CATALYST

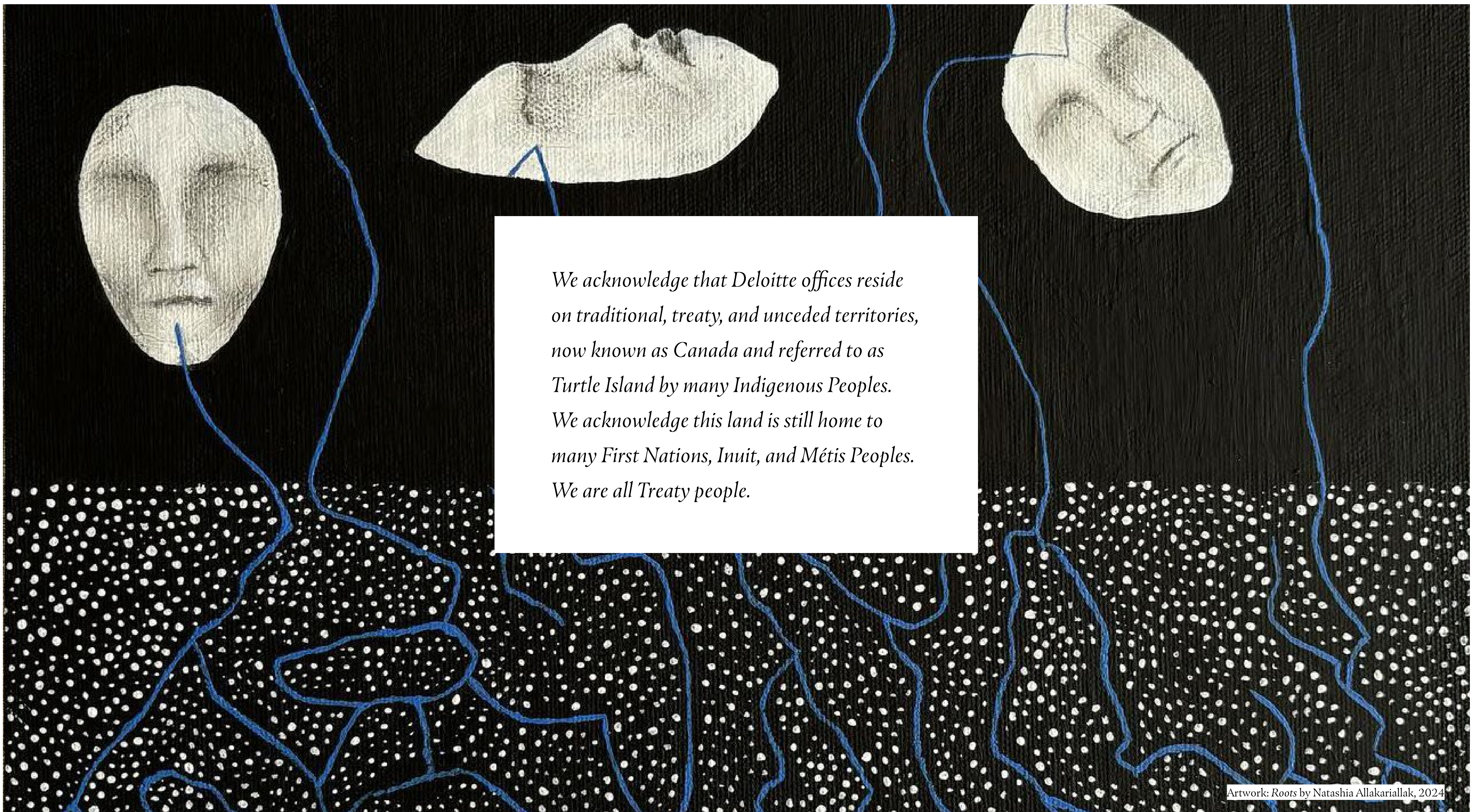
FUTURE OF CANADA CENTRE

Voices of Indigenous youth leaders on reconciliation

VOLUME 4: **RECONCILING OUR RELATIONSHIPS TO PRESERVE MOTHER EARTH FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS**

Deloitte.

Artwork: *The Children of the Land* by Natashia Allakariallak, 2024



Artwork: *Roots* by Natashia Allakariallak, 2024

This is the fourth volume of the *Voices of Indigenous youth leaders on reconciliation* series, which acts on Deloitte's commitment to ignite meaningful dialogue on the four themes identified by Indigenous youth as priorities for advancing reconciliation. The series is a joint initiative between Deloitte's Future of Canada Centre and Indigenous Youth Roots, formerly known as Canadian Roots Exchange.

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INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, Indigenous communities have been rooted in their reciprocal relationship with the lands in which they live. They have relied on them for physical, spiritual, and cultural sustenance. In return, they cared for the lands, animals, and resources through their traditional knowledge and practices.

"Indigenous Peoples, all of our different tribes and cultures, have the knowledge on how to interact with our lands and keep the lands safe, from farming to hunting to only using what you need."

Yet, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have been and continue to be largely excluded from decision-making processes regarding land and resource management, and climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. They are also disproportionally impacted by changes to climate and the environment, which threaten their physical well-being and the survival of their spiritual and cultural practices.

Photo by Damien Bouchard

When asked about the environment, Indigenous youth we interviewed described the environmental changes we are witnessing as an urgent call from the land for healing—a direct response to our failure to live in reciprocity with the environment. They noted that collaboration is taking place to answer these calls to protect and rehabilitate the land, which they see as the promising and necessary path forward. However, they cautioned that we cannot effectively enter these partnerships without first "reconciling our relations with the land and each other."

We hear Indigenous youth and we recognize the importance of having this conversation on their terms. We seek to amplify their perspectives about the current state of environmental practices in Canada and their recommendations about a path to a more sustainable future. We encourage corporate, government, and environmental decision-makers to examine the progress of their reconciliation work in a manner that is informed by the experiences of young Indigenous Peoples and, ultimately, ensure their efforts have truly positive impacts.

We at Deloitte believe we have both a call to service and a duty to drive positive change for Canada. Through our collaboration with young Indigenous leaders on this report, we aim to support Canada's leaders in bringing more inclusive approaches to the nation's pressing issues and in building a path to a thriving, environmentally sustainable future together.

Our approach

This exploratory research design applies an Indigenous youth-centred, Two-Eyed Seeing approach, which seeks to balance both Indigenous and Western research methods and perspectives.[1] We collected and analyzed data in keeping with CARE[i] principles, including respecting data and knowledge.[2] We protected research participants' data through responsible retention protocols and obtained their prior consent on how their data would be shared in the report. Given our focus on amplifying the voices of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, who are experts in their own lived experiences, we used an inductive approach of inquiry to identify key themes.

We synthesized insights shared by the participants of the 2022 and 2023 Indigenous Youth Advocacy Week (IYAW) programs, organized by Indigenous Youth Roots (IYR). Through interviews, workshops, and a report-development briefing and review process, the youth informed the report's overall insights and provided their recommendations, reflected throughout, on ways to support their calls for building a better relationship with the land and on how to work together more effectively to address the climate crisis.

Methodology

We began by surveying Indigenous youth aged 18 to 29 who participated in the 2022 Indigenous Youth Advocacy Week. We held follow-up interviews and a workshop with four participants, then organized another workshop and report-briefing session and review process with the 2023 IYAW cohort to dig deeper into the challenges they faced and discuss possible solutions. We supplemented the participants' insights and recommendations with secondary sources, including academic publications, analyses of aggregated data sets from Statistics Canada and other sources, and interviews with both academic and industry specialists experienced in working with Indigenous Peoples, Knowledge Keepers, and communities in the land and resource management and conservation sectors.

[i] *CARE refers to collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility, and ethics.*

Defining environmental reconciliation

The Indigenous youth from IYAW propose a more inclusive approach to the kind of work that belongs on Canada's climate agenda—that of environmental reconciliation. They describe this work as governments and industries taking responsibility for past and ongoing harms to their communities and the environment while working with Indigenous Peoples, whom they recognize as experts and leaders in this space, to address and correct such harms. The youth also call for non-Indigenous leaders in this space to establish reciprocity in their relationships with Indigenous partners and with the environment, which requires meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and values. While governments, industries, and organizations in the conservation sector have begun taking such actions, their efforts still fall short, and much work remains to be done.

