The Whapmagoostui Crees form a small-scale society that has used the same land for many generations. In this paper I will examine the results of a project carried out in the 1990s to compile information concerning historical and cultural knowledge relating to places within the Whapmagoostui Cree traditional territories. The project involved both a detailed place-names survey and the collection of additional information in the form of stories, myths and land-use data concerning particular named places. Toponymy was seen as a useful starting point for understanding Cree perceptions of the environment and of key points within that environment, and for obtaining a broad coverage of places of potential cultural and historic interest, based on the assumption that most such places would be named (cf. Hanks & Winters 1986:274).

The place-names survey was carried out with 1:50,000 scale maps using a modified version of the "Nuna-Top method," developed by Ludger and Linna Müller-Wille in arctic Quebec and Nunavut (CPCGN 1992). The team consisted of an interviewer, a recorder and a filing clerk, all Crees from Whapmagoostui with considerable knowledge of local geography and traditions. Interviews were carried out with individuals recognized in the community as likely to be most knowledgeable for dif-

1. Editors’ note: This paper was presented at the 37e Congrès des Algonquinistes held at the Musée Canadien des Civilisations in Gatineau, Québec in October of 2005 but unaccountably lost between computers during the editorial process. We sincerely regret the delay in its publication.

2. Funding for the Whapmagoostui Place Names, Stories and the Land project was obtained from the Direction Nord-du-Québec of the Quebec Ministère de la Culture et des Communications. This paper was drawn from a longer piece prepared in conjunction with a land-use and occupancy study carried out in relation to the Whapmagoostui Cree lands by the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee). I would like to thank Martin Weinstein, Susan Marshall and Adrian Tanner for comments on the earlier paper. Thanks are also due to Marguerite MacKenzie and Luci Bobbish-Salt for rendering the Cree place names in the standard orthography adopted by the Cree School Board and for other useful comments on the present paper.
Figure 1. Location of place names recorded during the Whapmagoostui Place Names, Stories and the Land project.
different portions of the territory. Eighteen persons were interviewed in the course of the survey. Most were male and all but five were between the ages of 60 and 79. A second phase of the project involved the sound recording of more complete versions of the traditional narratives (stories, legends and myths) referred to during the place-names survey.

NAMES AND THE CULTURALLY DEFINED ENVIRONMENT

Though a legacy of the past, place-names function in the present as signposts, guiding people as they move around the territory and facilitating all communications relating to place. Place-names are a key component of Cree “ethnogeography” – they both reflect and structure people’s perceptions of the land. Because of the continued close ties with the land, place-names are a matter of practical concern to the Whapmagoostui people. Knowledge of the names is not limited to a few elders; active hunters have detailed knowledge of the names associated with their hunting territories but even those who hunt only on a casual basis are familiar with a surprising number of traditional names. On the other hand, the oldest people have many more stories and are often more aware of the significance of the names.

Over 3,000 names were collected in the course of this project (fig. 1); they are distributed over 119 different map sheets.

Descriptive names

Approximately one third of the Whapmagoostui place-names are descriptions of the physical environment, including hydrographic, topographic, geomorphological or vegetational features. Examples would include such names as: Kåtihtikutåühkåch Minåwåtim ‘flat, sandy peninsula’, or Kåpimitåuhchiskumåkåch ‘crossways to hills frozen lake’. It is important to recognize the dual nature of what we are calling descriptive names: that

3. The larger proportion of men interviewed reflects the prevailing community perception at the time of the field work that men have much broader toponymic knowledge than women. Some women did participate (usually accompanying their husbands) and contributed narrative material such as stories and legends.

4. The place names survey took place between January and March 1991 and the collection of narrative material in July and August 1991. An earlier place name survey which included the Whapmagoostui Cree territories was carried out in the 1970s (MacKenzie 1977).
is, the fact that they are both "descriptive" and "names." Many names relate to salient environmental features, which can be easily recognized by travellers on the land and communicated to others. On the other hand, there are no clear rules regarding which features of the environment may serve for description. The names are rooted in shared experience at the local level, and any feature which could distinguish a place from others nearby might well be chosen. Like other names, descriptive names gain currency and become more standardized through usage. Some descriptive names were inspired by historical conditions that no longer prevail, that is, they may no longer be "descriptive" in any obvious manner. For example, a lake named Käiskwâpuschiwâtich ‘end of burn lake’ may retain its name long after the direct evidence of the burn has disappeared. Some names that appear to be descriptive may, instead, be ironic or playful. As in other cultural constructions, many descriptive names may lend themselves to more than one interpretation.

