

In the ethnography *We Are Still Didene: Stories of Hunting and History from Northern British Columbia*, anthropologist Thomas (Tad) McIlwraith examines talk about hunting among the Iskut people. His study is primarily interested in how language is embedded in social contexts. By looking at everyday speech, he concludes, “hunting is the central metaphor that informs Iskut culture” (McIlwraith 2012:12).

Iskut villagers are *didene*, “native,” and have ancestry in the area dating back thousands of years. Because the village is of recent, twentieth-century construction, not all villagers have the same backgrounds, experiences, or dialects. However, the one thing that all Iskut people have in common is their reliance on and identification with hunting.

In focusing primarily on communication among hunters, McIlwraith found that hunting was rarely spoken about openly and directly. Nonetheless, the use of hunting metaphor and allusion in everyday speech allows Iskut people to establish personal connections between hunters through shared experience, uniting the community. Hunters from different areas even use common structural elements while retelling stories about their hunting experiences. Talking about hunting affirms the relevance of traditional Iskut life in the modern context. Further, it allows them to assert their difference from non-Native outsiders, such as government workers or



Figure 5.2

DIDINI KIME, “YOUNG CARIBOU CAMP”

This typical Iskut hunting camp is used by multiple generations of people from the same family. Occupied as a base for caribou and moose hunting expeditions in the late summer and fall, this camp is visited throughout the year.

Credit: Thomas McIlwraith / University of Toronto Press.

anthropologists, who may claim ownership over their histories or Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK; see Chapter 14).

Cultural models at work in Iskut life establish the idea that animals, nature, and people are connected in a closely knit web. Animals should not be spoken of poorly or treated with disrespect. Similarly, the land should also be treated well, or punishment may follow. For this reason, Iskut villagers have stood their ground in an ongoing political battle to protect their native area from government-sanctioned mining exploration and development. As McIlwraith discovered, talking about hunting privileges personal relationships over economics and stewardship of the land over exploitation. In this way, talking about hunting is essential to Iskut identity.