This report shares the youth participants' insights on the actions that have severed and continue to sever Indigenous communities from their lands (and consequently their traditional knowledge and practices) and maintain their exclusion from environmental leadership. In addition to their recommendations, this report presents the youth's envisioned future state of the land and relationships that may be possible by undertaking this reconciliation work.

For more on the role that reconciliation must play in Canada's climate change response, as well as the framework behind Deloitte's own journey, see *Promises, promises: Living up to Canada's commitments to climate and Indigenous reconciliation*.

As [the youth] also said, being able to connect back to earth, the fundamental thing that you need to do is you need to love the earth again. When I'm facilitating meetings on climate change, that always comes up—they always talk about love. In other climate change circles, no one talks about that. All they talk about is carbon; rightly so, but they don't talk about how to get ourselves out of this mess. And what it boils down to is reconnecting again and loving the earth again."

– Deborah McGregor, PhD, Professor, Osgoode Hall Law School, York University

Mapping the path to environmental reconciliation

Acknowledging that the diversity and contributions of several Indigenous Nations have influenced the report's form, we have chosen to apply the Haudenosaunee's Great Tree of Peace[ii] as a framework to capture the vision of environmental reconciliation as the youth and specialists hope to see it evolve. This framework serves as a conceptual tool for understanding the issue space, the path forward, and the envisioned future state.

The Tree of Peace's origin traces back to Haudenosaunee Creation stories.[5] The tree image, shown in *Figure 1*, represents a vision for environmental reconciliation and peaceful co-existence—with each other and the environment—that can be realized when we undertake this work.

Environmental reconciliation starts at the foundation (the roots), with strong shared values and diverse knowledges that are meaningfully bridged. When the actions and interactions that follow are aligned (the trunk), the conditions necessary for balanced partnerships and effective cross-cultural collaboration can be met.

Restoring balance between knowledge systems, learning to value Indigenous approaches, and improving decision-making approaches and relationship dynamics between Indigenous and non-Indigenous parties allows the tree to grow tall and strong (the branches), and offers opportunities to work together in establishing balance between ourselves and the environment.

[ii] *To learn more about the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's creation story, see "Great Tree of Peace teaching" in the* ***Further reading*** *section of the appendix.*

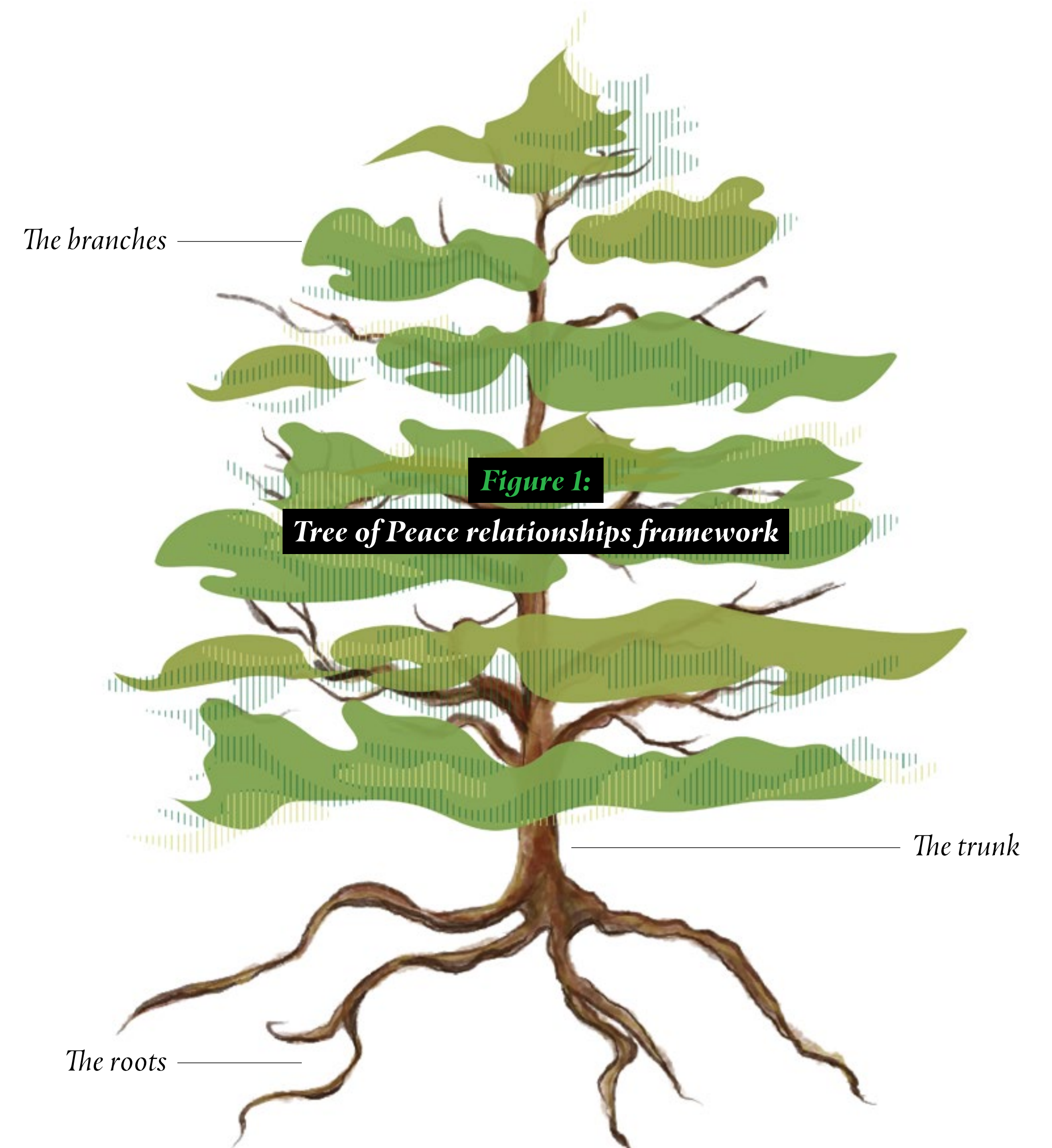


***Figure 1:* Tree of Peace relationships framework**

1. The roots: Fundamental values about the environment

Artwork: *Anaana* by Natashia Allakariallak, 2021

An inclusive definition of land

Mindful that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities hold their own unique histories and connections with the land, they do share some common values, such as viewing land holistically and respecting Mother Earth while acknowledging her reciprocal nature.

Among many Indigenous cultures, land is considered alive. It's inextricably connected to the people on not only a physical level, but also on an emotional and spiritual level, tracing the people's connections back to their Creation stories. In one study, many Inuit said their connection to the land was best explained as biological, a legacy of ancestry and the heart of their identity.[4] Indigenous scholars view land as a primary source of knowledge—it teaches reciprocity, obligation, and living in the world in non-dominating and non-exploitative terms.[5]

When asked how they think of land, the IYAW participants shared that it connects them with their family and ancestors, and is integral to maintaining their well-being and identity. In *Breaking colonial legacies and mapping new pathways to mental wellness*, we highlighted the mental health benefits of spending time on the land. In this volume, the young leaders describe the healing qualities and the feeling of safety the land offers, underscoring the reciprocal relationship humans can build and nurture with the land.

Understanding Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems

Since time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples have held and applied their own laws, teachings, and ways of living sustainably on the land. The youth we interviewed emphasized the important link between practising their culture and respecting Indigenous traditional knowledge (TK) protocols with improving environmental outcomes. They shared that reconnecting with and caring for the land in a good way, which is rooted in the strengths-based wellness concept of *mino-bimaadiziwin* (Anishinaabe) or *miyo-pimâtisiwin* (Plains Cree), is vital to preserving the environment for future generations.

Like the environment, Indigenous TK is not static but adapts in response to shifts and changes in the land. For example, the Medicine Wheel and Seven Grandfather Teachings in Anishinabek traditions guided decision-making and ways to live in balance with the natural world, which have been integrated into contemporary Indigenous governance practices.

