

WAHKOHTOWIN DEVELOPMENT

A CASE STUDY OF: First Nation Perspectives
& Approaches to United Nations Sustainable
Development Goals



National Park Service Photo / Kent Miller

Prepared by Plenty Canada in collaboration with Wahkohtowin Development GP Inc.



Wahkohtowin
Development GP Inc.



PlentyCanada

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**FSC
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Food
Secure
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Réseau
pour une alimentation
durable



Lakehead
UNIVERSITY

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Employment & Social Development Canada (ESDC) announced funding in 2020 to support provinces and territories, municipalities, not-for-profit organizations, academia, Indigenous partners, youth and equity-deserving groups and groups or individuals in vulnerable situations, to achieve the following three outcomes:

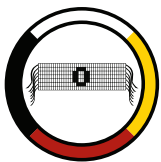
1. Identify gaps to meet United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) and approaches to address them
2. Implement innovative approaches that drive progress on more than one UNSDGs
3. Integrate Indigenous and local knowledge into approaches to achieve UNSDGs

Food Secure Canada (FSC) was awarded funding from ESDC to achieve the above outcomes in three action areas: Indigenous Food Sovereignty, Healthy School Food and Equitable access to healthy and sustainable food. FSC tasked different groups within their broad network to conduct the work in each action area:

Plenty Canada for Indigenous Food Sovereignty and the Healthy School Food Coalition for Healthy School Food and in-house co-ordination of equitable access to healthy sustainable food in partnership with their network. This method provides an opportunity for each action area to be led, directed and actionized by groups and/or organizations with a long history of working within those areas, ensuring local knowledge is approached in trusting reciprocal relationships.

INDIGENIZED GOALS

Through the development of this project the team recognized that the UN's SDGs are very disconnected from Indigenous ways of knowing and being, are framed through colonial language and visuals, and are hard to relate to for the Indigenous leaders and community members actionizing community development work on the ground. Although UN SDGs are interconnected to one another, much like the Indigenous view that everything is connected and in relation, we soon realized that we needed a more "Indigenized" way of thinking about these goals. Through partnerships with First Nation people and communities, project leads were able to "Indigenize" the UNSDGs and create a tool to communicate the goals from within an Indigenous worldview. This has strengthened the way Plenty Canada communicates the SDGs with their First Nations partners, and how they explain the need for Canada to listen to ancestral ways of protecting people and planet. These "Indigenized" goals are used in the case studies to connect the work of Indigenous communities and organizations to the UN SDGs.



SHARING ABUNDANCE



DEFEND OUR MOTHER



FOOD IS SACRED



WAYS OF BEING



OLD WAYS



WATER IS LIFE



ETHICAL SPACE



DECOLONIZE



SOVEREIGNTY



THE GOOD LIFE



ECONOMIES OF
ABUNDANCE



INDIGENOUS
KNOWLEDGE

THE CASE STUDY

This project has recognized Wahkohtowin Development for contributing to many, if not all, of the Indigenized Goals through their work. This document highlights, describes and connects their work to the Indigenized Goals and therefore also to the UN SDGs. Throughout the document we have identified some of the main goals that their work contributes to, though it should be noted it is not necessarily an exhaustive list, and there are usually multiple goals being enacted by any given project.

WAHKOHTOWIN DEVELOPMENT



Wahkohtowin
Development GP Inc.

“Wahkohtowin is a Cree word that means kinship and the interconnectedness of our people, animals, lands, air, waters and spirituality.”

Wahkohtowin Development GP Inc. is a social enterprise of 3 First Nations communities. The members of these Nations are the Rights Holders of the activities that occur on their shared traditional territory. They have been stewards of our lands and waters for thousands of years. Their work is focused on the prosperity of our future generations through

- innovation for a conservation economy,
- the revitalization of our culture and practices,
- and rekindling our relationship with their Land.

