

# INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

## A National Indigenous Guardians Network

Indigenous Guardians: A modern take on an ancient tradition of caring for the land

Across Canada, approximately 30 teams of Indigenous Guardians are working to conserve and manage their lands. They monitor wildlife, patrol protected areas and reduce the impacts of climate change. In the process, they honor their cultural traditions and train the next generation of leaders.

This model is proven to deliver major social and environmental benefits. But far more is possible.

Federal support for Indigenous Guardian programs will unleash their full potential across Canada. It will help establish a renewed Nation-to-Nation and Inuit-to-Crown relationships. And it will create transformational change within communities—change built on cultural pride, expert knowledge and the expression of nationhood.

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative has requested federal funding for a National Indigenous Guardian Network that will bring Guardian programs to a broader scale.

Funding the network will help the government meet several goals outlined in the 2015 Speech from the Throne—including reconciliation and international climate commitments. And it will help Guardian programs realize their true promise for communities and the country at large.

### Establishing a Network

The proposed National Indigenous Guardians Network will:

- Build on the success of existing Indigenous Guardian programs and bring the benefits of Guardian programs to all regions of the country.
- Expand over time according to communities' interest and readiness, adding as many as 200 Guardian programs within five years.
- Offer jobs and training for guardians so they can work on the ground and in the community and support decisions made about the land.
- Provide consistent core funding for Guardian programs, helping them move beyond grant-to-grant uncertainty and gain opportunities to leverage other funds.
- Create an Indigenous-led network to encourage sharing and learning among Guardian programs across the nation.

### Expanding a Proven Model

Approximately 30 Guardian programs in Canada have provided great benefits to their communities. The oldest stewardship program emerged in 1973 on Haida Gwaii and was formalized in the early 80s. Innu Nation has had a program since 1993, and it now spans all environmental programs at the Innu Nation including forestry, fisheries, mining and wildlife.

Indigenous stewardship programs have already proven successful. Australia has made a 10-year investment of AUD \$618 million in "[Working on Country](#)." Researchers have documented that every \$1 invested in the program generates \$3 in social, economic and cultural value. There are now 109 Indigenous ranger programs in Australia managing lands and water. Studies found that "Working on

Country” increases employment, reduces welfare payments, lowers crime rates and violence against women and improves public health.

A forthcoming case study of two Indigenous Guardian programs in Canada’s Northwest Territories concluded that they already deliver about \$2.50 of social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits for every \$1 invested. With support from a national network, researchers expect the value could increase to up to \$3.70 for each dollar of investment.

### **Supporting Reconciliation**

This is a pivotal moment in Canadian history. The country is grappling with the effects of colonization as noted in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission findings and recommendations. The time is ripe for a positive, forward-looking model that honors Indigenous rights and responsibilities to the land.

Guardian programs show what reconciliation looks like in action: Indigenous people managing Indigenous lands.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission called for closing gaps in education and employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Guardian programs help accomplish this—and many other Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations. They offer specialized training and good-paying jobs serving the community.

### **Empowering Young People**

When Indigenous youth are asked what would inspire them, their response is time on the land; Guardian programs make that possible and help instill a sense of purpose and leadership. Becoming a guardian strengthens young people’s pride in their culture. For too long, government policies and legislation has tried to strip Indigenous Peoples, particularly youth, of their cultural identity—causing generations of pain and despair.

A Guardian program can offer meaningful jobs that honor and value cultural tradition and re-establish the role of knowledge-keepers sharing with the younger generations. This creates inspiring new possibilities for Indigenous youth. Young people learn traditional knowledge and western science, equipping them to become not just today’s guardians but also future educators, lawyers, scientists, and legislators.

### **Shaping Land Use Decisions**

Guardians play an integral role in decision-making about the land and all that depends on it. They provide the critical link between decision-making at the leadership level and the reality on-the-ground and in the community. Their existence provides dedicated resources and focused conversations about the cultural responsibilities to the lands and how Indigenous Peoples can express their nationhood with respect to the lands.

Guardians collect data to help communities decide where to create protected areas, where to build infrastructure, and where to zone for development. They help foster conversation between communities and companies, clarifying when to allow development and what conditions to apply.

When guardians are on the land, communities can feel safer letting development proceed. For example, some Innu and Inuit communities initially opposed the Voisey Bay Mine, but when the Innu Nation Environmental Guardians agreed to monitor the project, it created the context for better social acceptability of the project within Innu communities.

A National Indigenous Guardian Network will build capacity so the existing programs can reach their full potential, and more communities can establish their own land use plan and engage as partners in development decisions.

### **Protecting Our Shared Environment**

Indigenous Guardian programs strengthen local communities, but they also contribute to larger efforts to protect the natural systems that all life depends on.

Many Guardian programs are active in the boreal forest—a globally significant ecosystem with more intact forest than the Amazon and nearly twice as much carbon as tropical forests. Their work helps conserve these riches for all of us:

- **Biodiversity:** Guardians monitor caribou and other endangered species, manage invasive species, and work to protect the boreal nesting grounds for billions of migratory birds.
- **Healthy Forests:** Guardians play a critical role in creating and managing protected areas, including parks, across the country.
- **Stable Climate:** By maintaining the health of forests and wetlands, Guardians help keep huge stores of carbon from being released into the atmosphere, and can help monitor and reduce the impacts of climate change.

### **What Guardians Can Do**

Guardians plan a variety of roles in their communities. They:

- Act as the “eyes and ears” on the land, in boardrooms and in communities
- Develop land use plans and other resource management plans, including for forestry
- Patrol protected areas and provide cultural interpretation
- Monitor wildlife—from caribou herds to salmon runs to grizzly DNA, including enforcement
- Monitor development activities such as mining, logging and energy projects
- Educate visitors about cultural values and other proper land use
- Respond to climate impacts such as large fire outbreaks and insect infestations
- Restore forests, streams and other landscapes

### **Guardians in Action**

There are about 30 Indigenous Guardian programs in place in Canada, including:

**Haida Gwaii:** Off the coast of British Columbia, the Haida Gwaii Watchmen protect the lands and waters of their nation according to traditional laws. They work on fisheries, forestry and parks, preserve culturally significant sites and share their knowledge with visitors. Their society inspired the Coastal Guardian Watchmen Network, connecting eight Indigenous coastal nations doing similar work.

**Innu:** In Labrador, the Innu Nation Environmental Guardian program employs 15 guardians to manage fisheries and caribou and forestry, and monitor hydro and mining. The program played a crucial role in building capacity and leadership within the Innu Nation, enabling them to negotiate the *Tshash-Petapen* (New Dawn) agreement-in-principle with the Crown, lead forestry planning across 71,000 square kilometres, and advance conservation efforts, such as creating the Akamiuapishk<sup>u</sup> - KakKasuak - Mealy Mountains National Park Reserve.

**Lutsel K'e:** The Dene community of Lutsel K'e in the Northwest Territories launched the Ni Hat'ni Dene (Watching the Land) program in 2008. These guardians help care for millions of acres near Great Slave Lake, including where the community will co-manage the proposed Thaidene Nene National Park Reserve. Guardians will maintain cultural sites and natural beauty within Thaidene Nene and provide interpretive tours. The program will help the community and Parks Canada establish a sustainable tourism sector for the area—creating jobs and spin-off benefits for the community and the Northwest Territories as a whole.