

Indigenous Conservation Engagement Year 3 Final Report



April 2022

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Cover image: Members of NCC Indigenous Advisory Group in Saskatchewan visited the Old Man on His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area, as part of the advisory group’s work to support development of the Bison Management Plan for these lands, which lie within the traditional territories of the Niitsitapi, Nakoda, Dakota, Lakota, Anishinaabe and Nêhiyawak Peoples, as well as the homeland of the Métis. Photo credit: Bison at Old Man on His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area, Jason Bantle

Opening in Ethical Space¹

We acknowledge that the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) works on the traditional territories of many different Indigenous Nations. We recognize the many First Nation and Métis communities, representatives, people and organizations who have shared, partnered and collaborated with NCC staff during this past year and initial two years in implementing NCC's Indigenous Conservation Engagement Framework. It has been a tremendous opportunity to learn from the wisdom and contributions of these many individuals. We strive to respect their unique responsibilities, rights, perspectives, histories and relationships with the land.

As a non-Indigenous organization, we recognize the fundamental importance of acknowledging the context that NCC operates in. We recognize that we work on lands that have long been inhabited by Indigenous Peoples living under their own laws. We recognize that the concepts of private land and conservation are complicated, loaded with meaning and not necessarily a part of Indigenous relationships with the land. As an organization, we recognize that we have a responsibility to learn from past approaches to conservation and we are committed to developing a more respectful approach that supports healthy communities and ecologies on all lands founded on meaningful relationships.

We are particularly grateful to the Indigenous Peoples, communities, organizations and advisors that have assisted and guided us on the initial steps of our journey through their participation in NCC projects, and for their patience, wisdom and advice as we move forward with our conservation work framed within an approach based on respectful Reconciliation.

Introduction

The increasing recognition of Indigenous rights, culture and connection to the land has profoundly affected conservation initiatives, both within Canada and throughout the world. It has begun to shape our understanding of the importance of Indigenous leadership in the protection and conservation of the lands and waters of their traditional territories.

The Indigenous Conservation Engagement Framework (hereby referred to as "Framework") launched by NCC in 2018 reflects our commitment to supporting Indigenous-led conservation as well as our desire to learn from Indigenous people and communities in the development of collaborative approaches to conservation, while supporting Indigenous rights wherever we work.

The momentum of our work with Indigenous people has grown year over year since the launch of the Framework. This increase in activity reflects not only the support the Framework has received from NCC staff, board members and senior volunteers, but also the trust, direction and guidance of Indigenous advisors, communities and partners working with NCC.

This third year of our journey has further advanced our understanding of Indigenous culture, history and relationship with the land, and identified actionable ways for NCC to be an ally in support of Indigenous-

¹ As described by Professor Willie Ermine in his article on the [Ethical Space of Engagement](#), "The 'ethical space' is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other. It is the thought about diverse societies and the space in between them that contributes to the development of a framework for dialogue between human communities."

led efforts to care for the land. We delivered cultural competency training to establish a foundation of understanding and historical context for all staff. We are also expanding our understanding of Indigenous rights in areas such as access to lands managed by NCC as well as cultural heritage and traditional land use management. And we explored new approaches to supporting Indigenous-led conservation efforts. These are the first steps in a journey that will continue as we respectfully work to build an ethical space for conservation that engages the concepts of Reconciliation, equity, diversity and inclusivity.

This report summarizes our Year 3 achievements and offers reflections on the overall progress made in our focused work with Indigenous people throughout the three-year span. We also reflect on the next steps, challenges and emerging priorities, as we continue this important journey.

Our work under the Framework is grouped into two broad priorities:

- enhancing NCC’s cultural competency and capacity; and
- supporting Indigenous-led conservation.

Enhancing NCC’s Cultural Competency and Capacity

Year 3 of the Framework saw an acceleration of Indigenous cultural competency training for NCC staff. This year *all* NCC staff were provided with the opportunity for training through our continued partnership with the University of Winnipeg and its *Indigenous Insights* program. This Indigenous-developed program exposed staff to a comprehensive overview of Indigenous history, culture and Reconciliation, ultimately increasing our capacity for more effective, respectful and knowledgeable engagement with Indigenous communities.

