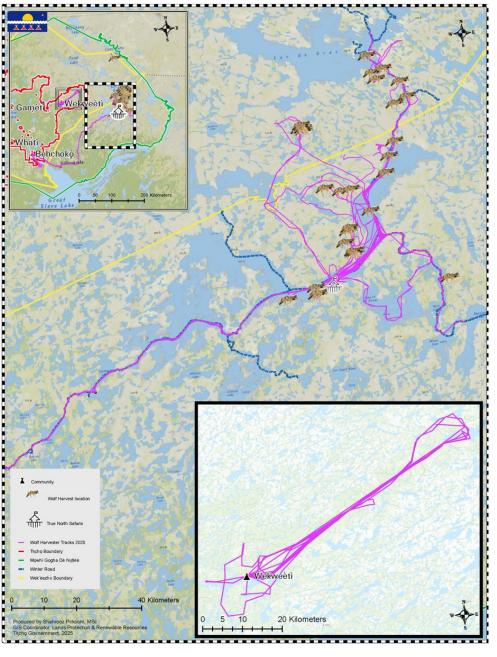


Figure 5. Harvester trails and diga harvest locations from the Diga Harvesting program, 19 Feb – 27 Mar 2025.



With the amount of ekwǫ in the area this made for easy hunting for the ekwǫ hunters as well as for dìga and so the dìga hunters focused on the area where there was heavy ekwǫ hunting (Figure 5). Initially, hunters saw many dìga seen in the Mackay Lake area. The plan was to stop hunting when the crew stopped seeing dìga or by March 14 but since hunters were still seeing dìga, we planned to send out another crew. There was a lot of activities going on in the communities such as handgames in Gamètì and Behchokǫ which made it difficult to find participants. We allowed the participants from the third crew to take time off and return after a week, only 2 of them returned and stayed till March 27th. The final crew were still seeing wolves when they left but because the Joint Ventures crews wanted to shut the winter road down, we ended our program. In total, we harvested 38 dìga for the Dìga Harvesting Program in 2025.

Diga Harvesting Program Methods

Camp Preparation

In the previous year, we used the True North Safaris Lodge (Figure 7) for as a base for diga harvesting crews. Logistically it was easier to use the lodge and so we continued to use the lodge this year so there was not much camp preparation that needed to be done. In previous years when the camp was located at Roundrock Lake, we hired residents of Wekweètì to set-up camp just before the hunter's arrival; we did not have to do that for this year.





Figure 7. A view of a couple of the cabins at the True North Safaris Lodge on Mackay Lake, NT in March 2024.

Team Dynamics

Typically, the teams consist of 8 people, which includes, a cook and camp helper, and six hunters. This year we decided to keep the crews small; we did not include any cooks for the crews. Our first crew we had 2 hunters based out of Wekweeti, doing day trips to search for wolves. Once they two hunters stopped seeing wolf activity around Wekweeti, they were sent out to Mackay Lake with another hunter from Behchoko. After this crew was done, we sent in another crew with guys from Whati and Gameti. We aimed to have youth involved in the program so that there is a transfer of knowledge. The hunters from Whati were a father/son duo. This crew went out to Mackay Lake again at the end of March while the Wekweeti guys made another attempt around Wekweeti and did not see any wolves.



Among the harvesters, there are designated roles such as a k'àowo (foreman), and a safety person. The k'àowo makes decisions including daily plans, travel routes for the day and prayers each day. The safety person is usually the designated first aid person who leads safety meetings, maintains electronic equipment (satellite phone, inReach, and GPS) and is responsible for tagging and storing of harvested dìga and must complete the harvester questionnaires provided by ECC. After each dìga is harvested, the ECC questionnaires are filled out and submitted to the program manager at the end of their rotation.



Figure 8. A safety meeting with participants of the Dìga Harvesting Program, February 2022.

Hunting Methods

Each day consists of a safety meeting (Figure 8) in the morning to plan for the day and determine hunters' travelling routes. Each crew would carry a Garmin inReach to record distances travelled (Table 1) and hunting locations and to also use as a safety communication device.

	# of Field Days	# of Hunters	Days Spent Hunting	Distance Travelled	Harvested Dìga
Year 1 – 2019/20	49	19	37	4484	3
Year 2 – 2020/21	66	15*	49	3839	32
Year 3 – 2021/22	31	12	21	3951	9
Year 4 – 2022/23	29	9	19	3778	15
Year 5 - 2023/24	17	8	17	5856	29
Year 6 – 2024/25	29	7	23	6384	38

^{*}affected by COVID-19 public health and travel restrictions



The harvesters go out by snowmobile in the morning, search for signs and look for diga. Once a diga is spotted, they start the chase. During the chase, sometimes they would break up so that they can reach the diga at separate angles and the one person with the best angle would take the shot. If the diga is wounded but still on the go, they will go after it with the kill shot. Once the diga is shot, the hunter will insert the muzzle of the gun into the diga's mouth, pay respects and thank it for its life, tag it and put into a heavy plastic bag then it is stored until the carcasses are picked up.

