

Special Issue of Northern Public Affairs Magazine: The Pan-Territorial On-the-Land Summit

Grounding culture, guardianship, education, and healing on the land

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The land is a source of life for all Northern people. It provides the basis for physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellness – the four components of a healthy individual and, by extension, healthy communities.

Colonization, residential schools, and interference with people's ability to make decisions about their own lives have disconnected many Northern and Indigenous Peoples from the land. This disconnection has in turn led to breakdowns in connection to language, culture, and identity.

Leaders from the community to the national level are now recognizing the importance of the land in the areas of health and wellness, justice, arts and culture, and employment, and are increasingly placing programming directly onto the landscape in traditional settings.

Just over one year ago, a Pan-Territorial On-the-Land Summit was held in Dettah, Northwest Territories from March 14 to 16, 2017. Funded by Health Canada and hosted by the Government of the Northwest Territories, the Summit gave participants from across the North the opportunity to explore the themes of healing, culture, guardianship, collaboration, and evaluation as they relate to land-based programming. Throughout the Summit, participants were able to learn from and build networks with other programming experts to foster new ideas for improving wellness in their own communities and regions.

Hosted on Chief Drygeese Territory, the traditional territory of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, the Summit was planned with community input and included on-the-land activities such as checking nets and traps, dog sledding, and skiing. A steering committee with members from Nunavut, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories provided guidance in developing the agenda and participant list. All three territories were represented throughout the three-day program as presenters and cultural performers, alongside visiting experts from southern Canada and Alaska.

At the Summit, culture and language were named as essential aspects of land-based healing and stewardship. Phillip Gatensby spoke to the importance of revitalizing a “connection language” – one that understands and recognizes the sacred, inherent relationships of Indigenous Peoples to the land, and allows healing to happen naturally.

John B. Zoe emphasized the role of land as a teacher and the site of language, history, and culture. Traditional place names hold the critical information needed for survival on the land, and keep people connected to the trails of their ancestors so they can be “strong like two people”; that is, as deeply rooted in tradition as they are within the modern world.

Ensuring youth have opportunities to be on the land while in school was also raised as crucial to building resilience among younger generations. Both Lois Philipp and Lawrence Enosse spoke to the value of land-based education and adventure programming as beneficial for strengthening identity, family, and community.

While many Northern and Indigenous communities continue to be affected by disproportionate impacts on their wellbeing, Carol Hopkins of the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation reminded us that it is key to focus on wellness not by looking at it from a deficit perspective, but by deciphering, through culturally appropriate means of assessment, what wellness actually looks like for Indigenous Peoples. We should focus on how individuals and communities derive their sense of hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose.

Leaders in Indigenous Guardianship, Stephen Kakfwi, Valérie Courtois, and Gloria Enzoe, shared the ways in which Indigenous-led land stewardship programs are creating sustainable employment for Northern communities and protecting the lands for generations to come while improving quality of life for Northern and Indigenous communities on their own terms.

And stories shared by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson illustrated the necessity that a connection to land has for Indigenous nationhood, wellbeing, and all of life itself. The simple question – what if Kwezens, the little girl who discovered maple syrup, had not been able to access the land at all? – brings that critical juncture into focus as something that must be maintained into the future.

Much more was shared in the outdoor break-away sessions and panel showcases from each region across the North, some of which is captured in the photo essay from the Summit. The event

was webcast and videos of the presentations can be viewed online, along with the full event agenda.

The wisdom of our communities is backed by research confirming that a relationship with the land carries positive benefits for physical, mental, and communal wellbeing. The Summit was an important first step in providing leaders in on-the-land healing, collaboration, guardianship, education, and evaluation the opportunity to learn from one another, and to showcase and celebrate the innovation and successes of land-based programs across the North. ●



Photo Credit: Pat Kane

Dene drummers open the Summit in Dettah with a prayer song during the feeding the fire ceremony.