Our training program was complemented by other initiatives, including the development of new engagement tools for staff, Indigenous-specific communications activities, an enhanced understanding of Indigenous culture and history, and the continued expansion of our Indigenous advisory network.

Highlights of NCC cultural capacity activities from the past year include:

Cultural competency training

- In Year 3, 230 NCC staff across the country completed *Indigenous Insights* training sessions developed by the University of Winnipeg, either through virtual seminars or a self-paced, web-based version of the program. To date, more than 300 staff have received this cultural competency training.
- NCC worked with Kiuna College, the only Indigenous-operated post-secondary institution in Quebec, to develop a French course, which was delivered to 29 NCC staff in that province.

New tools for staff

- NCC provided a variety of opportunities for our staff to build their capacity through internal webinars, and developed new tools to support consultation and engagement with Indigenous Nations and communities. These include tools on how to engage respectfully with Indigenous communities and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, best practices when working with Elders and guidelines on providing honoraria.

- NCC collaborated with the [Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership](#)² (CRP) on research about consultation and Indigenous rights in private land conservation in Canada. This research will inform NCC's approach to engaging with Indigenous Nations and communities.
- NCC produced a report outlining how to respectfully engage Indigenous Knowledge Systems in conservation planning at our organization, which will inform our approaches to conservation planning, our policy on conservation science and Two-Eyed Seeing³.

Advisors

- NCC is developing relationships with Indigenous Elders, community members and knowledge holders to help improve how NCC undertakes our work. Recognizing that more work needs to be done, working with Indigenous advisors has provided guidance and perspectives on a range of regional and national priorities, from conservation planning to Indigenous rights and decision-making.
- Work continues with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Holders to develop a national Indigenous Leadership Circle that can support strategic decision-making at NCC and is respectful of Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and laws.

Communicating with external audiences

Despite the challenges associated with COVID-19 and the scheduling of in-person events, we continue our efforts to build upon existing communication activities to share our work in support of Indigenous-led conservation efforts. NCC blogs, social media channels and the *Nature Conservancy of Canada Magazine* all featured stories and articles highlighting the collaborative conservation work that Indigenous Nations, communities and people are undertaking. Of note is the profile in the [spring 2021 magazine](#) on Indigenous artist and conservationist Rick Beaver from Alderville First Nation, as well as an article on the efforts to reintroduce the culturally significant plains bison to parts of Saskatchewan.

Reflections

Building an increased awareness of Indigenous histories, present circumstances, connections with the land and Indigenous-led conservation has been a key success of the Framework. This understanding has helped advance organizational change within NCC. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the opportunity to generate a virtual training platform ultimately helped provide training opportunities to more staff than originally envisioned. Staff interest and enthusiasm on receiving cultural competency training has grown over the three years of the Framework, with nearly 90 per cent of NCC staff having received some form of cultural competency training while working at the organization. Staff are now readily applying this training to their work and have expressed a keen desire for additional and targeted training.

Being able to advance Indigenous engagement respectfully also means creating space in our policy tools for Indigenous laws and protocols as well as other ways of knowing. We need to ensure that we are

² The Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership (CRP) represents a seven-year program of work hosted by the University of Guelph, which weaves together a breadth of partners that supports the establishment of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) and the transformation of existing protected areas to be better aligned with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and law.

³ As described by Elder Albert Marshall, [Two-Eyed Seeing](#) requires learning to see the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing with one eye, the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing with the other, and using both eyes together for the benefit of all.

engaging multiple ways of knowing, including both Indigenous knowledge and western science, to support more informed and respectful decision-making at NCC. Advancing our cultural competency and capacity while also making policy improvements will further support respectful engagement and consistency in our relationship building with Indigenous communities and Nations.