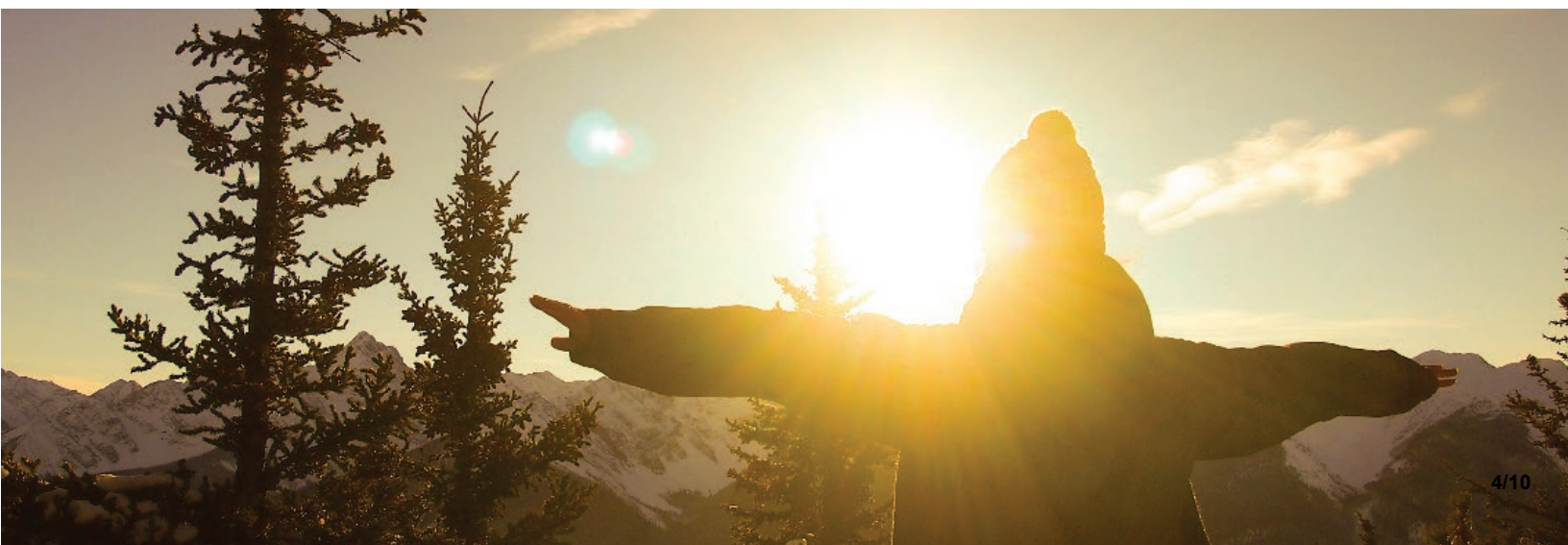
Their mission is to uphold Indigenous rights through a collective and collaborative approach that enhances social, cultural, and environmental wellbeing for the long-term health and prosperity of our shared traditional territory. Governed by three First Nations, their work began to build capacity on Lands and Resources Departments to work collaboratively to achieve Nations’ goals and has grown to support work in many areas including advocacy in forestry policy, hosting an innovation centre, a guardian program and a housing social enterprise.



DECOLONIZE



THE GOOD LIFE



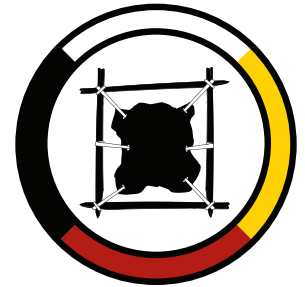
INDIGENOUS FORESTRY

Advocacy to Stop the Spraying Glyphosate:

Wahkohtowin is working to stop the spraying of glyphosate by forestry companies. Spraying of glyphosate is allowed under the current provincial regulations and the Ontario forest management plan. Spraying glyphosate is used by forestry companies because it hinders the growth of the plants, shrubs and deciduous trees that quickly grow after a forest is cut. Reducing the growth of these species increases the competitive advantage of tree species such as pine and spruce that are planted for future harvesting.

Even in a disturbance-based forest type such as the boreal forest, spraying of glyphosate over the long term reduces the richness of the boreal forest ecosystem. The Boreal Forest is a mosaic ecosystem, which is never 100% pine, but usually has some aspen, poplar, cherry or alder understory. As David Flood explains, "From year 3 to years 15 to 20, where 1 to 3 spray events may occur you've put the forest in a position of almost being sterilized or harmed to the benefit of conifer crop trees, the land no longer has the abundance it once had."

The reduction in plant biodiversity of the boreal forest negatively affects animals who are part of the ecosystem such as mammals, insects, reptiles and amphibians and birds.



WAYS OF BEING

Moose and Glyphosate Spraying:

Moose are a cultural keystone species for First Nations in Ontario. They are a vital link in a community's connection to the land and to tradition. Indigenous cultures and animal species have a deep-rooted and interconnected relationship that has developed over thousands of years. Many indigenous cultures have a strong spiritual and cultural connection to specific animal species, which play a central role in their beliefs, traditions, and way of life. These species are often considered sacred and are protected and revered. Indigenous peoples use the phrase 'all my relations' in this meaning they are referring to all animals, all plants, all ecosystems, all people that interrelate and rely on each other for sustainability.