Many others appear to encode environmental information that is of crucial adaptive significance. For example, there are numerous names referring to places where the water does not freeze completely during the winter, such as Āhipuniskiushich ‘winter open water’, and its several variants. Such places, which attract fish and a variety of small game animals during the winter, and waterfowl early in the spring, are critical habitat areas for Creees during these seasons, and are places where special care must be exercised during winter travel. Descriptive names may relate to aspects of the land that are not immediately visible, such as the shape of the bottom of lakes, as in Achikâskwâyiwâshich ‘deep channel on north side lake’. Such names identify unfrozen channels in lakes that otherwise freeze to the bottom where fish can caught during the winter. These and many similar names have direct, practical implications for travel and resource use.

5. The places names were recorded in syllabics and later transcribed in Roman. The Roman spellings were corrected to the Cree School Board standard spelling by Marguerite MacKenzie and Luci Bobbish-Salt.
Names relating to faunal resources

Over one third of the names in the sample represent a particular type of descriptive name which refer directly to faunal resources. Included are names relating to a large range of species of mammals, birds and fish.

Particularly important in this respect are those concerning fish and fishing places of which there are about 700, or almost a quarter of the entire sample. Included are dozens of names like Atiḥkimākw Sākihikin ‘whitefish lake’, Pikwāhipānān ‘winter net fishing’, or the more evocative Āhāshikumistichishkiwāč ‘fish in every mesh hole of the net’. These names indicate a harvesting potential, often for particular species of fish, or using a particular technique, and in a particular season. Many names refer specifically to spawning fish, for example, Kukimāw Pichistiwākin Āhmūtāmiwānāniwich ‘large lake trout spawning net fishing place’. In general, the very large number of names relating to fish and fishing places likely reflects the overwhelming importance of fish to the Whapmagoostui people during the late 19th and much of the 20th century when caribou were not readily available.

Next to fish, names relating to beaver are the most common. Of these there are approximately 170. While some of these names reflect stories about beavers, most identify beaver ponds. Normally, the names consist of the term Amiskw Sākihikin ‘beaver lake’ with a geographic descriptor, as in Kātāwāwātisich Amiskw Sākihihikānish ‘beaver pond in the middle of the isthmus’ or refer to a person, as in Chisāyiskwāsh Utimiskw Sākihikinim ‘old woman’s beaver pond’.

Many place-names reflect detailed observations on behaviour patterns of other animal species. Names such as Nimitichāwātikw Sākihikin ‘caribou antlers scraping place lake’, or Wishākw Mināwātim ‘caribou mating peninsula’ show a keen interest in caribou ethology, and many such examples can be cited for a wide range of species.

Like names relating to the physical environment, those relating to animals are derived from shared experience, and over time, have become a part of local tradition. While some names may reflect historic conditions that no longer prevail, most appear to express a potential that has continuing practical relevance for living on the land. All derive from a profound store of Cree knowledge of animals and their behaviour in relation to particular points on the landscape and have themselves, over time, become part of the cultural landscape.
Names relating to traditional technology

Some Whapmagoostui place-names are of special historical interest because they signal places traditionally used to harvest faunal resources using technologies which may not have been used for decades. For example, there is the place called Mānikin, referring to a type of enclosure used for impounding caribou not seen in the Whapmagoostui territories since the 19th century, or the small number of places called Chistākin, where traps were made to catch freshwater seals. Of similar interest are the places named after traditional stone resources, for example, Mātis Åhtā ‘flint place’, or Mātisinikush ‘flint small island’, where people obtained stone for “making fire.” An archaeologist might suspect that some such places could have been used in the distant past to obtain lithic raw material for the manufacture of tools. Likewise, places referring to wimin ‘red ochre, paint’ may have been traditional sources of red ochre. A final example is the place known as Ashtuyākānikw ‘canoe factory lake’ which was a common location for people to build birchbark canoes in the spring before heading to the Great Whale River trading post.