The Indigenous specialists we spoke with described Indigenous TK as not being a singular knowledge but place-specific, held by the members of a community entrusted with such teachings. Being relational in nature, this knowledge is alive, generated over time and gained through experience and living in reciprocity with the land under the guidance of Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

Mindful of these truths, Indigenous TK cannot be separated from the people. In working with Indigenous partners, it is important to respect this principle and the people entrusted with it. Indigenous specialists caution that because Indigenous TK and its spirit are indelibly linked with those holding it, their keepers must not only be asked permission to use that knowledge but be involved as well.[6] We all have a role to play in preventing the extraction and cultural appropriation of Indigenous traditional knowledge.

> *"We have our own ways of life but we need to think of better ways to source energy while protecting the land that we have left."*

Diverse understandings of land

A fundamental issue the Indigenous youth leaders and specialists identified is the tension between Indigenous natural law principles and dominant Western ideals, with Western climate interventions and approaches to land development resulting in the current state of the environment. In her field work, one specialist observed that "settlers are often disconnected from place," while another said it's this disconnection to land as well as the prevailing fee-simple approach to land ownership that is the source of many of our environmental challenges today. Western ideals have entrenched the perspective that land can be owned and that it is an exploitable resource, directly conflicting with many Indigenous ideals that view the land as living with its own spirit. This tension has played out since colonial settlement.

When Europeans arrived in North America, which some Indigenous nations refer to as Turtle Island, settlers viewed the land as unsettled, rich in resources, and something to be monetized. The influence that European imperialism had on landscapes, natural resource use, and development patterns is so pronounced that emerging carbon analyses can directly quantify and attribute historical emissions to colonial rule.[7] Driven primarily by capitalistic values, the Western approach has historically been to appreciate the land, in significant part, by how much profit may be generated from its development and extraction, thereby excluding both Indigenous scientific knowledge about the land's properties and needs, and principles like taking only what is needed. One youth noted the land is still seen as "something to exploit and not something to take care of."

This short-term view stands in stark contrast to Indigenous concepts of sustainability, like the Seven Generations principle, which involves making decisions and taking actions that will preserve a sustainable world for the next seven generations. The values and approaches of the first settlers to managing the environment continue to prevail today, resulting in the suppression of Indigenous Peoples' ways of life and harm to the lands.

Colonial impacts on Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems

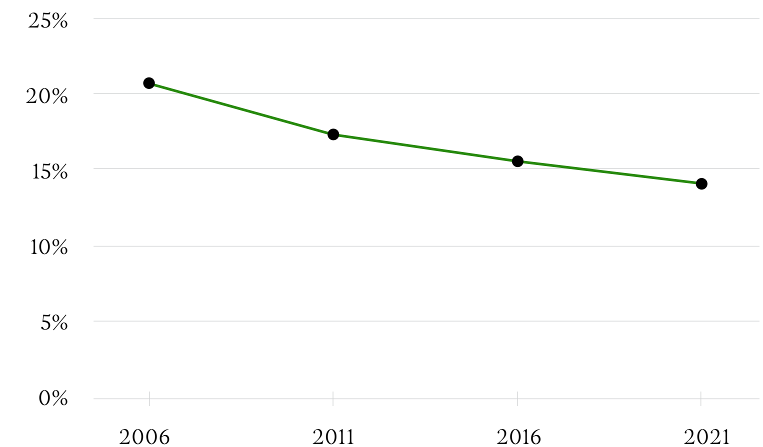
The youth see the benefits to their health and sense of identity from reconnecting with, or "repossessing," the land.[8,9] But they're keenly aware of the lasting negative impacts that residential schools have had on generations of Indigenous Peoples and their connection to the land, and the effects on the ability of previous generations to pass down knowledge, traditions, and language.[iii]

Indigenous languages are necessary for Indigenous Peoples' transmission and understandings of traditional cultures and teachings to strengthen relations with the land. While they want to learn and to connect with the land, the youth said they don't know where to start to gain this experience, given the decline in number and availability of Knowledge Keepers and Indigenous people who speak their mother tongue. Knowledge of Indigenous languages has been steadily decreasing: in the 2021 Census of Population, only 13.1% of Indigenous people in Canada reported an ability to speak an Indigenous language—down 8% from the 2006 census[10] *(see Figure 2)*. The fact that language is being lost between generations causes much concern for the young Indigenous people and environmental specialists we spoke with.

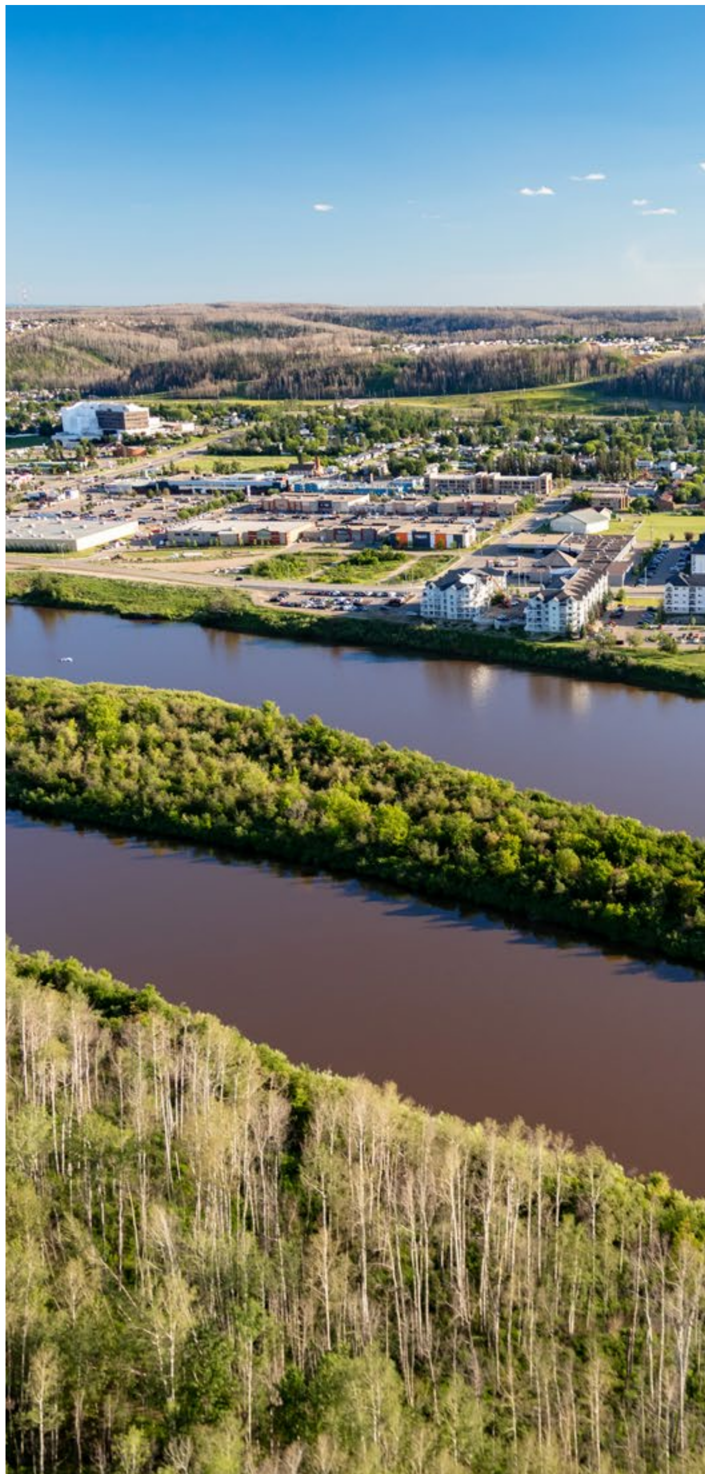
The historical displacement of Indigenous peoples from their territories has posed geographic and financial barriers to maintaining connections with their communities and conducting land-based activities and ceremonies. The lack of access to culture is more pronounced for youth living in urban settings: "It's disheartening because, especially here, in the city, where am I supposed to access traditional medicines?" said one. There's a yearning for safe spaces in municipal settings and access to cultural learning among the youth we spoke with, identifying a gap in the support for their overall well-being and desire to connect with the land.

