



First Nations' Perspectives on the Environment

Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources
(CIER)

Edmonton, AB
January 20, 2004

First Nations and the Environment



Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources



www.cier.ca

- CIER formed in 1994
- FN Board of Directors
- Not-for-profit, charitable, NGO
- Assisting FN environmental issues
- FN capacity building

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Presentation Outline

- Importance of language
- Western/ FN World views
- Past affects the present
- Impacts of change on FNs
- Determination for a brighter future



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Westernization of the World

“The idea that one’s view of reality
is the only reality
is the most dangerous of all delusions”
- *S. Huntington*

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Terms



- Indigenous
- Aboriginal
- First Nations (FNs)
 - Indian
 - Native
- Inuit
- Métis
- Anishinaabe (Ojibway)

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Caution!

- “And I hate the word ‘Aboriginal’. It's a white word that tries to homogenise everything in a single Aboriginal culture.”
 - Tim McCabe – Noongar Anthropology student.
<http://www.caa.org.au/horizons/h14/barra.html>
- 609 First Nations in Canada – 53 languages not including language dialects
 - Each FN is unique
 - Not all lessons learned are transferable

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That said...



- Broad generalizations
– Western world view
and First Nations
world view
- Provide context and
better understanding
when working with
FNs



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Consider Different Views of the Environment

- How do you define
the environment?
- What is your
relationship to the
environment?
- How important is your
environment to your
daily life?



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Human/Environment Interface



- Where does your food come from?
- Where does your water come from?
- Where does your shelter come from?
- Where do your clothes come from?
- Where do your wastes go?

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Western World View

- Dominion, progress & growth
 - Expansion of the Common Good
- Religious origins
 - ‘Garden of Eden’ & ‘Limitless Provider’
- Science & rationalism
 - compartmentalization & reductionism



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Western World View cont'd

- Culture of convenience
 - acquisition of material goods
- Limits to growth
 - Western view in transition
 - Sustainable Development & Responsible Stewardship



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FNs World View

“We are a part of everything that is beneath us, above us, and around us. Our past is our present, our present is our future, and our future is seven generations’ past and present”

- Haudenosaunee teaching



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Connections



- FNs are the land
- Moose, goose & berries
 - The food is the Earth - water, sun, CO₂, soil
- First Nations are the food they eat
 - literally, culturally & spiritually.

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Web of Life

“Creative participation with the living earth extends from birth to death and beyond.

...Death and the body’s ultimate decomposition into the primal elements of the earth, wind, fire, air and water mark the transformation of one’s relatives and ancestors into living landscape, its plants, animals, waters, soils, clouds and air.

This is a literal biological truth as well as a metamorphic one – hence, the meaning in Chief Seattle’s statement, ‘I cannot sell the body, the blood and bones of my people.’” (Cajete 1999)

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Interrelationship

- Health environment \Leftrightarrow Health FNs peoples (cultural, economic, and spiritual).
 - Clear cut
 - Flooding
 - Historical events



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History Matters

- Many Canadians are unaware of history from an Aboriginal perspective
 - Complex societies existed
 - Dispossessed of land, languages, spirituality and cultures



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Degradation of FNs Spirituality

- Creation of reservations
 - Breaking connections to the land (e.g. Plains Nations dependency on Bison)



- “... a decade after Native resistance collapsed, (General Phillip) Sheridan advised Congress to mint a commemorative medal, with a dead buffalo on one side, and a dead Indian on the other.”

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Perspective of Elder Louis Bird (Winisk FN)



- Omuskeego Oral History Project – OurVoices.ca
- Forced onto reservations (pg 4)
 - Remnants of culture and spiritual connection



Louis Bird

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Residential Schools



- Loss of language
- Loss of culture, bush skills, values, world view, processes
- Severed relationship to land
- Physical, emotional, sexual abuse
- Began cycles of abuse, drug dependency,
- Created contempt and hatred for traditional ways, Elders, anything “Indian”
- Alienation from family, community
- Loss of parenting skills
- Unable to pass language, culture and traditions on to their children

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Louis Remembers...

- ‘Who is breaking the 1st commandment?’ And the response was... ‘He who worships the Devil, animals, the sun, stars, and creations. He who does drumming, shaking tent, evil singing, and evil feasting, evil smoking and dream quests because these are the Devil’s creations.’
- Invokes variety of feelings - sadness, despair, anger, resentment, hostility

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Destruction of Inner Environment

- Fragmented and conflicted peoples
 - Apathy, hopelessness
 - Alcohol, drug, substance abuse
 - Child, spousal abuse
 - Suicide, homicide



CP Photo/Ryan Remiorz

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Hope for the Future



- Many returned to FNs
 - Harvest Traditional Foods
 - Some practice Traditional spirituality
 - In secret
 - Openly

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Second Generation Indigenization

- Phenomenon described by Ronald Dore
- 1st generation
 - Western education
 - Removed from home/land/language/culture
 - Return home to establish local education system for their children
- 2nd generation
 - Raised at home close to land/language/culture
 - To some extent, resent dominance of 1st generation
 - Turn to values and beliefs of own society
 - Resurgence of FNs languages/culture/spirituality

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Repossession by the Dispossessed



- Pushing a man in a field is different than pushing a man at the edge of a cliff
- New generation
 - University degrees
 - Understand corporations and free enterprise
- FN recognize the necessity of their land

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Summary

“ For indigenous peoples, the crisis of knowledge’ can be seen in, or has resulted in, the following:

- fragmentation of traditional values and beliefs;
- erosion of spirituality;
- distortions in local, regional, and national ecosystems and economies; and
- tensions related to cultural revitalization and reclamation.”

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Engaging First Nations

- Learn about the First Nation
 - Location, culture, preferred name, their reality
- Introductory letter and follow up phone call
- Introductions are important
- Handshakes
- If you don't know, respectfully ask questions
- Contacting people is often difficult

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LISTENING IS KEY

- Good to ask questions when you don't understand, but wait before asking
- Keep listening because sometime a lot of background is required before the point of the matter can be revealed
- Not every question will be answered

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Methods

- Hire Indigenous peoples
- How to dress
- How to behave
- Spending as much time as possible in the First Nation
 - Taking time to develop a relationship goes a long way
- Humor – people are judged on their ability or inability to laugh at themselves
- IK collected – check back to make sure correct interpretation has been captured

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