Sea Duck Joint Venture
Annual Project Summary
FY24 (April 1, 2024 – March 31, 2025)

Project Title: What are the ducks telling us? Documenting K'ahsho Got'ine knowledge about scoters (SDJV Project # 175)

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Partners: Fort Good Hope Renewable Resources Council (Bonnie Kakfwi, President), Tuyeta Management Board (Frank T'Seleie, Elder Advisor; plus appointee), K'ahsho Got'ine Foundation (Daniel Masuzumi Sr., Executive Director)

Project Description: The project addresses two Sea Duck Joint Venture (SDJV) Priority Research Needs: (i) informing sea duck ecology and management through studies co-produced with Indigenous partners and (ii) diversifying knowledge about sea ducks to include Indigenous perspectives. Specifically, the project aims to develop and implement an Indigenous Knowledge survey related to areas historically used by two priority sea duck species (Surf Scoter; *Melanitta perspicillata* and White-winged Scoter; *M. deglandi*) during spring and summer and (ii) evaluate current use of these areas by scoters through subsequent surveys.

To begin to understand changes in Surf and White-winged Scoter distributions in areas around Fort Good Hope (Sahtú Settlement Area, Northwest Territories, Canada), this study is building on existing relationships with Dene partners, aiming to address questions related to historic and current distributions of these species by bridging Indigenous Knowledge with western science. Key activities include (i) interviewing local knowledge holders and (ii) conducting surveys of areas traditionally used for hunting, due to abundant scoter populations during the spring and early summer.

Project Objectives: To build improved partnerships, our overarching project goal is to address sea duck conservation and management concerns with Indigenous Government Organizations in the Fort Good Hope area. Together with partners, we specifically aim to develop a research framework that will achieve two key objectives:

1. To describe combined historic distributions of Surf and White-winged Scoter in culturally important areas by developing and conducting interviews with Traditional Knowledge holders; and

2. To identify areas currently used by these species by implementing traditional (ground or canoe-based) and contemporary count surveys in areas identified by knowledge holders during interviews.

Preliminary Results: In the first project year, local Elders and knowledge holders – as well as members of the Fort Good Hope Renewable Resources Council and the K'ahsho Got'ine Foundation – met with Dr. Gurney in Fort Good Hope. The meeting began with a general discussion about community concerns around scoters (locally called black ducks), which was followed by a more detailed conversation about (i) hiring a Dene Coordinator to assist with the program, (ii) developing a work plan and timeline for Traditional Knowledge interviews, and (iii) understanding data and establishing an appropriate plan for its governance.

Subsequently, after posting an advertisement locally, a Dene Coordinator was hired by the Renewable Resources Council. Working with K'ahsho Got'ine Guardians and using feedback from the earlier meeting, the Coordinator produced a template for interviews that focused on collecting information about traditional sea duck hunting areas and timing of use. The Coordinator conducted eight interviews and shared written transcripts with Dr. Gurney by email. Transcripts are currently being summarized, with plans to highlight key findings and areas for further investigation / possible count surveys. Early results suggest that riverine areas are particularly important for black ducks in the Fort Good Hope region, especially during key migration periods, in the early spring and fall.

Project Status: We had two broad Year One goals – (i) to build the foundation for an acceptable data sharing and governance plan and (ii) to develop and implement an Indigenous-led knowledge survey that will reliably describe historical distributions of Surf and White-winged Scoter in culturally important areas. These goals were accomplished, although there were some challenges that required the project team to adapt and adjust our planned approaches.

With respect to the data sharing and governance plan, we began by reviewing existing guidelines (BC First Nations Regional Information Governance Centre, Alberta First Nations Information Governance Centre, First Nations Information Governance Centre) and then engaged with another First Nation that has made considerable progress in the data sovereignty context.

Together, these resources highlighted the value of building a visual representation of the life cycle of data (Plan, Collect, Assurance, Describe, Preserve, Discover, Integrate, Analyze). Building this visual was a goal for the meeting in Fort Good Hope, however, as discussion progressed, we identified a strong need to focus instead on questions around planning: what information is being collected, how it is being processed and stored, and who can access it (among others). Having considered these questions, we agreed that ongoing discussions were necessary to ensure that data practices remained acceptable for all partners. Future plans will entail revisiting these questions and continuing to work on a data sharing agreement that supports respectful and effective collaboration.

Regarding our second goal in Year One, we had success in hiring a Dene Coordinator to support the program and were also successful in identifying key questions for the Traditional Knowledge interviews. However, we did encounter some obstacles, primarily related to capacity. Local Indigenous Government Organizations are home to a wealth of knowledge but are often limited by funding and overwhelmed by a variety of pressing issues that require considerable resources and constant reprioritization. For these reasons, the Dene Coordinator was not able to conduct the Traditional Knowledge interviews with an interpreter present and some information may have been missed. To help ensure that information about traditional sea duck use areas is comprehensive, future plans include hiring an interpreter to help review video footage of the interviews and potentially conducting a secondary set of interviews that include a mapping component.