[iii] *To learn more about how students at residential schools were prohibited from, and punished for, speaking their language and practising their culture, see "National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation" in the* ***Further reading*** *section.*

Figure 2: *Percentage of Indigenous population reporting being able to speak an Indigenous language well enough to conduct a conversation*



Source: Statistics Canada, Knowledge of Indigenous languages, 2023.



Land-based learning in action: Fort McMurray public schools

The Fort McMurray Public School Division (FMPSD) in northern Alberta holds annual land-based camps for students in Grades 3 to 12 that combine traditional Indigenous teachings with modern education practices. This initiative aims to foster environmental awareness, cultural identity, and academic excellence, and offers all students—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of preserving the environment while learning about Indigenous culture, history, and traditional practices.

While at camp, students can explore the land, learn about plants native to the area and use them to prepare traditional healing balms, and participate in sharing circles. The concept of reciprocity is discussed and modelled in their activities, and students have the chance to express gratitude for the teachings and experiences. The FMPSD invites local First Nations and Métis Elders and Knowledge Keepers to share their cultures and experiences. The result is a safe, cross-cultural learning space that welcomes young people of all heritages who live in urban settings to embrace Indigenous concepts of land and sustainability, learn new skills, and deepen their connection to the land.[11]

> *"All of my aunts, and great aunts and uncles, they all hunt. Even my dad hunted when he was younger, but I never have, and I have always wanted to. Being in the city, especially, where am I to learn how to hunt?"*

Imposing non-Indigenous knowledge systems

Canada's suppression of Indigenous cultures is well documented. The intentional eroding of Indigenous governance and knowledge systems through the Indian Act and residential schools have disrupted a potential balance of power between settlers and Indigenous nations and facilitated the imposition of Western approaches to land. As a result, Western knowledge systems continue to dominate, while Indigenous Peoples and their knowledges of managing lands in a good way are sidelined.

The Indigenous specialists we interviewed emphasized Indigenous TK's validity is evidenced by the fact that Indigenous Peoples' holistic management of lands has sustained generations for millennia. Their connection to land also provides them with critical knowledge on environmental changes and wildlife patterns, which offer valuable insights for responsible land management approaches.[12] However, the merits of Indigenous TK remain generally dismissed, and attempts to integrate it are often superficial.[13]

In response to the exclusion of Indigenous voices, the specialists interviewed call for eliminating biases and including, on equal footing, Indigenous knowledge systems in decision-making spaces. Indigenous scholars are also calling for indigeneity-grounded analysis in policymaking, which involves applying Indigenous perspectives to policy analysis, accounting for their unique experiences and interests.[14] The time for respecting the validity of Indigenous traditional knowledge is long overdue.

> *"When we are told that because climate science is so new Indigenous peoples don't have this kind of science, I point to our knowledge like the Thirteen Moons,[iv] demonstrating that we already have a baseline from which to measure exactly what should be happening on our lands."*
>
> *– Deborah McGregor, York University*

[iv] *To learn more about the knowledge of the seasonal cycle from one nation's perspective, see "Nisto Osap Tiposkawi Pisimuk—Thirteen Moons" in the* ***Further reading*** *section.*

Embed respect for Indigenous traditional knowledge and connections to the land

1. Implement Indigenous language and cultural revitalization efforts

- **Governments and resource companies** should provide provide flexible funding for land-based language learning and cultural activities. They should also eliminate barriers to access such programming, such as by subsidizing transportation costs to participate.
- **Governments** should invest in and work equitably with Indigenous partners and Knowledge Keepers to protect and make available safe, public green spaces in urban settings (e.g., parks, urban forests, nature trails) for land-based cultural revitalization activities and support cross-cultural learning opportunities to reconnect with the land. This includes compensating Indigenous Peoples for their time and expertise in participating in collaborative projects.

> *"Language and culture are so important for our youth. That way they're grounded, and connected to the land, by doing those practices like fasting, so that they know who they are."*
>
> *– Shirley Williams, Professor Emeritus, Trent University; Water Walker*

2. Create cross-cultural learning opportunities to bridge Indigenous worldviews, and form a relationship with the land

- **Governments, businesses, and environmental institutions** conducting work on Indigenous territories should, with the guidance of Indigenous partners, undertake and report on learning to understand the history of colonial suppression of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems and their responsibility to improve their approaches and relationships with Indigenous Peoples. This should include land-based learning and sharing with Indigenous community members.

- **Research and educational institutions at all levels** should, in collaboration with local Indigenous community partners, include in their curricula Indigenous scholarship and research methods that highlight Indigenous knowledge contributions and consider the unique experiences of Indigenous peoples. This includes land-based, cross-cultural sharing among Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

- **Governments, businesses, and public institutions** should develop and apply an Indigenous-based analysis in decision-making processes to strike a balance between worldviews and experiences. This includes applying a lens that considers the potential impacts on Indigenous peoples and strives for Indigenous belonging and inclusion.

> *"We need to bring back traditional knowledge and help our Elders pass on the teachings and traditions. In Western schools, we can implement the teachings and make them more accessible."*

3. Decolonize climate research and action

- **Governments, businesses, and higher learning and research institutions** should recognize Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge and experiences as equally indispensable as Western approaches. This involves including Indigenous culture and language reclamation efforts in climate research, actions, and policy solutions.

- **Research institutions and researchers** should meaningfully include Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers in decision-making and data governance at the outset of planning research initiatives that might have an impact on Indigenous Peoples or will be taking place on their traditional territory. This includes fairly compensating them through established base payment rates.

- **Governments and research institutions** should build relationships with Indigenous communities impacted by climate change to make climate science data and academic literature more available to them to support their land-related objectives.

- **Research institutions, businesses, and governments** should consider nature-based solutions (NbS) when working with Indigenous leadership in land management and climate action. Indigenous TK in NbS can lessen the effects of climate change by safeguarding, restoring, and managing natural ecosystems in a way that benefits both people and wildlife.[v]

> *"There should be a national base rate for Elder honorarium to prevent Elder abuse and Elder fraud. Because I know a lot of these people are getting looped into roles and [are] severely underpaid."*

[v] *To learn more about nature-based solutions, see Deloitte Canada's Bringing carbon down to earth: Indigenous leadership in nature-based carbon projects.*

4. Invest in the next generation of Indigenous climate leaders

- **Governments and resource companies** should increase the availability of long-term, multi-year grants for Indigenous youth to allow them to engage in traditional land-based activities and climate science innovation. This includes Indigenous-led mentorship and empowerment programming that allows youth to connect with and learn from Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and climate science leaders.
- **Granting bodies** should conduct systemic reviews of their Indigenous youth funding programs to eliminate systemic barriers for applicants and provide coaching on how to successfully navigate their application processes.
- **Governments and environmental organizations** should include leadership positions for Indigenous youth from territories impacted by their decisions and policies.

> *"You need to have Indigenous youth in these spaces as well, with proper decision-making tools and resources."*

2. The trunk: Cultivating relationships with the land and each other

Artwork: *Allakariallak* by Natashia Allakariallak, 2022

Impacts of imbalanced relations in land management

The youth leaders and specialists said that when unsustainable worldviews are applied to the land, environmental harm happens. According to them, anthropogenic climate change and the damages it causes are a direct consequence of relating to the land in a fundamentally non-reciprocal way.

As the youth told us, Canada's current relationship with the land—one that is, for the most part, heavily marked by extractive practices—is one of taking too much from Mother Earth and not giving enough back in return. We are witnessing profound environmental changes, with 2023 being a record-setting year for above-normal temperatures and weather-related emergencies in Canada. Not only was it the worst wildfire year on record, burning more than 18 million hectares—at least twice the previous worst year and seven times the 10-year average of forests consumed by fires—Canada also experienced 27 major weather events, which included tornadoes, hurricanes, heat waves, and floods as well as the forest fires, up from 13 events in 2022 and triple the amount recorded in 2020.[15]

Such extreme weather has had a disproportionate impact on Indigenous communities, which are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.[16, 17] People living on-reserve are 18 times more likely than other Canadians to be evacuated due to such emergencies and disasters.[18] According to one study on flood exposure across Canada, 81% of First Nations lands are exposed to flooding, and 40 of 41 locations are at the highest risk of flood hazards based on flood exposure and social vulnerability measures.[19] The youth spoke about the devastating effects these disasters have on their communities' housing and infrastructure, including damaging homes and forcing families to relocate.

