

## **Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Conversations on Wellness:**

### **A Qualitative Study Exploring the Radical Possibilities of Relationships**

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There is a huge need for Indigenous people to tell their own stories that describe the “who”, “what”, “where” and “how” of Indigenous life in order to shape our own destiny. The question posed in this research study is, *In what ways do Deg Xit'an, Athabascan people draw from their culturally unique experiences, knowledge, values and relationships in the context of their lives to create and maintain wellness and wholeness?* The Deg Xit'an Athabascan (DXA) people are one of the smallest of the eleven Athabascan language groups located in Southwest Alaska. The importance of asking this question is significant at the individual and collective levels. The question itself is strengths focused. While it does imply that individuals and communities go in and out of balance and that problems exist, it is focused on the broader idea that within an individual and community are unique sets of existing tools and knowledge that can be utilized to maintain or create wellness and/or get back into balance. There are many statistics that highlight some of the many challenges Alaska Native people face today; however they do not highlight the potential and possibilities of a strong and enduring people. Wellness, as it has been written and discussed by many Indigenous scholars, is shaped by a holistic combination of factors (mind, body, spirit, environment, history, traditions and relationships)

influencing each other in a continuous and dynamic way working toward balance and harmony.

This is a qualitative study utilizing an Indigenous research framework. Twenty-two participants took part in the four conversational focus groups and two interviews. There were a mixture of Elders, culture bearers/community members and young adult community members.

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data and that contribute to wellness include: the cultural practices that were modeled by our Elders; traditional values that were embedded within those cultural practices; life's challenges and how the people adapted and grew strength from those challenges; and community action recommendations from participants on how to preserve our way of life and lead us back to the cultural practices that keep the people well.