To follow Tłįchǫ Elders' recommended protocols, immediately after shooting a dìga it is placed into a thick plastic bag so that the dìga's blood would not spill onto the snowmachines or the sleds. Before putting the carcass into the bag, the hunter would insert the muzzle of their gun into the dìga's mouth and thank it for its life, paying their respect to the animal. The dìga carcass was tagged with the date and location of the kill. The harvesters did not want to skin the dìga at camp and so the carcasses were brought to a Tłįchǫ harvester who stored them until he could skin them at a later date. After realizing how many wolves there was, Tłįchǫ Government decided to hold a wolf skinning workshop and used the wolves harvested from the program. Ensuring that we are following Tłįchǫ protocols posed some challenges in where this workshop would be held, ensuring that there would not be any blood of dìga dropped in any of the Tłįchǫ communities as requested by advising elders. We collaborated with GNWT-ECC and held the workshop at their compound in Behchoko.

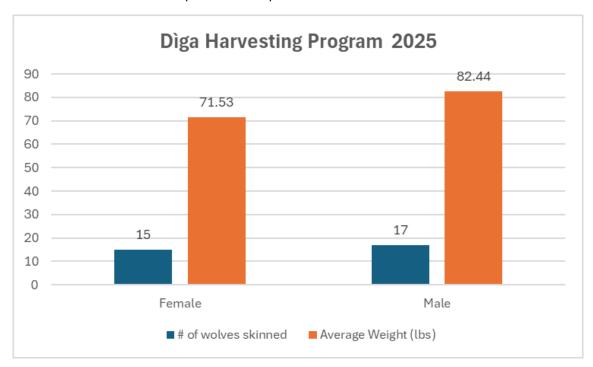


Figure 9. The number of wolves skinned and the average hide-on whole body weight by sex from the wolves harvested though the Dìga Harvesting Program in 2025.



In total, we harvested 38 wolves through our program in 2025, 32 of them were weighed and skinned. Of the 32 wolves weighed, 22 of them were skinned at the wolf skinning workshop and 10 were skinned by a Tłįcho harvester. We had harvested 15 females where the average weight was 32.4 kg (71.5 pounds) and 17 males where 37.4 kg (82.4 pounds) was the average weight (Figure 9). The skulls were given to GNWT-ECC for a tooth extraction and to get aged, we have not received the analysis of that yet.





Figure 10. Participants of the Wolf Skinning Workshop on April 2025 in Behchoko (should identify people in the pictures).

Discussion and Lessons Learned

Since Tłįchǫ Government started implementing the Dìga Harvesting Program in 2019, there have been many important lessons learned for the harvesters and the program manager. Dìga harvesting has been a practise that has not been done by many in the Tłįchǫ region. Tłįchǫ have many strong cultural beliefs about harvesting dìga. There is a very strong spiritual and cultural connection between the Tłįchǫ people, ekwò and dìga. Thus, when harvesting either species it has to be done in the most respectful way. As the Dìga harvesting program evolved, there has been many significant cultural practises that the Tłįchǫ people take pride in which has been incorporated into planning of the program. Such practises include:

- Avoid having any drop of diga blood into the Tłycho communities
- Avoid having any women at camp because it is said that a woman compels such a strong spirit especially when on their cycle that it may interfere with the harvesting of diga
- Equipment used for the Diga Harvesting Program can not be used for any other program that DCLP runs
- Pay respect to the animal immediately after the hunt by thanking it for its life

There have also been non-traditional ways that we have identified where our hunters can be more respectful and that includes using certain rifle calibers (.22-250, .243, .222) to ensure a quicker more humane kill. Although chasing an animal to kill it seems disrespectful, having a quick kill ensures they do not suffer as long. Other techniques were used to avoid chasing the animal, which includes snaring and



trapping dìga, but the fear of capturing non-target species such as ekwò is high and therefore we decided to not use snares or traps.



Figure 11. Following Thcho customs, daily prayers and feeding of the fire on Fridays were done at the Dìga Harvesting camp.

Incorporating other cultures and expertise into the program has also contributed to the learning process for the program manager. Getting advice from the Nunavut hunters and working with them has been an attribute to the program.

The success of the program heavily relies on experienced harvesters. There is a limited number of people that have this skill set. As described earlier, the Tłįcho people have strong connections to dìga and so only certain families are allowed to harvest this sacred animal. The small pool of potential participants has added complexity in planning for the program. Not only are we limited with hunters due to cultural considerations, but we are also competing with the people's priorities of hunting for ekwò. The program has also been constrained for time because the winter road is open only for a short period and hunters from the isolated communities may not be available because they prefer to travel south when the road is accessible and stock up on groceries. There are many factors that are considered each year of running this program all for the hopes of its success of decreasing the amount of dìga on the landscape with the end goal of helping the ekwò.



Acknowledgements

We extend our deepest gratitude to the harvesters whose skill, dedication, and stewardship have been essential to the successful implementation of the Diga Harvesting Program. Your knowledge of the land and the animals has shaped this program in meaningful and lasting ways.

We also honour the Elders who have shared their wisdom, teachings, and guidance throughout this process. Your leadership and cultural knowledge have grounded the program in respect, responsibility, and tradition. Your contributions continue to ensure that harvesting practices reflect both community values and long-standing relationships with the diga.

Our sincere thanks as well to the advisors who supported the development and implementation of the program. Your expertise, collaboration, and commitment have strengthened its foundation and ensured that it reflects a balance of scientific understanding, community priorities, and cultural integrity.

Together, your contributions have made this program possible, and we acknowledge your efforts with respect and appreciation.



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