Names, stories and community history

In contrast to some other North American groups, Whapmagoostui people often name places after individuals. These names may be related to events, or they may reflect places that were closely associated with the person during their life and through which the memory of the person is preserved. In the words of one Whapmagoostui elder: “it is like the person is still living through the name.” Almost 400, or over 12% of the names in our sample mention individuals directly. For example, a fishing lake may be named after the person who “discovered” it as in Pāschāwāyān Upikwāhipānān ‘Pāschāwāyān’s winter net fishing’ or a mountain after the man who loved to climb it, as in Kāchishāyiysiushit Upiskutinām ‘Kāchishāyiysiushit’s mountain’. Very commonly, geographic features (especially lakes) are given the name of a person who was born or was buried nearby, or who hunted in that area. While some relatively recent names are associated with individuals still living in the community, many relate to those deceased, several generations back, as in Kāmichāpāut Åhchipāpichit ‘where Kāmichāpāut arrived pulling a toboggan’. Many place-names referring to people are older still, associated with
those whose genealogical links with Whapmagoostui families are no longer remembered. Some of these long dead persons, whose memory is preserved in place-names, are also recalled through traditional stories.

The following examples serve to illustrate how place names relate to stories about Whapmagoostui ancestors. In the first, two women, one of whom was named Kâmichiskwâwû, who were left to fend for themselves one fall and winter while the rest of the group went in search of game some distance away. Every morning when Kâmichiskwâwû saw that the others had not returned she would cry. When she stopped crying, she told the other woman to look for porcupine on the big mountain on the north side of the lake. Each time the woman went there she always found porcupine. It is thought that through her crying she had been asking “someone” to feed them. Later in the winter, the people came back. The women had survived. The place where these events took place is called Kâmichiskwâwû.

Some of the stories contain more explicit lessons about people who behaved foolishly and then suffered the consequences, as shown in the example relating to the place called Nânâsiu Sâkihikin ‘Nânâs’s lake’. Amiskwâpâsh, a famous hunter and shaman, had warned people not to kill the beaver any more. All of the hunters obeyed him except for a man called Nânâs, who refused to listen. Later, Nânâs cut himself with an axe. His wound would not heal and got infected and so he died from it. This place is Nânâs’s burial site.

Another example is a legend-like tale that takes place on the north-eastern side of Wiyâshâkimî (Clearwater Lake). One night after dark when the wind was calm, an old lady heard some caribou in the water. Her husband and three sons went out in two canoes. The old man went in amongst the herd of caribou and speared three — a female, a calf and a one-year old — after which he allowed his sons to go and spear the other caribou. There were a large number of caribou and they killed them all. He told his sons to take three caribou (one small, one medium and one large) and to leave the rest in the water. They skinned and butchered them and the daughters-in-law prepared the skins. He told them to finish the hides before morning. That night they made a feast. The wind began to blow very hard. In the morning, the caribou were all lined up along the shore in the small bay near their camp. This place is named Chisâyîu Āchisîtâuyât ‘the old man caused the wind to blow’.
Like this name, approximately 200 (6%) of the names refer explicitly
to past events, most involving Whapmagoostui ancestors. It is here that
the poetry of Cree place-names is most clearly in evidence. The stories
range greatly in age, from those well over a century old to those relating
to the last few decades. They vary in content as well. Some refer to
humorous incidents or gently poke fun, as in the name Mwâkutisi Åhchih-
wiwiwâpinihk Pishishâwânâyiw ‘Mwâkutisi threw out a stew’, while
others refer to heart-rending family histories of starvation or accidental
death, as in the names Châkip Kâsh Åchikâwiwikâtiw ‘where Jacob Kash
[and family] starved’ or Åhchîyâyiuhuch Iyiyiuch ‘where people
drowned’. Many refer to stories about interesting or unusual encounters
with animals, such as Mihikin Åiskwâsî ‘burned wolf’, or to remarkable
hunting events, as in Kâmichâpâut Åhchîhniwitihkwât ‘where
Kâmichâpâut chased a caribou’. Some refer to feasts, as in Nukis Uchim-
wâchisâyâkwât ‘where Nukis had bear feast’, or exceptional exploits as in
Aushâwâu Twâmis Åhchîuhchimushâwâhk ‘Aushâwâu Twâmis started
his trip’.

