



Indigenous Peoples (Finally) Have Equal Voice in Canada's Conservation Efforts

Something very special is happening in Canada in the area of conservation – the convergence of indigenous stewardship and reconciliation. The indigenous peoples have taken a seat at the table with an equal voice to protect cultures intricately entwined with nature.

In Canada, discussions concerning conservation always include reference to Target 1, found in “The 2020 Biodiversity Goals and Targets for Canada.” Target 1 says, “By 2020, at least 17 percent of terrestrial areas and inland water, and 10 percent of marine and coastal areas of Canada are conserved through networks of protected areas and other effective area-based measures.”

At the same time, the Canadian government is working toward reconciliation with indigenous peoples, and reconciliation includes addressing indigenous ownership and management of lands, and conservation of lands and biodiversity through indigenous stewardship beliefs.

The Pathway Team was created to advance progress toward Target 1 and is composed of three main groups of people: The Indigenous Circle of Experts, a national steering committee and the National Advisory Panel.

Indigenous Experts Help Canada Rise Together to Protect Natural Jewels.

By the end of 2019, 12.1 percent of Canada's land and freshwater was conserved through the Pathway to Canada Target 1 initiative. Of enormous importance is the inclusion of the Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE).

In “We Rise Together,” the ICE shared the perspective of the indigenous peoples in Canada. One is that parks and protected areas have not traditionally been focused on preserving the health and well-being of nature. Instead, nature became a backdrop to the needs of recreationists and government's interest in generating revenues. In fact, indigenous communities were relocated off their cultural lands. Over time, a growing realization that indigenous peoples can make a significant contribution to conserving biological diversity led to the creation of ICE, a significant milestone in including a segment of society traditionally excluded. The “We Rise Together” report is based on the belief that “the time has come for indigenous knowledge systems, legal traditions, and customary and cultural practices be recognized as equally valid and binding versus other frameworks.”

As defined by ICE, “Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) are lands and waters where indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through indigenous laws, governance, and knowledge systems.” IPCAs include a variety of land protection initiatives – tribal parks, indigenous protected areas, indigenous cultural landscapes, and indigenous conserved areas.



Indigenous culture and language are the heart of the IPCA, and the IPCAs enable the application of indigenous perspectives and culture to modern practices and goals. They strive for cultural continuity and serve economic purposes for indigenous communities.

IPCA are an element of reconciliation, too, because they return to the indigenous people the ability to reconnect to the land, healing it through their ancient practices.

Coming to the Table as Equals.

When the Circle of Experts came to the table with the national representation groups, there were four areas identified that must be addressed for true progress to be made.

One of the first points made by the Circle of Experts spokesperson Eli was that he would not be a “token Indian.” Subsequently, the areas called the Four Moose, representing conditions of progress, were identified: Jurisdiction, financial solutions, capacity development, and cultural keystone species and places. Capacity development refers to support for IPCAs with subject matter expertise, much of which is available through indigenous guardian stewardship programs.

The cultural keystone species and places category refers to the fact the elders and people of the land are not concerned with things like government set biodiversity conservation targets. Their concerns were for the moose, the fish, and the birch bark trees which are all culturally significant species crucial to survival, their ability to remain on the land, and their interactions with the environment.

All of this work has revealed a rich cultural heritage, collective stories, diverse voices, and new perspectives that are blended with western management strategic plans and goals.

The coming together of two very different set of systems – oral and written – is found in “ethical space” which is where true dialogue takes place. It is space where knowledge systems interact with mutual respect, one system does not need to corroborate another, and all involved are flexible. This is so different from traditional committees, reflecting the unique approaches required to bring together a fixed written system with expectations of one side “winning” and an oral system with expectations of knowledge sharing only.

Guardians of Nature.

To ensure indigenous people are truly empowered and their voices are not lost in bureaucratic government systems, indigenous-led “Guardian” programs were initiated. There are more than 40 such programs now. Guardians are employed as the “eyes on the ground” and play a vital role in bringing all the work of the Circle of Experts to reality. They promote intergenerational sharing of indigenous knowledge, monitor ecological health, protect sensitive areas and species, and maintain cultural sites.

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative promotes the federally funded indigenous-led National Indigenous Guardians Network in Canada. There are three major areas of work: Land planning, governance and resource planning.



An example of land planning is the Dehcho First Nations collection of more than 40,000 pieces of data to identify conservation zones, protected areas, and general use areas for development. It also collaborated with the Northwest Territories government to expand the Nahanni National Park Reserve by fourfold.

An example of governance is UPCART in which seven Indigenous Nations and governments collaborated to create the Ungava Peninsula Caribou Aboriginal Roundtable to conserve caribou in Quebec and Labrador.

In the area of resource planning, the Indigenous Leadership Initiative works with indigenous communities to advise them on developing resource plans, provide technical assessments when outside companies propose logging or industrial projects, and assist with determining where to conserve or develop.

Protecting Culture and the Environment.

What is happening in Canada demonstrates an important fact: Collaborating with people as equals is the responsible and productive way to get things done. Canada has some of the most beautiful lands in the world, and for the indigenous peoples, it is a bounty intricately tied to culture and community.

Groups like the Circle of Experts and people like the Guardians are accomplishing measurable economic, social, and cultural value. In the end, it was a matter of empowering people and giving them a voice in conversation efforts – the people who have guarded the lands, waters and wildlife for thousands of years.