The IYAW participants we spoke with noted how discriminatory environmental policies are at play. Not only have reserves been relegated to lands situated in more vulnerable and disaster-prone areas, but Canadian policy has also allowed for heightened industrial activity and waste disposal near their communities, to the detriment of their health and well-being. The youth have witnessed habitat loss, contaminated water and lands, and the extinction or migration of plants and animals. These changes have threatened traditional sources of food and medicine and the very physical survival of their communities, including their ability to respond to and care for the land in their roles as stewards.

I have come to think of climate change as Mother Earth's response. As humans, our collective actions are directly linked to the changes Creation is experiencing: it's not the climate or the Earth—it is us and our actions. We are the ones who have "changed," forgetting the simple fact we are interconnected to everything. Mother Earth is just responding to years and years of neglect."

– Tasha Beeds, PhD,
Professor, University of Windsor

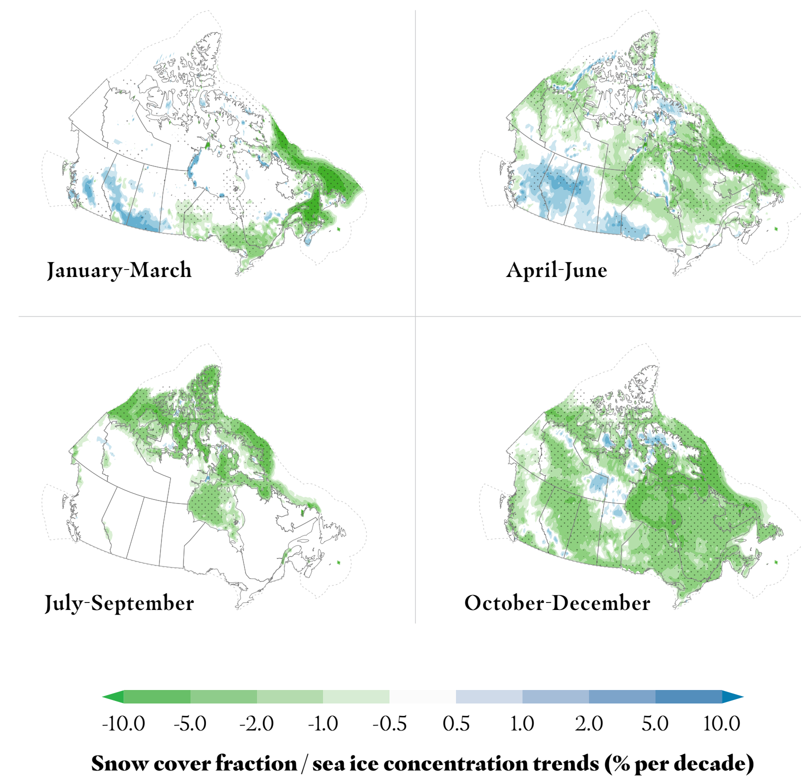
This threat is not only physical. The young leaders emphasized that the dependence on traditional lands for conducting spiritual and cultural activities means that a changing environment also threatens their communities' abilities to preserve their identity and spiritual well-being. They noted how fire bans have impacted their Elders' ability to hold ceremonies, and how some traditional pastimes in the northern regions have been virtually eliminated because there is less snow and ice. This is consistent with Canada's Changing Climate Report, which found that the proportion of the year with snow covering the ground (the snow cover fraction) has decreased across most of Canada by 5% per decade since 1981 and is expected to continue to decline at the current (high) emission levels *(see Figure 3)*.[20] Seasonal snow accumulation is also on the decline, decreasing by 10% per decade since 1981. As the youth put it, even if their rights to hunt, fish, gather, and practise their traditions and ceremonies are protected by section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982, these adverse changes to the environment prevent them from exercising those rights.

The youth describe the grief they experience when contemplating this grim reality. In addition to the general eco-anxiety they share with other young Canadians about the future, they also perceive environmental damage as manifestations of Mother Earth's suffering and fear for the continuity of their people's identities.[21] While they call for compensation for the harm and damage caused, they also seek accountability from those responsible for the damage—physical, spiritual, and cultural—that unsustainable environmental practices have caused and a recognition that these activities are ongoing.

Mother Earth is unhealthy and so are the Indigenous communities who depend on her. Responding to climate change requires addressing these inequities. The youth's message is clear: the environmental crisis demands everyone's immediate attention and action. They know that achieving better environmental outcomes and making space for Indigenous leadership go hand in hand, yet this work cannot fall to Indigenous people alone. Canadian businesses and governments have an important role to play too.

Restoring balance in our relationship with the environment will mean addressing the ways that our fundamentally unbalanced relationship with each other gets in the way of effective climate action.

***Figure 3:* Snow cover fraction trends from 1981-2015**



Source: E. Bush and D.S. Lemmen, eds., Canada's Changing Climate Report, Government of Canada, 2019.

Climate injustice in action: Industrial pollution in First Nations

The heightened vulnerability of Indigenous communities to climate-related hazards is a form of environmental racism—the result of discrimination in environmental policymaking concerning land development and waste disposal. One such example is the proximity of waste and industrial facilities to many Indigenous communities. The pollutants and toxins released by the facilities mean nearby communities are less likely to have access to clean air and safe drinking water, and citizens are at greater risk of adverse health effects.

Aamjiwnaang First Nation, for example, located near Sarnia, Ontario—home to 40% of Canada's chemical industry—experiences an unusually high incidence of asthma, with 40% of band members surveyed requiring an inhaler and many reporting fertility-related issues.[22]

Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows) and Wabaseemoong First Nations in Ontario are another example. Because of mercury that was dumped into the English-Wabigoon river system in the 1960s that has yet to be cleaned up, 90% of the members of these First Nations have suffered various degrees of negative health effects due to mercury poisoning, first caused by consuming contaminated fish—once a culturally significant staple in their diet—then passed down to younger generations.[23]

Exclusion of Indigenous voices from land management

Removing Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands and imposing Western values has weakened Indigenous authority on issues concerning the land and allowed unsustainable practices to dominate. This is made worse by the historic and ongoing exclusion of Indigenous peoples from a shared approach to governance and economic systems.

As a result, Indigenous communities remain largely underrepresented in spaces where important decisions about the land and resources we share are made. Despite making up 5% of Canada's population, in 2022, Indigenous people held only 17 board of director positions—that's just 0.9% of corporate board positions.[24] Meanwhile, in federal political offices, there have been to date 25 members of the Senate and 49 Members of Parliament who self-identify as Indigenous, with the proportion of Indigenous MPs in the House of Commons peaking at 3.3% in 2015.[25] Often when they are brought into Western institutions, such as political structures, the youth and specialists we interviewed described a dilemma they see Indigenous leaders facing: they are either overly tokenized by their colleagues and so have limited power to effect change or they are expected to speak for a broad range of Indigenous peoples on diverse issues.[26]

The specialists we spoke with pointed out that when Indigenous peoples are asked to respond to requests for input, they are consistently undercompensated and overstretched, and they aren't given adequate support. That is in addition to meeting the increased demands to educate their non-Indigenous colleagues.

> *"We are not seen as equals and our voices are not seen as important or as valuable as government or corporations."*

> *"The land is developed, and decisions are made without me in mind."*

There is also the issue of inadequate consultation. The IYAW participants stressed that governments and corporations still fail to adequately consult their communities on land projects, and that such processes are largely not Indigenous-led. And when consultation does take place, they continued, it often feels treated as "another box to check" and falls short of addressing their concerns or recommendations. As the youth view it, many organizations fail to establish real relationships with their communities and territorial community network or to reach a diverse-enough cross-section of members. As a result, proposed projects and conservation and mitigation tactics are often inconsistent with traditional practices or even cause more harm, such as expropriating more land from Indigenous peoples.[27]

According to the young leaders, these unbalanced relationship dynamics contribute to ongoing harm to the environment and distrust of Canada's political and judicial systems as well as non-Indigenous organizations.[28] This distrust has hindered our ability to work together, while underrepresentation of and chronic failure to work with Indigenous communities also means that Indigenous peoples are less able to influence important decisions that affect their communities and well-being. The youth leaders expressed a lack of confidence in governments and corporations to make decisions about the environment that reflect either their values or best interests.

