

Indigenous Guardians: Moccasins on the Ground & in the Boardroom

Stephen Kakfwi, Valérie Courtois, & Gloria Enzo

Stephen Kakfwi

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative is a group that I am part of, along with members like Ovide Mercredi, the former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations; Miles Richardson, the high-profile leader from Haida Gwaii; Dave Porter, a Yukon Indigenous leader; Bev Sellars, a former chief from the interior of B.C. who has published a couple of books; and Elder Dave Courchene, our spiritual leader.

Together we are trying to position ourselves to provide leadership to the environmental organizations that operate in Canada. And our message to the environmental organizations in Canada is: As Indigenous People, we have been fighting government, industry, oil companies, mining companies for the last 150 years because they come and they tell us what plans they make for our land. And the last thing we need is to have another fight with another group of people that come from the south, from the cities, that say, “Hey we’re environmentalists, we’re conservationists and we have plans for your land.” We’re saying: Work with us and we will provide you the leadership and the vision that is needed so you can become an ally and a partner. It’s kind of like reconciliation in a specific area. We are now working through that the best we can, and that’s what we do. For the last year we’ve been working as a group to promote the idea of a national Guardians program with the federal government, with Ottawa. We’ve been meeting with ministers and federal officials –

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well over one hundred meetings in the last year. And Valérie Courtois is our executive director – she’s the one that does all the work under our group and our leadership.

The Guardians program is kind of an on-the-land program with more scope, more permanence. I always say that every government in the world, every nation in the world, has the resources and the capacity to take care and watch over their traditional territory. And that’s what the Guardians are going to do. It will give our Indigenous governments, our nations, the ability to have our people, our Elders, working with youth to not only reconnect with the land but to watch over it using the latest technologies as well as the traditional knowledge of our people. To know this land the way we should and have done for the last thousands of years.

I want to tell you a couple of things because some of you in the room here I’ve known since literally high school, since the seventies, and the sixties for that matter. One is that – and I’ve never quoted him before so I thought I’d do it – a young Dene leader in about 1975 said to the legislature and Commissioner Hodgson and people from the South who were coming up and talking about the last frontier in this beautiful wilderness. He said, “There is no word in our language for wilderness, for everywhere we go it is our home.” And that is my cousin George Barnaby from Fort Good Hope. At that time the people of Good Hope, K’asho Got’ine, were less than about a thousand. The Arctic gas pipeline was being proposed, and I was there, I was 24 years old and I think we truly felt like if this pipeline happens, we are not going to survive. The impact, the lack of being prepared to handle the kind of impact that it was going to have, in our hearts we thought we were not going to survive it. And so when the Berger Inquiry went to Good Hope, we talked about it, and in the end the chief went off on his own and he made the decision to say what he did. And what he said was, “It is for the unborn child that in order to stop the pipeline I am willing to lay down my life.”

Today you hear that, you think, “Whatever made him say that?” Was it theatrics, was he being dramatic? And I know, I was there, and I know the intensity, what was on the line for us. We’ve dealt with pipelines since then. At that time we had no

office, no telephone, we had no staff. We were just totally unprepared to deal with anything that was going to come up the valley. And so we felt, we're not going to survive this. Those of you that are born after 1975, that's what the chief said at that time. And so the land is still there. We need to take back control more and more.

Valérie Courtois

Good morning everyone, it's truly an honour to have been invited to address you this morning. I'm Valérie, I'm from Mashteuiatsh, which is the westernmost Innu community in Quebec, but I now live and work with the Innu in Labrador. I also work with the Indigenous Leadership Initiative.

We've been working for the last two years on promoting this idea of a National Indigenous Guardians Network. Note that it isn't our idea; in fact, it is the idea of all the existing Guardians' programs across Canada. Back in 2014 we gathered everybody together in Squamish, all the programs that existed – and what I mean by “Guardians” is essentially our moccasins and mukluks on the land. They are the people who are there to watch and care for the land, in a formal way through an actual job; to fulfill the visions and goals and aspirations of the nations for whom they work.

Now those programs have existed in Canada for a number of years and I'll go through a couple

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of them. But all of them gathered in Squamish and they said, we need three things to make sure that our programs survive and thrive and we can use this as a model for all nations right across this country. They said, “Look, we often work by ourselves. We need a network; we need something where we can learn from each other and grow in and build off of our collective experiences,” so that's the national process. The second thing they said they needed is funding. All the programs, even those that have existed for a very long time, are all on unstable funding ground, so that's part of what we're hoping to address with



Photo Credit: Pat Kane

From right, Stephen Kakfwi moderates a panel on Indigenous Guardianship, featuring Gloria Enzoe and Valérie Courtois.

this federal partnership. The third thing that they asked for was training.