Next steps

- Embed Indigenous cultural competency training as a formalized part of new staff (and senior volunteer) onboarding.
- Facilitate community-based “on the land” programs to support future staff learning opportunities.
- Provide training and information aimed at improving NCC skill sets to support Indigenous-led conservation (e.g., land use planning) and establish a Standard of Engagement for all NCC projects that outlines expectations for how NCC is to engage with Indigenous Nations and communities.
- Expand the use of the *Indigenous Insights* training program to include NCC’s senior volunteers (e.g., Board of Directors and committee members).
- Continue to build advisory resources and networks both internal and external to NCC.
- Identify and facilitate new training opportunities focused on specific regional topics as well as improved and expanded Indigenous engagement.
- Improve diversity within NCC and develop and integrate Human Resource strategies and processes aimed at Indigenous recruitment, retention and support.
- Develop a framework that supports the creation of ethical space at NCC and facilitates a Two-Eyed Seeing approach to decision-making.
- Develop a cultural heritage management strategy that outlines obligations and approaches regarding cultural heritage on NCC-managed lands.

Supporting Indigenous-led Conservation

Indigenous Nations and communities continue to develop projects and practices to conserve and steward their traditional territories and, over the past three years, NCC has worked to support and collaborate in these Indigenous-led conservation efforts. In addition to the direct conservation outcomes achieved, participating in these efforts has helped us change our approaches to better support Indigenous-led conservation initiatives. While much work needs to be done, supporting Indigenous-led initiatives has helped build trust and positive working relationships with Indigenous Nations and communities.

Indigenous land trust model

Over the past year, NCC has worked with Indigenous Elders, practitioners and allies through the Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership (CRP) to help advance the research, awareness and development of Indigenous land trusts.

Together with the CRP, NCC hosted a virtual sharing circle on Indigenous land trusts in October 2021 that brought together interested First Nations communities in southern Ontario with land trust

practitioners to discuss the opportunities and challenges in establishing and managing Indigenous-led land trusts.

Additionally, NCC has partnered with the CRP to create a research fellowship to undertake research on Indigenous land trusts to:

- identify ways in which the Indigenous land trust model can support Indigenous-led conservation efforts; and
- provide recommendations on renewing the land trust model in ways more compatible with Indigenous worldviews, governance and values.

Technical support for Indigenous-led conservation efforts

This year, NCC had the privilege of supporting Indigenous leadership in conserving their traditional territories and explore opportunities to establish new Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs)⁴.

In December 2020, the Cree Nation Government (CNG) and the Quebec Government announced the designation of 23 new territories, totalling 39,000 square kilometres, reserved for protected area purposes in the Eeyou Istchee. These new protected areas were identified and proposed by the CNG and encompass areas of cultural and ecological importance to the Cree nation of Eeyou Istchee. NCC has continued providing support to CNG through the past year as they lead conservation efforts in their traditional territory, including both technical support for further conservation planning and exploring possible funding models for long-term stewardship.

NCC also engaged in new and emerging opportunities to connect with and provide support to other Indigenous Nations leading conservation efforts, including:

- Co-facilitated, along with Parks Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada and Nature United, a 10-session Healthy Country Planning⁵ training workshop with both the Ktunaxa Nation Council and Cree Nation Government, as well as four teams from other Indigenous communities.
- Entered into a multi-year agreement with the Wolastoqiyik Wamspekwuk First Nation in March 2021 to provide technical support to develop IPCAs in the Gros-Cacouna Coastal Area in Quebec. The agreement includes supporting conservation planning as well as sharing expertise to support the Nation's efforts to co-manage and protect important lands in the region.

Land securement and stewardship

In 2020-2021, NCC supported the efforts of multiple Indigenous Nations undertaking important conservation securement projects on their traditional territories. The Tahltan Central Government, Province of BC, Skeena Resources Limited, NCC and the BC Parks Foundation worked in partnership to establish the [Tenh Dzetle Conservancy](#). Announced in April 2021, this new conservancy helps protect the environment and species on Tahltan territory in an area historically known as the Ice Mountain Lands.

⁴ As described by the [Indigenous Circle of Experts](#), IPCAs are lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems. Culture and language are the heart and soul of an IPCA.

⁵ [Healthy Country Planning](#) is a conservation planning tool adapted from the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation that focuses on building community-led plans built on participation, community engagement and capacity building.