Like the names, associated stories vary greatly in terms of their age
and content. Some can be read in terms of particular historical conditions
that prevailed when the events described took place, for example, the dif-
cult periods during the 20th century when caribou and other game were
very scarce, the pre-1900 periods when caribou were more abundant or
the pre-1840 period of open hostility between Crees and Inuit. Some have
a very strong legendary quality to them while others are more prosaic.
Some explicitly contain lessons or morals while others are simply (on the
surface at least) ‘good yarns’. What they have in common is that they link
the memory of Whapmagoostui ancestors to particular places on the land
and they add a human and cultural dimension to the environment.

THE LAND AND TRADITIONAL CREE BELIEFS

There are some 100 names that are tied to myth or legend, or represent
places where spirit power has been manifested or spirit beings have been
observed. These locations can be seen as an geographic expression of the
traditional religious belief system of the Whapmagoostui people. A rela-
tive small number of places are associated with an âtiyâhkân (‘myth’ or
story relating to an ancient time before the world assumed its present
A well known example relates to the rock called *Chipāhyáu uspisāukinish* 'small breast bone of a bird' which is located near the top of the first rapids on the Great Whale River. The origin of this rock, which has the appearance of the breast bone of a bird is told in the story of a mythological bird who spoke to the rapids boasting that he could sing louder and longer than the rapids could. The bird told the rapids that he would never stop singing until the end of the earth. He sang until he starved to death and fell into the middle of the rapids.

The best known places in the Cree mythscape relate to a story concerning a trickster figure known as Másw who chased a family of giant beaver across the land in a narrative that stretches from Wemindji ('paint mountain') on central James Bay coast to north of the Nastapoka River, with various stopping places along the way, including *Wāshtihkān* 'beaver lodge', *Utāaskihp* 'giant beaver lodge', *Wimin Ātät* 'paint place' and *Kushāpihhchikin* 'shaking tent'. According to one version of the story, Másw waited for the last male giant beaver to surface at *Michiwiimin* 'bad ochre, bad paint' located to the north of the Nastapoka River and finally succeeded in killing him there. It is said that this explains why there are few beaver in the northern part of the territory. Locations where Másw made a kill are reflected in the presence of *wimin* 'red ochre, red paint', representing the blood of the giant beavers.

For the Whapmagoostui Crees the land is alive in a sense that goes well beyond the presence of wildlife and vegetation. People talk not only of knowing the land, but of the land knowing them. This sense of various elements of the land as sentient is an important part of many stories. It is strongly reflected in stories relating to the underlying spirit life of the land. In the traditional Cree perspective, there are a wide variety of spirit beings who are usually only observed by *mitāuch* 'people with medicine power' or through dreams. Although the stories relating to these beings have legendary qualities, they are all seen by Crees as instances of *tipâchimuwin* 'true story' rather than *ātiyūhkān*. The following examples

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7. This term may relate to the term *uhtâskwâw* "trail made by beaver when carrying felled trees and food to the lodge" (MacKenzie, personal communication). The place Utaaskihp is also referenced in the version of the Másw story told by Job Kawapit (see fn 4), where it appears to relate to caches of beavers' food.
hint at the richness of these traditional beliefs which are tied to places, and which are often reflected in place names, throughout the Whapmagoostui lands.

