

Dane-zaa Moose Hunt: Hadaa ka naadzet. An online exhibition project of the Doig River First Nation with support from Canada's Digital Collections Program (Industry Canada).¹

Reviewed by Patrick Moore

Over the last decade, the Doig River First Nation has sought to increase their capacity to represent their contemporary and historical cultural practices through the use of digital media and web-based exhibits. In this endeavor, the community has drawn on academic and professional resources, including the extensive documentation of Dane-zaa (Beaver) culture by anthropologist Robin Ridington dating back to the 1960s. In 2003, the Ridington family and the Doig River First Nation produced a digital archive containing over 1500 images, 600 hours of audio recordings, 60 hours of digital video recordings, as well as textual materials documenting Dane-zaa culture over a forty-year period. The Dane-zaa Moose Hunt exhibit is one product of the research being sponsored by the First Nation and is a precursor to a more ambitious exhibit on Dane-zaa stories and songs that the community is developing for the Virtual Museum of Canada. The exhibit was created by a team of young community members working in collaboration with Dane-zaa elders as well as folklorist Amber Ridington, anthropologist and videographer Kate Hennessy, and website design instructor Dan Arbeau.

The exhibit does not attempt to provide encyclopedic coverage of Dane-zaa practices and beliefs associated with the moose, but rather to provide a synoptic overview of selected topics relating to this theme. The site is organized according to five sub-themes relating to Dane-zaa culture and the moose hunt: Dane-zaa elders, hunting, meat processing, hide preparation, and Dreamers. Visitors to the exhibit are able to select the section that they are interested in and then choose textual materials, audio recordings or videos from each section. The sections on hunting, meat processing and hide processing include short videos of local elder Jack Askoty shooting and butchering a moose and of elders Margaret Attachie and Rosie Field preparing a moose hide. In the section on Dreamers, project members used Robin Ridington's archival photos and audio recordings to inform exhibit visitors about the spiritual beliefs of Dane-zaa. In the past, Dane-zaa hunters were often directed to kill moose at locations identified by *naáche* ('dreamers'), spiritual leaders who are often called "prophets" in English, and the exhibit includes songs and oratory by the late *naáche* Charlie Yahey that were recorded by Robin Ridington. The on-line resources are a valuable supplement to the published works on the Dane-zaa dreamers.

The exhibit will engage members of the general public who seek more information about contemporary First Nations cultures and indigenous use of resources and would be appropriate for use in university classes that study issues concerning the representation of indigenous cultures. Importantly, the exhibit reflects Dane-zaa approaches to education and cultural documentation. The videos of moose butchering and hide tanning include minimal narration, taking a learning-through-observation approach. Seeing a hunter sever the head of a moose might be disconcerting for some visitors to the exhibit, but such activities are an ordinary part of life for the Dane-zaa, for whom the respectful use of the animal is an essential responsibility.

¹ Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* March 12, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.wordpress.com/2007/03/12/mar200717/>. © 2007 Patrick Moore.

The project reflects the priorities of the Doig River First Nation, including their desire to assert their cultural practices and rights in response to extensive oil and gas development in the region and their desire to provide opportunities for younger community members to learn from community elders while conducting cultural projects. The exhibit is a vivid reminder of the importance of moose as a lynchpin for Dane-zaa cultural practices, one that needs to be protected from environmental degradation. The respect of the young project members for the elders they worked with is evident throughout the exhibit and each of them contributed a moving profile of a community elder who had inspired them to the section on Elders. Much of the exhibit text is written in the first person plural, reflecting a community perspective, and is integrated with the more personal first person singular voices of youth and elders who worked on the project. The text retains the voice of the trainees even as they appropriate academic terms to make them their own, as when one young woman quotes her grandmother telling her, "Always keep in mind that you are a North American Indian, and be proud of it; Help each other and work as a team."

Some features of the exhibit could be upgraded without altering the community orientation of the project. The community chose to have the community youth carry out most of the work necessary to develop the site rather than hiring outside web-developers even though this meant sacrificing some technical standards. The website is often off-line because of on-going problems with the server. The spellings of several Dane-zaa words are inaccurate, and making these spellings more consistent would be helpful for language learners from the community. Some visitors might also appreciate photo identifications and credits in sections such as "Making Dry Meat." While these details could be improved in future productions, the exhibit represents a major accomplishment for the community and the exhibit team. The "Dane-zaa Moose Hunt" exemplifies the ways First Nations are using digital exhibits for self-representation and cultural revitalization and makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of contemporary indigenous cultural practices.

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