The land supports intensive Tahltan use and occupancy and is essential to the well-being of the Tahltan as a place to transfer skills to youth. NCC helped support the removal of all mineral tenures in the area, allowing for the full protection of the region’s cultural and ecological values.

NCC worked closely with the Kebaowek First Nation in establishing an Algonquin-led IPCA on their traditional territory. NCC actively worked with the Nation to secure Fitzpatrick Island in the Ottawa Valley, a place of strong cultural importance for the Nation, as an initial step in establishing their IPCA. NCC is now working with the Nation to transfer the title of the island.

NCC also collaborated with Indigenous Nations on various stewardship activities. In 2020-2021, NCC engaged in more than a dozen such initiatives, ranging from collaborating on baseline inventories with the Ktunaxa Nation Council in BC to working with Indigenous advisors on the management of the Wilson Island Archipelago in Ontario. Furthermore, NCC has engaged with Indigenous advisors in Saskatchewan to inform the development of the Natural Area Conservation Plan for the Southwest Sandhills Region.



Mt. Edziza in Tahltan traditional territory, now a part of the Tenh Dzete Conservancy. Photo courtesy of Skeena Resources

Indigenous engagement and collaboration

NCC recognizes that positive, collaborative projects are based upon strong relationships. NCC staff are working to build new and strengthen existing relationships with Indigenous Peoples from coast to coast to coast. Guidance and support from Indigenous Elders and partners are also helping us improve our ability to support community livelihoods, cultures and biodiversity. While much more needs to be done, these initial steps are helping enable more respectful conservation. Such engagement efforts include:

- Working to engage First Nation and Métis communities regarding collaborative interpretation and property management at Fort Ellice, Manitoba.
- Exploring collaborative stewardship, restoration and guardianship opportunities with the Innue Essipit First Nation at Pointe Sauvage, Quebec.
- Working with L’nuey and the Mi’kmaq of Prince Edward Island to discuss collaborative conservation approaches on the island.
- Partnering with the Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership, Parks Canada and Indigenous Elders to discuss ways to facilitate Two-Eyed Seeing approaches to fire management.

Reflections

Working with and learning from Indigenous collaborators has provided a significant and profound opportunity for NCC staff to help advance meaningful conservation. Being able to support the efforts of Indigenous Nations and communities to conserve the land of their ancestors for present and future generations and engage in culturally defining acts are rewarding examples of helping to build a thriving world. This has required all of us to consider what we mean by “conservation.” We are grateful for the patience and support of Indigenous Peoples that we have been able to work with and learn from on this journey.

NCC recognizes Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship have been, and will continue to be, key contributors to successful conservation in Canada. We have an opportunity to support and elevate the role of Indigenous land practices, Knowledge Systems and priorities for conservation through a variety of approaches, including private land title securement, stewardship, restoration and conservation planning. It will be critical to define and refine NCC's role in achieving durable conservation outcomes in coordination with the diversity of Indigenous Nations and their respective efforts across Canada.

Next steps

- Continue to advance the Indigenous land trust model by hosting regional Indigenous sharing circles and undertaking collaborative research.
- Develop guidance to support NCC staff when engaging with Indigenous communities in conservation activities and initiatives.
- Take further advantage of emerging opportunities to support Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship efforts.
- Support the development of a Two-Eyed Seeing approach and respectful engagement of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and worldviews in conservation planning and prioritization tools.

Reflecting on the Journey So Far

A glance back

When NCC established the Indigenous Conservation Engagement Framework in 2018, conservation and the societal recognition of Reconciliation in Canada was undergoing significant change. At that time, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the release of their seminal Calls to Action in 2015 were rapidly making their way through conservation policy and practice, as was Canada's endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2016.

With the release of the Framework and the corresponding three-year action plan in 2018, we set ourselves on a journey to build meaningful relationships with Indigenous Peoples, Nations and communities. The Framework outlined our vision and plan to work more purposefully with Indigenous communities and Nations, in the spirit of reconciliation, and focused on five key areas:

1. Build relationships with Indigenous advisors.
2. Build NCC's Indigenous cultural awareness and competency.
3. Incorporate the care of Indigenous cultural heritage resources into our management plans and practices for NCC lands.
4. Explore opportunities to support the development of Indigenous land trusts as a model for conservation of Indigenous traditional lands within Canada's land tenure system.
5. Lend technical skills and expertise in support of establishing Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas.