The presence and health of these species are integral to the well-being and cultural identity of indigenous communities. However, the decline of indigenous animal species due to habitat destruction and over-exploitation is a threat to both the survival of these species and the cultural heritage of indigenous communities.

Forestry has a large landscape effect on animal habitat. According to biologists and models used to predict moose habitat, there should be enough habitat for the moose to be ok for the next 100 years. However, for the past two decades, Moose have been declining in Ontario. Moose populations have declined 25%-50% in some forest areas in the last decade, according to both First Nation's experience and MNR surveys.¹ Indigenous communities have expressed concern about moose numbers as well as their health. They have been sounding the alarm for decades about forestry management policies that allow the moose to decline.



Spraying of glyphosate disturbs moose habitat and reduces their ability to thrive.² Moose habitat includes various types of landscape in close proximity including waterways, mature coniferous forest, shorelines and open areas with deciduous trees and shrubs.

They rely on various plants in their diet including deciduous trees, aquatic plants, shrubs and coniferous trees. When spraying is done to suppress deciduous trees and shrubs, in cut areas, this reduces the food available for moose, especially in winter months. "It is known from Western science that the moose will go out 80 meters from the edge of that forest in the heaviest parts of winter and browse for food along the forest edge. So, if they're spraying all that up to that edge, they're basically starving the moose. In the wintertime, if they don't have enough food as a mother, they'll abort the baby." Unfortunately, in the previous forest management plan, areas set aside for moose habitat called moose enhancement areas were not mandatory but were left as discretionary.



FOOD IS SACRED

1 <https://www.ontario.ca/page/factors-affect-moose-survival>

2 <https://www.wahkohtowin.com/post/wahkohtowin-s-work-on-moose-habitat-protection-presses-forward>

Indigenous Peoples' ability to exercise Section 35 Rights

The Treaty 9 First Nations Missanabie Cree Nation, Chapleau Cree First Nation and Brunswick House First Nation have brought legal action against the government.³ In their action they argue forestry operations have harmed their traditional way of life by degrading the boreal forest ecosystem and this is an infringement on their treaty rights⁴.

"Forests are our grocery store, our pharmacy." (David Flood)

Spraying of glyphosate is also infringing on Indigenous rights under section 35 because it affects their ability to use land to forage food and medicine. Changes to the biodiversity of the boreal forest reduces Indigenous Peoples' ability to exercise their rights. Reduction in moose populations, medicinal plant species and small animals traditionally gathered through trapping reduces possibilities for Indigenous people to engage in their traditional food ways. For example, Wahkohtowin has done modeling analysis on Marten habitat in old growth and other forests. They have found in some areas there is no longer any Marten habitat. Therefore, there is a threat of extirpating the Marten on that geography - findings from a Wahkohtowin sponsored Mitacs study on the Temiskaming Forest by student from University of Toronto comparing multiple wildlife habitat models - including Ontario's that is available for use but not legally required under the current landscape guide. The issue is at what scale do you accept spatial habitat analysis to determine impacts on Aboriginal rights?⁵

"It's hard for people to understand maybe how that kind of policy affects the abundance at the local level. The truth is, I used to be able to drink from that lake, creek, or river and I can't today. We used to get all our fish from those lakes and rivers in spaces we can't today. We're told, 'only so much fish'. So how can anybody argue there isn't an ongoing deleterious effect?" (David Flood)



SOVEREIGNTY

3 <https://www.aptnnews.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023-04-26-DRAFT-Statement-of-Claim-re-Treaty-9.pdf>

4 <https://www.matawa.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Media-Release-Treaty-9-First-Nations-bring-Legal-Action-to-Stop-Degradation-of-the-Boreal-Forest-00077911xE3DB2.pdf>

5 <https://www.mitacs.ca/our-projects/assessing-forest-harvesting-impacts-on-furbearer-habitat-at-the-scale-of-indigenous-traplines-a-case-study-in-indigenous-consultation/>

Forest Management Plans & the Sustainability of the Boreal Forest

The central question being asked is: Who defines what sustainability is? Who gets to measure sustainability? As David Flood points out, "If we can still eat some fish it's still sustainable? No. Sustainable to Cree and Anishinaabe people was like, we could always access the abundance of what the creator provides for us."