So the idea is to create a national program where the Government of Canada and the Indigenous nations come up with a partnership to work together. We believe that this needs to happen on a nation-to-nation basis because, of course, our nationhood rests on our lands and so if we're going to be true partners in this country under reconciliation this has to be a nation-to-nation approach. The idea is that we would build off of the local programs through training and jobs into a system where there are regional networks which feed into the national network. Now with Dechinta¹, we've built up a training program, a pilot program, that we helped fund that started two summers ago in Caribou Pass at Dechenla, and it is now continuing.

The Haida Gwaii program was started by a very interesting character called Captain Gold in 1973 when he bought a Sears Roebuck canoe that he ordered from a catalogue. He had a vision of returning back to his home village in Skung Gwaii, which is at the very southern tip of the Haida Gwaii Islands. He canoed there from Skidegate by himself and went back into the village and said he immediately felt the ancestors, so he started taking care of that village, bringing it back to life, cleaning it up and honouring the site. That became the basis upon which in the early eighties, the Haida Nation formalized the Guardian program.

The second oldest program is the Innu Guardian Program and, in fact, the word "Guardian" is a translation from an Innu word which is Minashkuat Kanakutuataku, which means to care for and to watch over. And so the Innu Nation's program started in 1992. And interestingly enough, back in 1992 was the collapse of the Atlantic salmon commercial fishery. Some of you may remember that. The nation at the time was approached by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans federally where they said, "You know, we want to have officers and we want to give you some tags and quotas for your harvest of the Atlantic salmon," and the Innu Nation's response was, "No, we can do that on our own. We don't need your officers, we've got our own people who can who can do that; we've got our own laws and our own rules and our own ways of managing our take of Atlantic salmon." That inspired, in part, the creation of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' Fisheries Guardians Program.

A little bit later there was a forestry crisis in Labrador where the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador wanted to harvest up to 400,000

cubic metres on Innu lands, put a pulp mill in Goose Bay, and really continue to develop the area around Goose Bay. Of course, the Innu Nation said, "No, the forestry is going to have too important an impact," and so the Innu Nation imposed its own forestry system. That actually became the basis for what is now law in Newfoundland and Labrador, and that is to have an ecosystem-based approach that is built from the communities up.

Then we had the largest nickel ore find in the world that would later become the Voisey's Bay nickel mine. That mine is still to this day the largest nickel mine in the world. It operates on shared lands between the Innu Nation and the Inuit of Labrador now under the government of Nunatsiavut, and they are the first mine to have permanent monitors on site that do not work for the mine – they work for the nations and they watch what happens at that mine. Now in the Innu Nation's case, that role of those people who were responsible for making sure that the mine happened in a way that the Innu agreed to, was a condition of acceptability of that project. So we think that kind of model can really translate right across this country, and now there are now 30 such programs. I'm really thrilled that Gloria is going to tell us a little bit more about the Ni Hat'ni Dene program here in the NWT.

The potential of these programs is great. I made a map of Indigenous-led protected areas across this country, looking at what are some of the examples where Indigenous Peoples had the ability to hold the pen, where they decided the boundaries of these areas and the measures within them, and if you add up all these areas there's actually more than one million square kilometers of protected

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areas that are done by Indigenous People in this country. It is the most of any country on the globe. It's more than Australia, more than the States – more than many other countries. Believe it or not, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have protected more lands than anywhere else on the globe. All of these areas and the areas in between have potential to

have Guardians associated with managing them.

Now in our federal efforts we were also inspired by experiences from our friends in Australia, and in fact some of us have been to Australia to go visit and watch how those programs work. They started an Indigenous Protected Areas program in 1997 that was funded under the federal government. There are more than 75 of them in which 67 million hectares are all conserved by Indigenous Peoples. That's more than half of the total that they have title over in Australia. In 2007 they discovered that while having Indigenous Protected Areas is a great idea, the way that you really have Indigenous Protected Areas fulfill and meet their full potential is by having people in them, and so they created a program called the Working on Country program where they have Rangers troops – both men and women Rangers troops – responsible for managing many of these lands. Now they have almost 900 full-time positions and because a lot of them work on a part-time basis, that actually provides employment for over 2,500 people in Australia.

Both programs run on a set of five-year contracts and, to date, just in the Working on Country program alone, the Australian Government has spent over \$680 million over the 10 years to pay for these programs and it's completely transformed the landscape in Australia. You may know that in Australia they have a feral animal problem. They have animals that have come from other parts of the world that are wreaking havoc on their ecosystems – the largest camel herds in the world are in Australia, the cane toad, the rabbit – so now the Australian Rangers are actually responsible for managing those feral animals and dealing with that problem and the impact on their ecosystems. That program started off in the Environment Department in Australia and is now managed through the Office of the Prime Minister, and so that's a demonstration of how this is really a program that spans not just environmental concerns but truly multiple spheres of concerns.