The exclusion of Indigenous voices is a lost opportunity to share their knowledge and sustainability practices, which, according to the youth and specialists, is the most promising approach to restoring balance to our relationship with the land. They stress that "Indigenous people have the answers," and that their perspectives and solutions should be adopted by Canadian businesses and governments in close collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Barriers impacting Indigenous institutions' leadership roles

The specialists noted that Indigenous communities, governments, environmental non-governmental organizations, businesses, water protectors, and land defenders across Canada have effectively co-led climate solution efforts over the years. The youth participants shared their optimism about the resurgence in nature-based solutions led by Indigenous communities, such as Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) and land management and stewardship initiatives like Land Guardian programs.

For one, these initiatives are known to improve conservation effectiveness and deliver diverse and measurable co-benefits for the environment and human well-being alike.[29, 30] Guardian programs on the West Coast, for example, measure these benefits in dollar equivalents, recording an estimated investment return ratio between 10:1 and 20:1—that's a $10-$20 return per dollar spent.[31] Furthermore, since a significant proportion of Canada's biodiversity and high-carbon-density forests and peatlands are located in Indigenous Nations' traditional territories, they also present a viable path toward achieving Canada's 30% terrestrial areas and inland waters conservation target.[32]

Canada has also recognized the critical role of Indigenous leadership and partnership in climate action and the need to affirm Indigenous land and territorial rights in various policy statements. And yet Indigenous-led environmental work still faces several systemic barriers. Decades of legislation has dismantled traditional Indigenous governance structures, sheltered corporate wealth, and controlled access to and development of land and resources on- and off-reserve.[33] Such government control has resulted in layers of unresolved territorial claims, jurisdictional tensions between state and recognized and asserted Indigenous title, and competing systems of governance.

Federal and provincial/territorial governments continue to allocate tenures and licences that allow mining and staking, oil and gas extraction, logging, hydroelectric development, and commercial fishing, on Indigenous territories, along with the roads and other infrastructure that's necessary to support these activities.[34] Despite Indigenous Nations exercising their right to self-determination and to enforce authority over their traditional lands, their assertions are routinely ignored by Crown governments, industries, and the conservation sector.

The inability to enforce their own laws and the absence of explicit legislative tools for establishing conservation areas and protecting these territories from extraction make it difficult for Indigenous nations to govern their lands in accordance with their laws and values.

Furthermore, financing and capacity are ongoing, pervasive challenges, according to the youth and specialists informing this report. Because wealth remains concentrated in non-Indigenous governments and organizations, emerging Indigenous communities and organizations require significant financial and non-financial resources (i.e., support and capacity) to establish governance models, fundraise, and build partnerships so that they can lead climate initiatives independently and be equal players in economic opportunities.

In response, federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments have in recent years increased funding for Indigenous-led climate solutions, broadly covering risk assessments and monitoring programs, emergency preparedness initiatives, infrastructure revitalization and clean energy projects, and agriculture and food security programs. To date, Canada

has pledged $2 billion in climate action funding for Indigenous Peoples, and a combined $1.4 billion for Indigenous-led conservation initiatives—such as IPCAs, Indigenous Guardians, conservation on Inuit lands, and Indigenous partnerships working to protect species at risk—in 94 Indigenous communities across the country.[35, 36]

While a step in the right direction, this funding represents less than 4% of the $107 billion that Canada has spent or committed to spend on the national climate agenda over the 2016/17 to 2027/28 period.[37, 38, 39] The specialists with whom we spoke noted that decarbonization and climate technology initiatives—projects that offer faster returns on investment and results—are receiving the lion's share of climate funding. This is consistent with general attitudes to Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Because Indigenous-led projects tend to require a longer-term commitment, where effectiveness is less obvious or measurable on shorter time scales, they are less likely to receive the same level of attention and funding.

In addition, the government and philanthropic funding available to Indigenous leadership for climate response and environmental conservation is often challenging to obtain, as they can require extensive bureaucratic processes. In the absence of substantial and sustained financing options, Indigenous Nations must take a piecemeal and labour-intensive approach to securing project funding from numerous grant sources. Many Nations are further frustrated, our interviewees told us, that when they do receive funding, it may come with expectations of co-governance or require Nations to compromise their values and approaches.

The youth echo these challenges in their own experiences engaging in climate work or revitalization projects at the community level. They expressed frustration at being invited to contribute their skills, knowledge, and leadership to opportunities that are either unpaid or come with the additional work of navigating complex application processes and bureaucratic requirements to access funding. Those interested in leading initiatives independently often struggle to secure funding if they are not affiliated with an administrative body like a university or an Indigenous or non-profit organization.

To read more about the key role of Indigenous leadership in land management, jurisdiction, and decision-making in working toward Canada's climate goals, read *Bringing carbon down to earth: Indigenous leadership in nature-based carbon projects*.

Facilitate partnerships among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and non-Indigenous parties for environmental management

5. Acknowledge past and continuing harms and give back to affected communities

- **Governments, businesses, and environmental institutions** should acknowledge the histories of traditional lands, territories, and peoples, any previous interactions with the community, and any role played in causing past and ongoing harm when entering or initiating a relationship with an Indigenous community or on traditional lands and territories.
- **Businesses whose activities have or will negatively impact Indigenous communities and territories** should work with Indigenous partners to identify and assess environmental, social, and cultural damages, financially compensate those affected (e.g., community funds to offset environmental impacts), and invest in restoration and remediation activities in accordance with Indigenous TK and under Indigenous partners' oversight.

> *"Big companies are contributing to pollution massively, and they are profiting from the damage that they're doing. They should pledge a fund for Indigenous communities that they're directly harming."*

6. Create space for Indigenous leaders to meaningfully participate in environmental decision-making

- **Governments** should prioritize working with Indigenous rights holders to clarify territorial status and jurisdiction in a government-to-government relationship, such as resolving outstanding land and treaty claims. This would demonstrate respect for inherent rights and facilitate the enforcement of Indigenous laws.
- **Governments, businesses, and environmental institutions** should create seats for Indigenous representatives on environmental governance bodies, including municipal, provincial or territorial, federal, and international committees, and associated policy working groups that focus on environmental policy and monitoring.
- **Businesses and environmental institutions** should create seats for Indigenous leaders and expert representatives on their boards, establish cultural leadership opportunities (e.g., Elders wisdom panels), and ensure other positions of authority within climate and resource sectors. This affords Indigenous leaders early oversight and active roles in decision-making on land and resource management projects that affect Indigenous peoples.

"Representation matters. You can raise up an Indigenous person to where a non-Indigenous person currently is so that we can see ourselves in those positions. At this time, we can only see ourselves in very few positions."

7. Equitably invest capacity for Indigenous-led initiatives

- **Governments, businesses, and environmental organizations** should establish substantive, sustained, and flexible hands-off investments and capacity-building opportunities for Indigenous-led land management, environmentally sustainable infrastructure, and conservation initiatives and stewardship programs.
- **Governments, businesses, and environmental organizations** should invest in and make available non-financial resources and supports (e.g., intellectual capital, human capital, networks, relationships) to Indigenous-led stewardship, land management, and conservation initiatives.
- **Governments, businesses, and environmental organizations** should improve Indigenous applicants' access to financial supports by streamlining funding application processes for climate action and programming. This could include creating Indigenous-specific funding programs and providing advisors to facilitate the process.

> *"Grassroots organizations can do a lot. They are doing a lot for the Indigenous communities right now. They just need the chance and the funding."*

8. Transition to more conscientious, Indigenous-led land management

- **Governments, businesses, and environmental organizations** should conduct and facilitate meaningful community consultation and participation that goes beyond fulfilling a legal duty to consult by engaging Indigenous rights holders early on and in a culturally appropriate manner.