A further lawsuit brought by Wahkohtowin against Ontario calls out the forest management plan as not being in compliance with the crown forest sustainability act. They call attention to practices outlined in the forest management plan that are not sustainable and therefore do not comply with the crown forest sustainability act as it is supposed to. The forest management is the measure of sustainability based on the crown forest sustainability act.⁶ Wahkohtowin's work shows how Ontario's approach to forest management is focused on wood production and the interests of the forest industry, rather than on the health and sustainability of the forest eco-system for current and future generations. The Crown forest sustainability act states that a forest management plan can only be approved if the long term health and vigour of forests are provided for in a way that minimizes the adverse effect on plants, animals, water, soil, air and social and economic values. The environmental commissioner of Ontario has been critical of MNRF, saying that they are not doing enough to make sure forest management plans are sound and stable from an environmental sustainability perspective.⁷



**ECONOMIES OF
ABUNDANCE**

⁶ <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/94c25#BK9>

⁷ <https://chapleaucree.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Media-Release-Date-set-for-Judicial-Review-of-Ontario-governments-refusal-to-conduct-an-Environmental-Assessment-for-Northern-Ontario-Forest-Management-Plan.pdf>

THE GUARDIAN PROGRAM

The guardian program is about cultivating Indigenous leadership on the land. The program aims to foster learning old ways and sharing knowledge to create innovative environmental solutions for our communities. With guidance from Elders and Cultural Advisors the guardian program is one of the ways Wahkohtowin encourages a return to Traditional Knowledge, practices and way of life in Indigenous Communities.

"As a guardian, we get to get very creative with the work that we're doing, and we get to learn to do it the traditional way ... I've gotten so much more comfortable with even singing and drumming since working here. I feel like I'm very much more in touch with my culture."

— Celena Farrell (Guardian of the Land, Michipicoten First Nation)

Guardians actively monitor traditional territory with the goal of protecting land, which supports knowledge gathering for Indigenous-led management and conservation. They take an active role in monitoring moose, marten and traditional medicines, to name a few. This provides access to environmental data to support informed decision making on traditional lands and territories.

"[In] summer [2024], the Wahkohtowin Guardians, together with staff, conducted a [Herbicide Alternative Practices] HAP research trial focused on manual brushing—a forestry technique that removes competing vegetation around young trees, providing them with more access to sunlight, nutrients, and space to grow Manual brushing plays a key role in supporting forest regeneration by giving young trees better access to resources they need to grow. Unlike chemical herbicides, this sustainable approach helps maintain the health of surrounding ecosystems. In practice, manual brushing involves carefully removing vegetation that competes with saplings and young trees. Equipped with Stihl brushing saws and pruners, the Guardians selectively cut back shrubs and other plants that could hinder the growth of young trees. By focusing only on the plants that limit tree development, manual brushing creates a more favorable environment for targeted tree species to thrive—all without using chemical herbicides that kill the surrounding vegetation that could be left standing." (Stevie Luzzi (Forest Conservation Coordinator, Wahkohtowin Development))⁸



DEFEND OUR MOTHER

Youth Guardians build skills and experience in forestry and Indigenous forest stewardship by merging traditional and modern ways of understanding the land. This program offers a unique and valuable experience for youth seeking to deepen their connection to the natural world and their cultural roots. Guardians have opportunities to spend time with Elders and knowledge keepers, and Indigenous languages are incorporated into the learning activities. For example, each year the guardians build a birch bark canoe with knowledge keeper Chuck Commanda.

"Not every kid is going to be able to build a birchbark canoe, it's almost a once in a lifetime thing. To me it was really eye-opening. It was really cool to see all the processes and the team just working together to build this one canoe."

— Carter Pullen (Guardian of the Land, Michipicoten First Nation)



⁸ <https://www.wahkohtowin.com/post/wahkohtowin-s-guardians-in-action-supporting-herbicide-alternative-practices-hap-in-the-boreal-fo>

Indigenous stewardship of the land honours relationships based in reciprocal worldviews. Stewardship is reciprocal where the rest of creation is not understood as resources to be consumed by humans, but as relations who are responsible for human life and should be cared for so they may flourish. “We take care of the land, and the land takes care of us.”⁹ In this way the guardian program fosters accountability to our relationships with the rest of creation.

“We are all guardians of the land, protecting and making sure that we can have a beautiful, clean Earth for our future generations.”

— Emily Bouchard (Guardian of the Land, Essipit First Nation)



All photos on page by: Wahkohtowin Development



One of the important roles of the Guardian program is to promote community thriving by providing opportunities for youth to be employed in their communities rather than leaving to seek employment. This keeps communities together and ensures opportunities for inter-generational learning. Through this program Guardians become leaders in their communities and have opportunities to share their knowledge and experience with other youth.