So what's the impact of the program? In Australia they've done a really good job of measuring the impacts of this program and they've not just measured the direct environmental management or feral animal management, but they measured the social impact of the programs. They've found that this program has markedly reduced the rates of incarceration of Indigenous Peoples – a problem that we also face here in Canada – and the rates of violence against women. Of course, when people are working, they're happier and they're less likely to be violent. It's improved, in the Australian case, the taxation system for the country. And what they

found is that with all of these impacts, that for every dollar that they invest in the program, they get an equivalent of 3.5 dollars back in value.

We've started doing some measurements on programs here in Canada; in fact, we had the same folks who did the evaluation in Australia come to the Northwest Territories and evaluate the Ni Hat'ni Dene program and the program out of the Dehcho. They found even with those very young programs – the Ni Hat'ni program I believe is just over five years old and the Dehcho program I believe is just over two years old – they found already a 2.5 to 1 return on investment, and their feeling is that with the federal program investment, that would jump to a 3.7 to 1 return on investment. Now to put that into perspective, there are currently no programs of funding with Indigenous Peoples that have that kind of return on investment and impact, and so when we met with the federal cabinet ministers, treasury board president and staff, we really found that they were clued into that reality. Another piece of perspective: We just met with Catherine McKenna, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, and she stated that they did an evaluation of the Canadian parks system and they get a 3 to 1 value back, so they could even be investing more and getting more of their money back within the park system.

This is why it matters: Our youth, our communities, our Elders, and learning how to manage our lands and be who we are for our own future.

I'm really excited by the presence of all the types of on-the-land healing programs because I think those are really the seeds upon which Guardians programs can be built – and especially the way that some of your programs are being run, which is from a healing lens and one of a cultural revitalization and strengthening, which is exactly the right route for guardians programs which are formalized.

As governments who are coming into self governance and figuring out who we are as nations, we have some responsibilities. Some of those responsibilities cannot be fulfilled in other ways than through guardians programs, so it is really a way for us as nations to grow and fulfill who we are as nations and be a place where we can interact with the other nations in this country, including the Crown governments.

And finally, especially on the wildlife and lands, because I worked with folks right across Quebec and Labrador on the Ungava Peninsula Caribou Aboriginal Round Table (UPCART) to come up with a way for us to decide what is going to happen

with caribou. What we see here in Délı̄ne is that they've gotten their own caribou plan accepted here – congratulations to Délı̄ne. This the first time in the country where a community plan has been accepted by a Crown government in its own strength and in its own power, so way to go Délı̄ne. That is a trend that is happening right across this country, and, in fact, with the UPCART, we are going to be developing our very own program to counter the impacts of development and the decisions of the Crown governments that have really led to what we feel is a collapse of our caribou. Our caribou have gone from over a million caribou to now, in the George River Herd case, less than one thousand caribou since the 1990s. And so this is us taking back the power and making it happen.

For the national program, we costed it out for every nation and we figured that it would be good for the federal government to come in for the core program upon which other things could be leveraged. We estimated that for a five-year program in Canada, that could cost up to \$500 million dollars. Now it sounds like a big number when you think about it. But the process for the Mackenzie Valley consultation cost about \$500 million dollars. And so it's actually not that much money. We estimate that every guardian costs about \$100,000 a year in equipment, salary, training, uniforms, and coordination with the rest of the programs in the community. When I was running the program, we had between 15 and 18 guardians and my budget was about \$1.5-1.6 million for the Environment Office. That's kind of what it costs to run these programs. It sounds like it's a lot but it's really not when you think about it from the value of the money that you get back or the return on investment.

Gloria Enzoe

My name is Gloria Enzoe. I come from Lutsel K'e and am a Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation member. I want to thank the community of Dettah for gathering us here today. I give them much thanks and also give Valérie and the organization thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak to you guys today. I'm a mother of three boys, an avid land-user, and mentor to young adults that are growing in this world.

Right now, I work for the wildlife department within the Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation. I did run the Ni Hat'ni Dene program, which I founded with community Elders in 2008.

The one thing that my parents instilled in me is the fact that our land is important to us.

The Ni Hat'ni Dene program started as a

pilot project in 2008. The program was created to protect the pristine waters of McLeod Bay due to the increased activity of exploration and mining within our traditional territory of Akaitcho Dene, Lutsel K'e Dene, inspired by the Elders.

I was fortunate enough to be hired on to work with a great team. In 2008 we started up the pilot project, and the things that I remember from the beginning stages are keywords that the Elders passed on to me. They talked about our future and how we're going to live with the land, and how healthy the land is going to make us as people. My key observations at the time were: These Elders have so much knowledge. They knew the water flow, they knew migration routes, trapping areas. They held all this knowledge. While I was sitting with them learning from them, to know that they know where our water comes from, how it flows, where the caribou migrate, where it's good to hunt moose, where to pick berries, all those things – to know that they held so much knowledge – that's when I knew they passed on to me the importance to monitor our waters and lands, and to make sure visitors are respecting our territory.