Most spirit beings live under the water or under mountains or cliffs. The most common type, about which there are many stories, very often referenced in place names, are referred to simply as minitu ‘spirit’. People who drown but whose bodies are not recovered are believed to become minitu. Whapmagoostui beliefs about minitu reveal much ambivalence: they can be extremely dangerous or they can be generous and assist people by providing them with food. The best known minitu story for most Whapmagoostui people relates to the place called Minitunikw ‘spirit island’ and the first rapids in the Great Whale River. A man called Upischiuni was hunting beluga whales in the estuary of the river. He speared a whale and then his canoe was pulled out of the estuary toward the island known as Minitunikw. The other canoes came alongside and urged Upischiuni to let go of the line as they were convinced that it was not a whale that he had speared, but he did not want to let go. Finally, he was pulled away from the others. He could no longer be seen as he reached the island. Later a shaking tent ceremony was carried out and through this means they were able to communicate with Upischiuni. He told them that he was at the place where they had last seen him (Minitunikw) and that he was living with the minitu there. The people pleaded with him to come back to his wife and children but he replied that he was now married to another woman. He told the people that there were many minitu living where he was and many others living at Mdhchich Pdustikui ‘last rapids’, i.e., the first rapids on the Great Whale River.

There are numerous places in the Whapmagoostui territories that are associated with sightings of various kinds of animals, especially porcupine, caribou and dogs, that were said to have come out of the water. The “water” mammals are said to be much larger than their land counterparts. Some elders explain declines of certain land mammal populations by saying that the animals have “gone into the water.” When populations begin to increase, they say they are coming out of the water again. Appearances of such “water” animals are often reflected in place names.

Some places are profoundly associated with a single species of animal. For example, the mountain Kwåkwå ‘earthquake, rumbling’, an important freshwater seal hunting location, was said by medicine men to
be the “home” of these animals. Kwākwā is also one of the four mountains that were said to have told of the coming death of the shaman, Aspasiwāu. The name derives from a story about giant otters, who were seen sliding down the cliff on the outside of the mountain and underneath the water. Shortly after, the people heard a rumbling which was the sound of the giant otters shaking the water off of their fur.

Likewise, there are several very important beaver trapping locations named after kāchichāmiskw ‘immortal beaver’. Kāchichāmiskw are believed to be male beavers who are larger in size than normal beavers. It is said that they have white fur, and although they mate with regular beavers and their mates and offspring can be trapped, the kāchichāmiskw can never be caught and never die.

Several places are named after Mistinākw, the spirit master of the fish – there are numerous accounts of how medicine men communicated with Mistinākw in order to get food. Other beings called māmākwāshiuch (hairy creatures usually associated with cliffs and with the water beneath the cliffs) also have an important role in Cree traditional thought. Several toponyms such as Māmākwāshiuch Āhtāch reflect the presence of these beings and serve as reminders of the stories.

Some places in the Whapmagoostui territories are associated with shamanistic power, including certain rapids, channels, or mountains where people were warned never to venture. The most important in this respect were the ponds (called Mistischī Āhtikuch) where shamans obtained ‘medicine’ for sacred medicine bags.

Finally, there are a number of places whose names refer to accounts of confrontations with, or magical escapes from, the giant cannibalistic monsters known as achān. In some cases, power battles that occurred between achān and medicine men resulted in modifications to the landscape. There are also places where shamans used their magical powers to defeat another kind of enemy known as pwātich ‘spooks, sometimes associated with land surveyors’. Again, in many of these cases, the stories are referenced in the place names.

CONCLUSION

This brief exploration of place names demonstrates that these lands are infused with historical, cultural and religious meaning as a result of gen-
erations of Whapmagoostui Cree occupation. The names and related stories are not abstract facts about the past. They are melded into a landscape that echoes these tales which are heard, interpreted and reinterpreted as people travel from place to place. They are a cultural heritage, linking the community and its past to a myriad of points across the land and evoking sadness, mirth or wonder at the ancestors’ experiences. At the same time, they are a network of messages containing both practical information and a breath of spiritual and moral counsel.

The names and associated stories add an important dimension, whether this is called ‘literary’ or aesthetic, historic or spiritual, to Cree appreciation of their lands. Even an outside visitor to Whapmagoostui who hears the story will never again see the magnificent Minitûnikw (or Bill of Portland Island) without thinking of Upischiûni being dragged under the water by the whale and joining the minîtû living at the base of the cliffs.

REFERENCES

