

WEDNESDAY AM WORKSHOP #9: INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Workshop: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Nation Building and Environmental Sustainability

Presenters: Kerry Prosper, Afton First Nation, Nova Scotia, Canada, Stuart Myoiuw, Mohawk Tradition Council, Canada: The Iroquois Confederacy, Trudy Sable, Director, Labrador Project/Innu Environmental Guardians Program, Saint Mary's University, Nova Scotia, Canada
Date: Wednesday, June 23rd

Kerry told the story of the American eel as it pertained to his community and the eventual commercial fishery which developed and the consequences of this on his community. The life course of the eel was initially described, one whose trajectory in spawning is opposite to the salmon where the latter goes upstream inland to spawn. How the fish were caught was also described.

Historical background: The American eel was a very important food source for his people during the winter months as the fish would burrow in the mud of the estuaries. As well it was also considered a food with medicinal purposes for when elders' lives were nearing their end, it was a food that encouraged an increase in appetite, and would most likely comprise the last meal that an elder might share.

When fished by the members of the community, a portion of the catch may have been sold to subsidize income and the other portion was shared amongst the community.

Impact of legal decisions pertaining to treaty rights: During the last decade, important decisions pertaining to treaty rights and thus access rights to natural resources came from the Supreme Court of Canada Marshall decision (<http://www.apcfn.ca/>) and the Sparo case in BC. Since this time, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) of the Canadian federal government began issuing licenses to non-Natives without any consultation with the local Native communities, thus establishing a commercial fishery. The price of the eel began to rise encouraging more growth in the fishery. This resulted in a reduction of the stock, to such an extent that the elders of Kerry's community began to worry that this very important food source would disappear. It was described that at certain times there would be hundreds of people on the frozen estuaries spearing the eel. It was also noticed in Kerry's community that concurrent with this fishery, there was a reduction in the traditional sharing of the food source within the community since more money could be made by selling, in particular by youth, also concerning the elders.

Today and reflection: The eel population is recovering slowly. Few elders fish now. There is reflection on almost losing a way of life. Kerry talked about a sense of guilt at times when fishing knowing the stock is suffering and the fish are being hurt, however witnessing this suffering can be beneficial since maybe people need to see and experience this suffering to see what they are doing. This is a big lesson in a small place, but one that is being experienced elsewhere throughout the world.

Stuart Myoiuw, representative Mohawk Traditional Council, Canada

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For background, Stuart began by discussing some aspects of the Iroquois Confederacy as it pertained to selection of chiefs. He has been on the council since 1987, selected by the women of his community as was the law in their constitution.

He described our world today as that of a dollar culture, the dominant culture and one that is destroying the planet and indigenous cultures literally but also in spirit, noting that when groups of people living together begin to affect their surroundings and other cultures and then get so big without restraint in growth this is what results.

He discussed how the spirit and spiritual practices of one's culture are needed to maintain one's cultural identity. When building nations, connections to Mother Earth have to be maintained as part of keeping the identity. It is necessary to create nations that are brother nations to each other. In the Iroquois Confederacy, each of the five nations maintains its individual identity but they are not a collection of individual nations. It is the kinship with Mother Earth that maintains the connections between all nations, the connections to Mother Earth being part of all nation's/culture's identity. When a connection is lost with Mother Earth then all nations lose, e.g. the extinction of an animal. If the knowledge of the connection to the land is lost, the next generation will lose their identity but also their responsibility to Mother Earth.

Stuart was noticing the signs of people moving away from the dominant culture, bringing nations back to their identities. However decisions made today by politicians do not consider these connections. In terms of his own community and life, he would always have generations of his family with him, his father and his children, in all that he does, as they are here with him at this conference. This is a way that the wisdom is passed from one generation to the next. When decisions are made in his community, when counciling, it is always stated "for all those faces yet beneath the earth", i.e. all those (yet to be) born of Mother Earth, also to speak "for all that comes before all else". This is so that in intention the council is being like the creator, and so that the future of the great spirit is embodied. All governments need to remind themselves for whom are they making decisions. All have experienced colonization and the colonization continues: the non-natives are the colonized now - their minds are colonized. The key is to recognize that all individual and cultural identities are linked by the connection to Mother Earth.

Trudy gave some history and description of the project she works on with the Innu. Very recently, in 1960 the Innu were settled off the land, generations of families put in houses and the effects of this are being felt today with many community problems. There is a move to bring back community members to the land at this time. Trudy recounted her personal encounters with being on the land with the Innu at the beginning of the project, and how the land speaks to them, not necessarily in words as they are often not necessary, but the land moves through them. In testimonials by the Innu elders, it was heard over and over again the message: "the land is our medicine", "the land is our life".

Using satellite images as a backdrop, the stories of the Innu as told by elders are being "mapped", places of seasonal camping, hunting, etc... There is to be a national park created in a large part of the Innu territory. As part of this the provincial gov't is planning to build a road on the perimeter of part of this park. In the Innu's case, Trudy noted that there are co-management

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agreements in place now so that they are part of all decisions made about this area, this was not the case in the past.

Q&A

Why is a road being built in the Innu area and the park?

No explanation was available, except to hypothesize that the area may be opening up for nature resource extraction, possibly due to global warming.

A member of the audience from Thailand recounted the experience in her country of a national park being designated where tribal peoples lived in the forests comprised by the park.

Kerry talked about a national park in Nova Scotia where Native peoples used to live (Keijimkujik (sp?)), the national park in Cape Breton where the moose population is too large but Native people's are not allowed to hunt them as they normally would for food. However at the same time he told of a potential collapse of the moose population anticipated in the future: due to logging in surrounding areas, with the same growth rate of the trees at a certain time in the future it is forecasted that the moose will no longer be able to reach the trees to eat from them as they will all be the same height and thus the moose population will dramatically die off.

When decisions are being made about national parks, First Nations (Aboriginal Peoples) needed to be consulted.

Stuart further explaining colonization: the whites have colonized themselves for a long time.

The Aboriginal Peoples are simply the latest victims, but the white's minds continue to be colonized. In his nation, there are annual ceremonies which teach the community and younger generations about the teachings of the laws, the connections with Mother Earth. The Mohawk Nation is one of travelers, they are known throughout Turtle Island (North America). They have an embassy in the Hague although not officially recognized as a nation by the UN.

A Bhutanese offered the following thought in referring to the American eel situation, from source of food and spiritual significance to an Aboriginal community to that of a commercial fishery: the eel allowed itself to be fished but then the fish was to be fished (be fished to fishing)