So in 2008 we started working with others and finding money, developing a program and hiring a team. Ni Hat'ni Dene means "watchers of the land". This is where my work with Valérie and the organization comes from. I not only worked with Elders to develop on-the-land programs but we also developed partnerships with others. I was able to learn from the Haida, to understand what it was for them to protect their lands and the reasons why. Visiting their lands gave me an insight of how important not only my lands are, but how important other lands are to other First Nations, and how we're all trying to do the same thing.

So the Ni Hat'ni Dene program mandate is to maintain the integrity of the cultural sites and natural beauty within Thaidene Nene², to host and provide interpretive tours for visitors in the area, monitor and document visitor activity, cultural futures and environmental and wildlife values, and to transmit cultural and scientific knowledge to younger generations.

Ni Hat'ni Dene runs through the summer. We hire monitors, and the monitors are usually two adults and four youth. [We] usually have two teams of those that go out on a rotational basis throughout the summer. The duties are fish samples, wildlife observations, angler surveys, visitors' surveys, and protecting our old cabin sites, amongst many other things. Learning from their teachers about travel routes and how to harvest and preserve food, the

youth get the skills necessary to live as one with the land and all that is living. Traditional knowledge is important for future generations and our way of life.

The community history of monitoring has developed some excellent internal capacity, and outside “expert” capacity has been relatively stable. There is still room for improvement for training and expansion of the Ni Hat’ni Dene. The community maintains a strong vision for its traditional territory and its role in it.

When we send our young adults out we’re actually sending them out to heal.

The reason why I bring up these programs is because I’m a community member; I live in a community. My moccasins are on the ground. We send our young people and adults onto their traditional territory and the things that I see, my own observations for my young people and my people at home, is the teachings are skills that people need to heal. So when we send our young adults out we’re actually sending them out to heal. They learn to harvest wood and make fire, to hunt and prepare food, they learn to collect water and clean, they learn to be with oneself and learn to practice spirituality.

Bringing these programs together ensures that young people are going to live a healthy life and that they’re going to go into adulthood [as] healthy people and that our communities [are] going to be healthy because we are raising healthy people. The reasons why I bring this up [is] because this is a pan-territorial health summit and community health is really important. In small communities, people don’t have many resources. Often, the people we care for very much. And that’s why we come to these meetings to help them, to help our people who are struggling. I think this is a time to heal and get back to them. Because so much was taken from us with all our history.

Through the on-the-land programs we began to observe individual change: more youth applying, confidence building, strengthening skills gained from being out on the land and on the waters. People are happier, healthier, and respectful. Individuals that take interest in on-the-land programs have the responsibility of protecting their home; they take pride in maintaining their homelands.

On-the-land programs are very important in regards to how we live in the community, with each other and how we live with the land. When I look at these pictures of young people amongst the fire, they give me pride. I care for all young people and I want them to live the good life.

People here in the North are strong. Very strong. Dene knowledge is very powerful. So, with that being said, I want to say marsi cho from the Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation. I hope that this meeting gathers us together: ●

This panel presentation has been edited for length and clarity.

Stephen Kakfwi is a former Northwest Territories Premier and Dene Nation President. He has been outspoken in his beliefs on the importance of NWT Aboriginal participation in the Northern political and economic mainstream, balancing Northern resource development with stewardship of the land, and protecting and preserving NWT languages, culture, and traditions. He is a senior advisor with the Indigenous Leadership Initiative.

Valérie Courtois is a registered professional forester who specializes in Indigenous issues, forest ecology, and ecosystem-based management and planning. She is a member of the Innu community of Mashteuiatsh, located on the shore of Peikuakami, or Lac-St-Jean. Courtois has been the Director of the Indigenous Leadership Initiative since 2013. In addition to her work in conservation and planning, Valérie is an avid photographer. She is also on the Board of Directors of the Corporation du Mushuau-nipi, a non-profit that encourages cultural and professional exchanges on the George River. She lives in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador.

Gloria Enzoe is a member of the Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation. She comes from a very traditional family and has spent most of her life on the land, learning the traditional ways of her people. Gloria has dedicated her time to developing the Ni Hat’ni Dene guardians program in her community that honours the Elders and transfers knowledge to the younger generations.

Notes:

1 Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning is a Northern-led initiative delivering land-based, university-credited educational experiences led by Northern leaders, experts, Elders and professors to engage Northern and southern youth in a transformative curriculum based on the cutting-edge needs of Canada’s North.

2 <http://landoftheancestors.ca/>