

Students learn nature's secrets

Echo Dene School students learn about traditional plant usage

by Roxanna Thompson

Northern News Services

Acho Dene Koe/Fort Liard

If she has a sore throat, Katrina Emmons now knows that chewing a piece of rat root and swallowing the juice – but not the root – might help.

Emmons, 10, is one of the students from Echo Dene School in Fort Liard who learned about the different traditional uses of plants and

trees with Andy Norwegian. A language specialist with the Dehcho Divisional Education Council, Norwegian spent Sept. 12 to 15 in Fort Liard.

He took the students in each grade out on the land for half a day. At three different locations, including Hay Lake and Muskeg River,

Norwegian taught students how to identify plants and their traditional uses.

"I think it's important we pass on this knowledge," he said. "It's information you're not going to find in a textbook."

Birch was one of the common trees Norwegian taught the students about. Many of them knew about using the tree's bark to make birchbark baskets but few knew the tree's other uses, he

said. Wood from birch trees can be used to make snowshoes, paddles, axe handles and dog sleds. Sap can also be collected from birch in the springtime.

"These trees are important in our culture," he said.

Spruce is another useful tree. Its bark was traditionally

used for canoes and to cover roofs, similar to the way shingles do now. Its boughs are also used for flooring in tents and around fires to keep the dust down, said Norwegian.

He also taught students about a variety of plants and their traditional uses.

At Hay Lake, Emmons said she learned about two different types of wild mint and how they can be used for tea. Emmons also discovered that parts of cattails can be mixed with moss and used for absorbent material in diapers.

"It was really awesome," she said.

Emmons' classmate Dylan Steeves, 11, said he learned about rat root. Norwegian wasn't able to find any growing at the lake but had brought samples along. Steeves was one of the students who tried it.

"It numbs my mouth," he said.

Steeves said he enjoyed

spending time learning about traditional plants.

"It was good," he said.

"I think it's important we pass on this knowledge."

Norwegian modified his sessions based on the age of the students he was teaching. The older students learned about additional plants while the students in kindergarten

and grades 1 and 2 were taken to Muskeg River sooner, where Norwegian read a

book to them in Slavey.

To conclude their sessions, students had a campfire and some cooked bannock on sticks. Norwegian said he'd hoped to have the students sample traditional teas made from Labrador leaves and wild mint but they ran out of time.

Many of the students, along with their teachers, classroom assistants and parents who attended enjoyed learning about plants and trees from the Dene perspective, he said.

COFFEE Break

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Andy Norwegian, left, shares information about traditional plants with students from Echo Dene School in Fort Liard including, clockwise, from left, Naomi Beaulieu, Julianne Klondike, Tyrone McLeod-Berreault, Dylan Steeves, Jeremy Punch, Abigail Duntra, Brandon Hardisty and Katrina Emmons and Laura Nelson, centre.

photo courtesy of Philip Meaney