“It is their right to be connected to this land and be able to live off this land. We want to build advocates and want to nation build. You educate the youth, you give them the true understanding of who they are in relation to what’s around them, and then they start to just advocate on their own.”

— Shah Mohamed (Project Manager, Wahkohtowin Development)



OLD WAYS

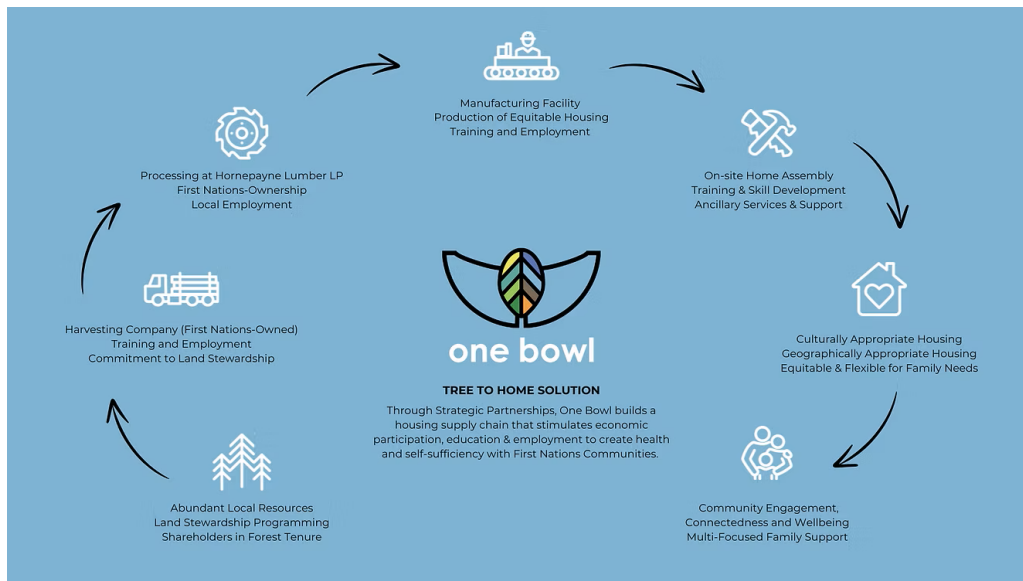


INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

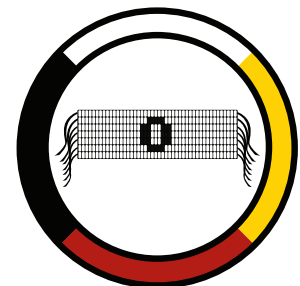
One Bowl is a social enterprise that brings together innovative log home technology, and Indigenous-led housing solutions. The mission is to foster long-term sustainability by empowering Indigenous communities to own and independently manage their housing projects.¹⁰ This project builds a housing supply chain that will reduce housing costs to remote First Nations that facilitates building more homes with existing financial support. In a pilot program, Wahkohtowin partnered with Boréal Homes to actively redefine Indigenous housing from being adequate to equitable.

The Supreme Court of Canada acknowledges the right for First Nation families to shelter themselves with wood/logs from the forest in their territories. However, First Nations have been living with substandard housing for many years. One Bowl is a social enterprise and a partnership between Distributor Homes and Wahkohtowin. This is part of Wahkohtowin's work to build a circular economy. They use white pine and spruce trees from Indigenous territory to build homes for Indigenous people. Boréal's Thermolog™ technology allows First Nations to build modular, inexpensive and energy efficient homes that are appropriate for Northern Climates. Sourcing materials and labour from close to communities allows jobs and revenues to stay in communities.



"The product is very versatile, highly fire resistant, mold resistant, it has got the right R-values, it transports easily on the back of transports to remote communities. We are challenging (the) forestry industry and the mechanisms of the ministry to go out and access wood for the purpose of building these thermal log kit homes and moving them into our communities." (David Flood)

The planning for housing supply chain would also include initiatives such as community owned hardware stores and job training for plumbers, electricians and cabinetry. For example, in a further pilot program, IESO (Independent Electricity System Operator) supported Wahkohtowin's Communities in developing a solar thermal system to support alternative energy in communities as part of building multiple facets of a circular economy. The Guardians receive training in how to build, install and maintain solar hot water heaters for homes. All of these initiatives and youth training opportunities are important for developing thriving community health and wellbeing.



SHARING ABUNDANCE

¹⁰ <https://www.onebowl.org/about>