The areas of work over the past three years work have expanded beyond the five focus areas, and the Framework has broadened our understanding of the importance of Indigenous-led conservation to further not only conservation itself but also support Indigenous rights and healthy communities.

Cultural awareness and competency

One of the most notable achievements over the past three years is how fully NCC has supported this new direction, with staff and senior volunteers taking to heart the training and opportunities to approach conservation differently and in ways that support reconciliation. While this training may resonate differently with individual staff members, it provides a common foundation for everyone to build awareness and understanding of the importance of this work.

A key realization through this work has been the importance of collaboration and integration. This includes ensuring that Indigenous voices and perspectives are central to our work, whether from Indigenous advisors, Indigenous board members or Indigenous staff.

Developing new tools and guidelines for respectful engagement with Indigenous communities and Nations is ongoing. Cultural competency training better equips staff and senior volunteers in outlining strategic directions and conducting their work more effectively.

Supporting Indigenous-led conservation

The number of projects that NCC has engaged on with Indigenous Nations and communities has grown steadily over the past three years, as has our understanding of the different approaches and opportunities that we can enable to support Indigenous-led conservation. While technical support and Indigenous land trusts were key areas, ways to reconcile and support new approaches to land securement and ownership have gained increasing importance.

Ultimately, the work accomplished over the past three years highlighted the importance of relationships. The world of conservation depends on relationships, and the ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships with Indigenous Nations and communities is essential to enabling enduring conservation and Reconciliation.

A look ahead

Over the past three years, the pace of change in the conservation landscape in Canada has increased. In large part, this reflects the growing recognition of the role of Indigenous Peoples in achieving greater conservation and protection of lands and waters. This includes not only an increasing recognition of Indigenous rights supported by courts and government action, but also a serious reckoning of the historical context that has informed the need for a renewed relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada.

Indigenous-led conservation efforts have expanded rapidly across Canada, with numerous IPCAs and guardian programs⁶ being formed across traditional territories. Recognizing the success of these efforts has also increased as Canada aspires to even more ambitious conservation targets. Indigenous-led

⁶ As outlined by the Indigenous Leadership Initiative, [guardian programs](#) support Indigenous land management by employing trained experts to manage protected areas, restore animals and plants, test water quality and monitor development. The network of guardian programs undertakes Indigenous-led activities and encourages Indigenous and Crown representatives to collaborate as partners.

conservation is now firmly embedded in Canadian society, with support for Indigenous-led conservation efforts being part of all four main political parties' platforms in Canada.

Specific to NCC, the work of the last three years has helped us identify more milestones in our journey and to see more clearly those milestones in front of us. Ensuring we provide the time and create ethical space is essential for the long-term success of this work. Learning from the leadership of Indigenous Peoples has been essential to advancing NCC's approach to conservation.

Conclusion

As NCC approaches our 60th anniversary in 2022, we continue to commit ourselves to our values of durable and evidence-based conservation, respect for nature and people, integrity first, conservation through collaboration and nature for all where equity, diversity and inclusion are celebrated.

As we began efforts to implement the Framework three years ago, we recognized that there were many challenging questions that required greater time, effort and understanding. These included increasing our ability to effectively engage and work with Indigenous Peoples, communities and organizations, understanding how we can better support Indigenous-led conservation and how we can better manage access to NCC properties by Indigenous people. Through the patience and support of Indigenous partners, we have learned a great deal about all of these topics, and more. We have learned how complex they are and how they are connected to larger ones that we must also learn about.

Our work through the Framework has confirmed and increased our commitment to Indigenous-led conservation. Our work with Indigenous Peoples will be a major foundation to our ongoing commitment to promote healthy people and healthy communities. As we conclude the first three years of our focused and purposeful Indigenous conservation efforts, we look forward to continuing and increasing our work with Indigenous Nations, communities and partners in support of a thriving world.