

Land as Our First Teacher



“Land and water defenders are essential workers, imagining a future for all our relations. It is our duty to honor and support them.”³

When talking about the land as our first teacher, we acknowledge that each Indigenous cultural group on Turtle Island has **a distinct worldview and teachings** that guide how they relate to the world. The worldviews and the relation to land/Mother Earth also differ between Indigenous groups on Turtle Island and people who have come to settle here.

What each Indigenous group does have in common is the fact that **all creation is interconnected to land and each other**. The land creates and sustains our lives and livelihoods and this is a relationship that we must respect and give time to, as that connectedness nourishes our spirits.

The use of land-based learning with Indigenous youth provides them with space to return to their first teacher and **reconnect with themselves and to all relations**, from the rocks to the stars. Land-based learning must include Elders and work towards the aims of their community needs. The foundation of learning is a decolonial approach that will start with the individual and increase leadership among Indigenous youth.

How do Indigenous peoples *relate to the land?*

BODY



- » Humans are not the centre of everything; rather, we are a small part of creation.
- » We see ourselves belonging to the entire existence of our world; we are not separated from anything.
- » Our relationships with land inform and order the way humans conduct relationships with each other and other-than-human beings (rocks, trees, birds, moose, etc.).¹⁰
- » Food consumption plays a central role as a cultural foundation for Indigenous people.²
- » Growing and eating cultural food is a way for adults to display responsibility to their children and to practice spirituality.²
- » Certain plants, berries, and animals are not only consumed for nutritional reasons but can also be used as medicines to heal.²
- » Food sovereignty campaigns involve a focus on ending violence against women, given the integral role of women as food providers.¹¹
- » Not only are traditional foods valued from cultural, spiritual, and health perspectives, but the activities involved are collected and dispersed to allow for the practice of cultural values such as sharing and cooperation.²
- » Cultural food is a part of a connection to the land through reciprocity.²
- » We should give more than we take.⁷

MIND



- » Shkagamik Kwe is a source of knowledge and understanding.
- » Learning from Shkagamik Kwe is about relationality, interconnectedness, language, and reciprocity.
- » Building relationships on the land contributes to Indigenous governance, ethics, philosophies, and life.

- » Knowledge exchanges from the land include the past, the present, and into the future.
- » Indigenous peoples who are enculturated into the fundamentals of their cultural and own specific histories (which include the land) have better health outcomes.⁵
- » Elders and their oral histories and teachings are a connection to the land, as they can share how we are connected and our relationship to land.⁵
- » Treaties are part of the land, as they are agreements that protect the land, Indigenous sovereignty, nationhood, and way of life.⁷
- » Plants and animals are active members of society and directly influence how humans organize themselves into that society. This is evident in the clan systems. The very existence of clan systems evidences these many historical agreements between humans and non-humans.⁹
- » “Our languages are key to helping the environment because the values, beliefs, and the traditional knowledge of how to live in balance with Mother Earth are contained within our language.”⁶

SPIRIT



- » The stars are our oldest relatives.
- » Everything Indigenous peoples do is done with the future generations in mind, with respect for the land and waters, and guided by our traditional ceremonial practices.⁶
- » We can engage in conversations with the land and on the land in a physical, social, and spiritual sense.
- » Shkagamik Kwe not only supplies us with material needs but also the ethic, moral, and spiritual teachings on how to live a good life.
- » Water is a living being, a relative, and is a teacher, medicine, and healer.²

PROBLEM: There is **a lack of funding and institutional capacity** for land-based initiatives.⁸

THREE WISE PRACTICES

01. **Do not assume** that what is successful in one situation, context, or culture will necessarily work in a completely different one.^{1,10}
02. **Centre the strengths** of an Indigenous community, its local knowledge and experience, that is, the oral histories and traditional teachings held by Elders and other knowledge keepers.¹
03. **Build on identity and culture:** for any Indigenous leader to be competent in advocating for and representing their community's interests, they must have a strong understanding of, and grounding in, their culture, traditional knowledge, and historical connection to their traditional territories.¹

SEVEN PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO RECONNECT TO THE LAND

01. **Encourage cultural ties** to build strong leaders.¹
02. **Generate leaders:** leaders must practice courageous leadership to change the status quo and improve the conditions of the community.¹
03. **Guide the youth in how to be proactive, not reactive,** by fostering long-range plans and visions for their community. Youth that focus on a strategic plan can motivate and inspire others to support positive change.¹
04. **Revitalize traditional governance** and management of land and community.¹
05. **Champion attitudes and behaviours that relate to accountability and stewardship.** This will create good leaders who can act on behalf of the community and are responsible for their decisions and actions. Encourage openness and transparency. Being open and transparent about their decision making and spending builds community trust in them.¹
06. If youth need to be evaluated, **ensure you are measuring them in a culturally-competent way.**¹
07. **Foster collaborations,** partnerships, and external relationships.¹

WHERE DO I START?

Start by **centering Indigenous voices and experiences.** Respect the communities' and individuals' resurgence and do not be alarmed if help is refused.⁷ The foundation of assisting youth in reconnecting to land should include:

- » **“deprofessionalization** (the restructuring of the ‘helping’ practices back under the control of communities themselves);
- » **deinstitutionalization** (fighting against the nonprofit industrial complex and re-focusing on mutual aid, treaty responsibilities, and settler complicity); and
- » **resisting settler extractivism** (working towards the repatriation of land, children, and culture and the upholding of Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence).”⁴



This factsheet was developed by *Michelle Kennedy*, MIR, OCT, Graduate Student, and *Joey-Lynn Wabie*, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Indigenous Relations, Laurentian University.

APA CITATION

Kennedy, M.-L., & Wabie, J.-L. (2020). *Land as Our First Teacher*. Youth Research & Evaluation eXchange.

RESOURCES

WEBINAR: Land as Our First Teacher. <https://youthrex.com/webinar/land-as-our-first-teacher>

BLOG: Back to the Land — Building Resiliency by Connecting Aboriginal Youth to Place. <https://blogs.ufv.ca/blog/2016/07/back-to-the-land-building-resiliency-by-connecting-aboriginal-youth-to-place>

BLOG: Connecting to the Land Restores and Empowers People and Communities. <https://fnha.ca/about/news-and-events/news/connecting-to-the-land-restores-and-empowers-people-and-communities>

BLOG: Neechee on the Land — Youth Connecting with Art, Nature, and Culture. <http://thewalleye.ca/neechee-on-the-land-youth-connecting-with-art-nature-and-culture>

VIDEO: Re-Connecting Youth with Land-Based Activities and Indigenous Values. <https://nccie.ca/story/land-based-activities-connecting-with-youth-and-re-connecting-with-indigenous-values>

TOOLKIT: The Seas Toolkit. https://natureunited.ca/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/canada/SEAS-toolkit_v7_FINAL.pdf

ARTICLE: Keepers of Great Bear. <https://nature.org/en-us/magazine/magazine-articles/keepers-of-great-bear>

TOOLKIT: Land for Healing: Developing a First Nations Land-Based Service Delivery Model. <https://thunderbirdpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Thunderbirdpf-LandforHealing-Document-SQ.pdf>

VIDEO: Nimkii Aazhibikong. <https://nimkiiazhibikong.com/about-us>

REPORT: A Roadmap to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Call to Action #66. <https://youthrex.com/report/a-roadmap-to-the-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-call-to-action-66>

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- 7 Simpson, A. (2014). *Mohawk interruptus: Political life across the borders of settler states*. Duke University Press.
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- 9 Watts, V. (2013). Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1), 20-34.
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