- **Governments and businesses** in the resource and energy sectors should, with guidance from Indigenous partners, invest in and create education pathways, training, and capacity-building opportunities to empower Indigenous workers and youth to take on leadership roles in renewable energy and green technology projects in their communities.

- **Governments** should work with Indigenous rights holders to update legislative and regulatory requirements around environmental assessments and permits that better align with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous partners' worldviews on responsible land management.

- **Governments, businesses, and research and public institutions** should actively include Indigenous community leaders, Knowledge Keepers, and scholars for their perspectives in the design of a clean and post-extraction-based economy, and collaboratively work on Indigenous-led economic growth and development (e.g., conservation-based economies).

> *"It's not just funding these projects. Invite us to the university, show us how, and we'll do it. We just need the opportunity."*

3. The branches: *Restoring peace by living and working together sustainably*

Artwork: *Drying Fish* by Natashia Allakariallak, 2022

A vision of a healthier future sustained for future generations

When asked what they hope awaits them at the end of this path toward environmental reconciliation, the IYAW participants identified the following as key elements of their envisioned future state:

- *Clean air and water.*
- *A healthier environment, including the plants and animals on their lands.*
- *A stronger connection to the land and their traditions.*
- *The ability to exercise their rights to hunt, fish, and have ceremonies.*
- *Indigenous leaders are considered authorities on the environment.*
- *Indigenous values are reflected in how we as a country relate to and manage land.*

This is a future in which, having addressed past harms, Indigenous communities are healthier and more resilient, the environment is thriving, and harm is prevented because Indigenous Peoples are leading the way. These are the signs of rebalanced relations, with the land and with each other, as envisioned by the young Indigenous leaders.

Whether businesses, governments, or environmental organizations are playing a supporting role or working alongside as partners, the youth and specialists said they see greater collaboration as an inevitable outcome when responsibility for the land is appropriately shared. Yet, partners can expect that despite having good intentions, challenges can still arise. The youth noted that it's important to acknowledge that "it's not going to be perfect" and that "there's going to be hiccups, just like any kind of relationship."

The youth leaders caution, therefore, that we safeguard against the following possible barriers to success:

- Power differences that reproduce colonial inequalities that hinder Indigenous peoples in engaging as equal partners
- Conceptual differences and differences in values that lead to mistrust
- Co-opting Indigenous TK and traditional practices or alienating Indigenous leadership in co-governance or Indigenous-informed arrangements

The youth and specialists told us that collaboration—when built on a strong, reciprocal relationship—can be a process of learning together and moving forward. They also shared with us principles for approaching collaboration and partnership with mutual respect, curiosity, and a spirit of equality.

"As settlers, if we want to be part of the solution then we need to first stop the damage, and then begin to rebuild relationships and move forward together. We first need to acknowledge that damage to communities and lands is ongoing and then need to address that so Indigenous people can get out on the land and begin engaging with their own solutions."

– Jen Gobby, PhD, Postdoctoral Researcher, Concordia University

A. Approach collaboration locally

There are over 640 First Nations as well as Métis and Inuit communities, each with its own distinctive values, practices, identities, and histories. While most Indigenous communities share in the responsibility to care for the land, how they go about fulfilling this obligation will vary—and so will their expectations for effective collaboration and partnership.

The youth shared that respecting the diversity of Indigenous Peoples and acknowledging their different histories and connections to that land must be the starting point for any engagement. This requires that parties looking to collaborate with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities must avoid a universal approach, and instead take the time to learn about their local histories, cultures, and community-specific protocols so that the relevant social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions are factored into proposed projects and collaborations.

In particular, the youth and specialists ask that collaborators develop an awareness of the ecological context in which these communities exist. Recognizing and honouring the significance of animals, such as caribou and moose, and traditional plants to Indigenous peoples' identity, culture, and livelihoods, for example, is critical to a comprehensive understanding of their relationship to their environment and to prevent future harm.[40]

There is no perfect path to collaboration. However, by taking the time and effort to understand a community's values, responsibilities, and relationship to the land, one can ensure that projects are carried out in a way that is responsive to that community's distinct needs.

> *"There should be Indigenous voices from a wider scope, from all walks of life, from rural and urban communities, from different reserves, and with different areas of knowledge."*

B. Sustain a community presence and involve community members

The relationships that youth seek are those built on trust and reciprocity. Building these relationships takes time. They envision partners seeking their favour—be they governments, businesses, or other organizations—taking a long-term view and establishing a genuine community presence. According to the IYAW participants, parties looking to enter their communities with a project or collaborative opportunity must be willing to start building a relationship with community members beforehand, and to sustain this relationship during and after the project's completion.[41]

Working in this way respectfully requires open communication and appropriate involvement from the outset, while inviting participants to be vulnerable in order to facilitate open discussion.[42] This begins with an honest articulation of one's intentions and a readiness to seek out the participation and involvement of relevant rights holders. As the youth put it, partners "should come toward us and not us toward them," to ensure their involvement begins with the building of the foundation and not as an afterthought.

Respectful involvement also means that partners adopt a wider perspective on who counts as a partner participant. Participants should not be limited to community members who hold leadership positions but should include those interested in or affected by the proposed work, regardless of their age, education, or professional background, for example.

Most importantly, the youth want their communities to feel heard. In addition to creating accessible opportunities for individuals to share their perspectives and participate in decision-making processes, partners must also be willing to make revisions (such as to governance models, timelines, and approaches) that reflect their contributions so that projects involve community members in a meaningful way and deliver shared benefits.

> *"When there is consultation happening, it should be the youth, community, Elders, and the chiefs, not just the leaders of communities."*

C. Meaningfully bridge Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges

As the youth shared, the key to effective climate action and environmental governance is reinforcing a strong sense of shared values and considering diverse perspectives. The kind of knowledge-sharing envisioned moves beyond attempts to integrate, incorporate, or assimilate other ways of knowing into Western ones, and toward honouring the co-existence and complementarity of different knowledges. This new approach involves creating a shared space where they can be appropriately and respectfully valued and shared. Here, specialists emphasized the concept of an "ethical space," which, according to the Indigenous Circle of Experts, is "a venue for collaboration and advice, sharing and cross-validation" between people of different worldviews.[43]

Ethical space and cross-cultural sharing frameworks are rooted in an understanding that collaborating parties enter these spaces as equals and accept each other as such. This acceptance should create a safe space for dialogue, find common ground, and establish terms for undertaking shared work that are accepted by all, which includes setting and respecting boundaries regarding what will be shared and co-created in the process.[44]

There is, of course, more than one way to create this space and approach the knowledge-sharing and co-creating that follows. The concept and spirit of the Two-Row Wampum *(Kaswentha)*[vi] of Haudenosaunee origin and Two-Eyed Seeing *(Etuaptmumk)*[vii] of Mi'kmaw origin are examples of frameworks that have also been embraced in environmental protection, restoration, and monitoring programs as well as resource co-management initiatives.[45, 46] What matters is adopting and adapting an approach in a locally relevant way so that knowledge is gathered, documented, generated, validated, and shared in a mutually agreed-upon way.

It starts with acknowledgment that something needs to be done and if there's agreement that they're going to move forward together then they must build a vehicle to use together to do that work. It's about creating that safe space and working together as a team, using this new vehicle and this new acceptance."

