

Dene K'éh Kusan

ALWAYS WILL BE THERE

RESTORING KASKA VALUES TO KASKA LANDS

HERITAGE & CONNECTION

The lands that are called Dena Kēyeh are alive with the memories and spirit of the Kaska Dena. The Kaska Dena are an unceded Nation of people who have lived in their ancestral lands since time immemorial and have survived, thrived, and created a culture in this place.

These lands known as the 'people's country' are 240,000 square kilometers of landscape which countless generations of Kaska have called home. This homeland includes areas in northern British Columbia, the southeast Yukon, and the southwestern corner of the Northwest Territories.

The Kaska relationship to Dene Kēyeh is born of a deep personal feeling of belonging to a region that sculpted the ideals and structures of Kaska society. Dene Kēyeh, as a landscape, is therefore intimately intertwined to a system of Kaska beliefs and values called Dene K'éh. Dene K'éh as a form of knowledge, known as "the people's way," is expressed in traditional oral narratives which are used as guiding tools for appropriate and lasting cultural behaviour. These narratives form the basis of understanding ā'ī, 'our ethics', and represents principles that generate notions of respect and reciprocity.



The Kaska Dena's relationship to the land is an elemental one. Our indigenous way of life, our identities, values, spiritual practices are all strengthened based on our physical connection to the land and all the richness within and of it. These relationships are guided by the sacred stories that taught our people how we as humans, depend on a complex web of relationships in order to live well. Dene K'éh - the compass of the original instructions of how we as Kaska Dena connect with ourselves, others, the land, and the spiritual realm is what informed our understanding of our relationships. Thus, Dene K'éh is rooted in the ecology of Dene Kēyeh.

CULTURE, LAW & SPIRITUALITY

These values and behaviors guided in Dene K'éh are our traditional laws based on the natural law of the earth which created our identity as a people and formed our spirit, thus they established our constitution. The Kaska Dena's constitution is founded on the sacred responsibilities and inherent rights granted to the Kaska by the Creator.

Through the relationships that govern our interactions with the environment and with other people, the Kaska Dena developed values and legal principles. The Kaska Dena understand themselves as stewards of the land and its resources, and it is our duty and responsibility to maintain, preserve and protect Kaska lands for present and future generations.

Within our constitution, Kaska laws are sacred and paramount. Unfortunately, many of the legal orders of our colonial history impacted the invisible line that the Kaska Dena had to the spiritual world and Dena Ah Nezen – 'our codes of conduct'. These codes of conduct were built based on hard experiences and the past learnings of our ancestors. The land in which we lived provides us with the archive of how to resolve disputes and our ancient stories described how we managed conflicts and made decisions based on the ecology and harmony of where we lived.



FUTURE PLACE OF HEALING

The Kaska have an historical and current social reality that fits a similar pattern as many Indigenous nations in Canada. Colonial structures created oppressive processes and dehumanizing policies that broke down the Kaska Dena's connection to the land and our belief systems. These colonial discourses undermined the oral knowledge of women and Elders and encouraged Indigenous children to sever culturally significant connections to their ancestral lands, marginalizing Dene K'éh.

The Kaska Dena know that in dismantling this colonial system, we need to create space to hold and reinforce indigenous ways of understanding for the survival of our communities and our Nation. Collectively we have started to restore our faith in knowing that the answers to our survival lie in our culture, our spiritual understandings, and our land-based connections. To heal this divide and recover the lost spiritual heritage we once had, we need to reconcile our relationship to the land and to each other. Our traditional laws and ways of knowing must inform our own reconciliation. Through Dene K'éh we can connect back to Dene K'eyeh.



RECONCILIATION & IPCA'S

Unfortunately, Dene K'éh, remains marginalized and is increasingly perceived as belonging to a disconnected historical past. Many indigenous communities in Canada are currently challenging the colonial philosophies in their communities in order to generate an essential healing process that reduces the disassociation from their culture, their indigenous identity, their language, and their ancestral lands. As a result, today, there are innovative approaches towards mapping attachment back to certain landscapes in order to recover our livelihood.

Due to the attachment and symbiotic relationship the Kaska people have had to the land, we have been establishing protected areas for millennia. Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA's) as a land protection initiative in Canada is a vital conservation strategy based on indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems. Through our multiple ways of knowing, we have developed our own strategies that have focused on conserving ecosystems through Dene K'éh.

Today the Kaska Dena are working on implementing our indigenous legal traditions by advancing the concept of Kaska specific IPCA's.

It is the Kaska Dena's hope that through this initiative, and respectful partnerships with others we can revitalize and reconcile the relationship we once had by using our self-determination strategies in mutually beneficial ways.

Protecting core Kaska ancestral lands that contain spiritual, social and cultural attributes in recognition of Kaska Law is our path to reconciliation. The Kaska Dena Nation's primary goal is to promote the health and wellness of our people through the cultural revitalization of our land-based connections. Dene Kēyeh is critical for us to preserve the Kaska people's material, cultural and spiritual lives. Contemporizing the traditional relationships with Dene Kēyeh is, therefore, essential if the Kaska culture is to thrive in the future. By restoring these values, we can help guide the much-needed restitution of the people to the land in our Country.

We can then heal our relationships through the reconciliation of our faith in knowing that this land will always be here and at the end of the day, so will we - 'Dene K'éh Kusān'. The harmony of this restoration will be determined by the collective vision of our government and yours.