

Science meets tradition at Whitefish Lake First Nation

Study looks at
medicinal
plants and herbs

By Carol Mulligan
THE SUDBURY STAR

A survey being conducted at Whitefish Lake First Nation will help determine if medicinal plants used in traditional medicine practices are safe for consumption.

Dozens of samples of herbs such as bunchberry, black ash and juniper have been collected and will be analyzed to see what levels of metals of concern — if any — they contain.

See page 2 **See related story / A3**

The survey is being conducted in conjunction with the Sudbury Soils Study, although it is not being paid for by Inco and Falconbridge Ltd., the mining giants funding the four-year, \$5-million soils study.

The medicinal plant survey is being undertaken by the SARA (Sudbury Area Risk



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Summer students Corey Saikkonen (left), Patricia Nebonaionoquet and Danielle Homer collect soil samples for a survey being conducted in conjunction with the Sudbury Soils Study.

Assessment) Group, the group conducting the Sudbury Soils Study, at the invitation of Whitefish Lake First Nation.

It is being funded by Health

Canada's First Nations and Inuit Branch, through its First Nation Environmental Contaminants Program.

Please see SOIL / A4
See page 3

Study asks: Where did all the frogs go?

The number of frogs populating water sources on Whitefish Lake First Nation has been declining and no one seems to know why

By Carol Mulligan
THE SUDBURY STAR

It's a mystery that Art Petahtegoose and Kathleen Naponse have pondered.

And now it has captured the attention of a biologist working with the Sudbury Soils Study.

The number of frogs populating water sources on Whitefish Lake First Nation has been declining and no one seems to know why.

Petahtegoose, a band councillor for Whitefish Lake, said he and his father have discussed how weed beds are disappearing from water holes on the first nation — and how the four-legged amphibians seem to be going with them.

Petahtegoose said he has also noticed mutations among the frogs he has seen.

Drop noticed

Naponse, director of health and support services for Whitefish Lake, said she, too, has noted there aren't the number of frogs that used to be there when her children were young and used to chase them out in ditches. "Now, my grandchildren don't play with frogs," she said.

Shawna Peddle said that kind of anecdotal information can often lead to scientific research studies, and she admitted her curiosity was piqued over the frog mystery.

A biologist, Peddle works for the SARA (Sudbury Area Risk Assessment) Group and is project manager for the Sudbury Soils Study.

The study won't answer the frog question, but it will produce other answers about the health of the air, soil and water in Greater Sudbury.

During an interview about Whitefish Lake's medicinal plant survey Tuesday, Peddle quipped that she might try to seek out funding to study the matter of the disappearing frogs.

Soil: low levels of metals found

Continued from page A1

The survey is the property of Whitefish Lake First Nation and its findings will be turned over to the community when it is complete.

Art Petahtegoose, a band councillor for Whitefish Lake, said his community has had concerns about effluent from industrial operations contaminating the area.

"People have been concerned about the environment," he said Tuesday.

However, results of soil sampling done for the Sudbury Soils Study in 2001 show Whitefish Lake soils actually contain lower levels of metals of concern such as arsenic, nickel and copper than other areas of Sudbury.

That finding also holds true for Whitefish and Naughton because all three communities are upwind of ore processing operations.

The SARA Group's Shawna Peddle, project co-ordinator of medicinal plant study, said results of the vegetable garden survey conducted on the First Nation last year showed vegetables were safe for consump-

tion.

Peddle said the three summer students hired to conduct the study have gathered 40 samples of plants from 25 different species from five different sites at Whitefish Lake.

Those plants, and their locations, were identified after interviews with elders and others in the 70-square-mile community who use the plants as traditional remedies.

Endangered

Petahtegoose said the community was not revealing what medicinal plants are located at Whitefish Lake or the quantities that grow there, for fear they might be "exploited."

Some of the plants could be on endangered species lists, he said.

He did say they are plants that grow there naturally and are harvested by community members. Some are used to treat flu and cold symptoms, or in traditional ceremonies.

Peddle said the experience was a good one for students because he helped acquaint them with some of

the traditional medicine practices of their community.

Kathleen Naponse said the summer job was also giving the teenagers an opportunity to see if they might be interested in pursuing careers in science.

Naponse is director of health and support services for Whitefish Lake First Nation. She has also been involved with the Sudbury Soils Study.

The students are wrapping up their sampling work this week, and the survey findings should be complete by January, when they will be presented to the community, said Peddle.

She said "nothing would make me happier" than to report that the plants being surveyed are not contaminated.

Naponse said she feels the same way. Some of the medicinal plants are used for healing at the health centre at Whitefish Lake.

"If we are promoting traditional health, we have a responsibility to make sure that what we're promoting there has no health risk."

Petahtegoose said people on the first nation have had some concerns about using medicinal plants growing there.

"We have been wanting to know if there are dangers. I think this study will help answer that question."