– Steven Nitah, Lead Negotiator, Łutsël K'e Dene First Nation

[vi] *To learn more about the Two-Row Wampum Framework, see "Onondaga Nation" in the **Further reading** section.*

[vii] *To learn more about the Two-Eyed Seeing Framework, see "Institute for Integrative Science and Health" in the **Further reading** section.*

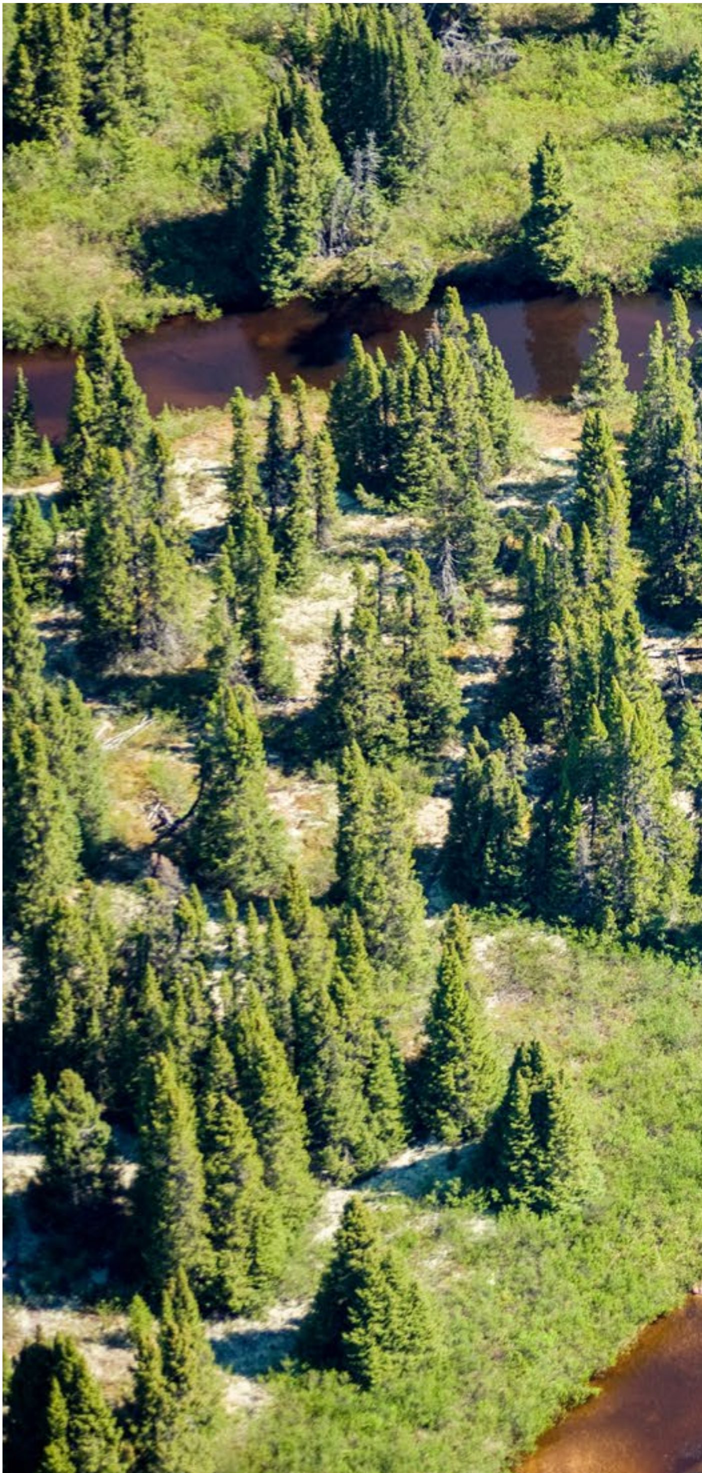
D. Share responsibility by being transparent and accountable

Working together on shared goals and agendas means sharing responsibility for their outcomes. The notion of shared responsibility or reciprocal accountability, which is based on Indigenous perspectives, is critical to the kind of collaboration and partnership the youth envision.[47]

Reciprocal accountability suggests that such accountability exists in a web of relationships. The youth remind us that entering into relationships with Indigenous communities and leadership generates obligations to these groups. It also generates obligations to the lands on which these projects take place. Being accountable means upholding one's obligations and continually evaluating the effects one's actions have on all relevant parties, including the environment, and ensuring that costs are not unfairly shouldered by some while the benefits are enjoyed by others.

Undertaking this evaluative work requires transparency. This includes collaborative discussion, clearly outlined roles, responsibilities, decision-making authorities, and processes, as well as consistent reporting and data-sharing practices that make information accessible to all involved.[48] Transparency also requires a commitment to respond to impacts on communities as well as their feedback, while being open to adjusting approaches or compensating as needed.

"Accountability is following up and making sure that the things they are implementing are working and allowing room for hard questions to be asked and answered."



Working principles in action: Indigenous Leadership Initiative and International Boreal Conservation Campaign

In June 2023, the International Boreal Conservation Campaign (IBCC), established in 2000 by the US-based Pew Charitable Trusts, transferred its long-standing environmental campaign in Canada's boreal forest to the Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI) headquartered in Mashteuiatsh, Quebec. In assuming responsibility for IBCC's conservation initiatives in Canada, ILI also took on its remaining staff, assets, and relationships with funders and partners, which include civic and business leaders, advocates, and scientists.

This move is the culmination of a partnership between the two organizations that has, for two decades, prioritized working closely with local Indigenous nations and bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to conservation. The transfer demonstrates IBCC's accountability to its goal of supporting conservation that is truly Indigenous-led. It also shows that conservation can and should go beyond advancing protected areas and consulting Indigenous communities—it should also include respecting Indigenous rights and title, and supporting Indigenous nationhood by equipping communities with the resources necessary to make decisions about and execute the aspirations they have for their lands.

Photo by Damien Bouchard

WHAT'S NEXT ON OUR JOURNEY

When asked about the future of climate action and land and resource management, the young leaders repeatedly described this work as concerning the land and country of all who live here and that such work must be a shared effort as it impacts us all.

When Indigenous communities and leaders can lead in this space, and Canadian governments, businesses, and environmental organizations do their part by working inclusively, the effective cross-cultural collaborations and partnerships between equal parties that is needed for change is possible. The youth envision a variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners coming together on environmental initiatives that are reciprocal in spirit, based on a shared agenda and offering mutual benefits.

"It's about collaboration. They say, 'We want to do this,' not 'We should do this together.' Instead they should be saying, 'This would benefit all of us'. We talk about working together, building communities, creating jobs, etc."

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth are calling for a new approach for working together and rebuilding relationships with the land and each other to ensure a healthy environment in their lifetime.

We must heed this call and act on it today, to strengthen the trees—roots, trunks, and branches—that sustain life. Our future generations depend on it.

Appendix

Summary of recommendations and working principles

The roots: Fundamental values about the environment

Embed respect for Indigenous traditional knowledge and connections to the land

1. Implement Indigenous language and cultural revitalization efforts
2. Create cross-cultural learning opportunities to bridge Indigenous worldviews, and form a relationship with the land
3. Decolonize climate research and action
4. Invest in the next generation of Indigenous climate leaders

The trunk: Cultivating relationships with the land and each other

Facilitate partnerships among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and non-Indigenous parties for environmental management

5. Acknowledge past and continuing harms and give back to affected communities
6. Create space for Indigenous leaders to meaningfully participate in environmental decision-making
7. Equitably invest capacity for Indigenous-led initiatives
8. Transition toward more conscientious, Indigenous-led land management

The branches: Restoring peace by living and working together sustainably

Principles for working together and sharing the land

A. Approach collaboration locally

B. Sustain a community presence and involve community members

C. Meaningfully bridge Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges

D. Share responsibility by being transparent and accountable

Further reading

- *Haudenosaunee Confederacy: Great Tree of Peace teaching*
- *National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation: Truth and Reconciliation Commission Reports*
- *Nisto Osap Tiposkawi Pisimuk—Thirteen Moons*
- *Onondaga Nation: Two-Row Wampum Treaty*
- *Institute for Integrative Science and Health: Two-Eyed Seeing Framework*

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Artwork: *Tuilik* by Natashia Allakariallak, 2021

ABOUT THE ARTIST

From Iqaluit, Nunavut, Natashia Allakariallak is a multidisciplinary artist exploring themes of Inuit traditions and womanhood through printmaking, jewellery, and performance. Allakariallak's work mirrors geometric forms and monochromatic colour schemes. The use of materials sourced from the land and waters of the arctic are often statement pieces in her work. From Baleen, narwhal tusk, polar bear fur, to fish leather and seal skin all sourced from local hunters and fishers, these materials encourage Natashia to describe the true beauty of where she comes from in her work.

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