

INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

Opening Keynote: Ethel Blondin-Andrew First Nations Guardians Gathering 2021

Mahsi Cho to the Elders from the Dehcho (Fort Simpson) for the Feeding of the Fire performed yesterday to open our gathering.

On behalf of the ILLI, I would like to welcome Guardians, Indigenous leaders and our allies from across the country and the World! (Americans and Australians)

Out of respect for Indigenous peoples across Canada, and the world, I feel it is important to address, upfront, the news out of BC this week. Thank you to my dear sister friend Bev Sellars for your powerful words yesterday.

Residential School and Guardians Leadership

In light of the exposure of the burial of those 215 children at Kamloops Indian Residential School, my heart has been so heavy. I am a Residential School survivor, and I have been surrounded, coast to coast to coast, by both survivors and intergenerational survivors of the horrors of the Residential School System. I needed to acknowledge this news story because it has gravely affected me. Not because it is new information: We know these mass graves exist, and that there will be many more discovered – but because being faced by the reminders that we live and walk with these difficult knowledges is indescribably painful. I am on the Indigenous Advisory Committee for the UBC Residential School History and Dialogue Centre with 14 other Indigenous leaders, including Mary Ellen Turpel, and we are working to make sure these atrocities are not forgotten.

I am thinking of those children, their families, and of all of us, with love and with fierce resolve to make healthy, beautiful futures for our children and grandchildren despite what was done to us.

My work with ILI is the part of the antidote, the uprising, that will show the world that Indigenous peoples should play a major leadership role with respect to Conservation: We are the stewards of the remaining biodiversity of the planet. While the world's 370 million Indigenous peoples make up less than 5% of the total human population, we manage our whole tenure over 25% of the world's land surface. This is a huge part of who I am and what I do as a Shúhtaot'ine. We have come to a place where we are fully engaged in a process called Indigenous-led conservation.

This is no surprise. It is who we are.

80% of the biodiversity on the planet remains due to the stewardship of our peoples. As such, we are the foundation of healthy futures for all life on Earth. This is our ancestral gift, our power, and our legacy. This is even more extraordinary in light of what has been done to us. I cannot wait to hear from Guardians; your stories of hope, of work, of healing. Let us learn from and support each other as we work together to continue to care for and protect our Lands, our cultures and our communities.

The growth of this Guardians movement is great cause for celebration: There are now more Guardians employed across the country than at any point in history. The programs have tripled in the past 5 years, and there are now approximately 95 programs in existence. The Land Needs Guardians - and you (audience) are answering that call! I am so proud to be part of this movement. Let me tell you a bit about how I got here.

My Story

Long before I went to residential school my people gave me what I needed to survive in this world. My parents raised me on the land. We traveled by dog team by boat or on foot. I acquired a taste for country food at an early age. My parents taught me to love and respect the land, animals and the people. My grandmother gave me the gift of my Dene language and ceremony, especially to pay the land back as we take from it.

Wherever we are it is the land, the animals and the people, we look to Mother Earth. While there is incredible diversity between Indigenous peoples, nations and

languages, we share a powerful commonality. We understand our fundamental dependence upon the land. And we continue to act with this in mind.

This brings me to the joy and inspiration at this stage of my life and career; I feel incredibly grateful for my involvement and my work with ILI.

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative Approach

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative is dedicated to advancing the role of Indigenous Nations in deciding the future of traditional territories. We are an Indigenous-led organization. Our Senior Leaders have decades of experience on the land, in Indigenous leadership and governance, in territorial and provincial government, in Parliament and federal cabinet, and in national commissions and the international arena.

We draw on this expertise to foster Indigenous Nationhood. We take a holistic view of Nationhood and believe healthy lands support healthy peoples, healthy families, and healthy communities. Together they form strong Nations. We also see linkages between strong Nations and a more sustainable, equitable society for all people. We advance Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas and Indigenous Guardians programs, for instance, because they foster, and are an expression of, Nationhood. They also help solve existential threats like Climate Change and loss of biodiversity. And they help prepare a path toward reconciliation, Nation-to-Nation relationships, and a better foundation for Canada.

The ILI is a partner of the International Boreal Conservation Campaign, a coalition of like-minded organizations who are all dedicated to supporting Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship and conserving the Boreal region according to the wishes of the Indigenous Peoples who call it home.

Currently, I am also working with Self-Government in Sahtu: this is another way that I am working to centre Indigenous governance, self-determination and Nationhood for my people.

Nationhood is not easy, but responsibility is not meant to be easy. The hard work of coming together to do the right thing, according to Dene values and laws, is always worth that effort.

My fellow Dene and Métis are passionate about the land and our relationship with it; we are also rooted in our Indigenous foods. We gotta have caribou, moose, fish; these are our supermarkets...our breadbaskets.

There are many special and sacred Places in the Sahtu: From Tuyeta, to Horton Lake, the Great Lake Biosphere, and my homeland.

Nio Ne Pene is the backbone of the Mackenzie Mountains: It is the birthplace of my ancestors, of my husband's ancestors, and provides the habitat for moose, caribou, bears, wolves, sheep, porcupines, ground squirrels. That area provides a lot for our people in all four directions.

We must move forward by incorporating time-honoured traditions and practices of our people and our communities while being able to participate fully in Canada's economic and social growth.

Momentum Is Building

Guardians help communities honour those responsibilities. They draw on Indigenous law, knowledge, and tradition. And they conduct research that informs policies—strengthening Indigenous governance and Nationhood in the process.

We need Guardians on the land now more than ever. I think IPCAs and Guardians are the single most important strategy to address climate change and biodiversity loss. In the last 10 years, 85% to 90% of new protected areas in Canada have either been led or co-led by Indigenous Nations—from Mealy Mountains National Park Reserve to Ts'udé Niljné Tuyeta.

I know that North America's boreal forests, where I'm from, which spans the Northern portion of the continent from Alaska, all the way to Newfoundland, covers an astonishing 1.5 billion acres, larger than all, but six countries, including India. Canada is home to 85% of North America's boreal forest.

Clean water is a basic need. Climate change threatens all of us. Animals and plants are disappearing. Freshwaters are becoming contaminated. Indigenous Peoples are stepping up to the challenge. We have the stewardship expertise, knowledge systems, and proven models. And we have Guardians. We are like the Raven – we

are the sentinels, the cleaners, of the Land. And we like to laugh while we do it, but we SEE like the Ravens. Ultimately, we know what has to be done.

Youth Camps

My passion is that I get to work with so many good people, especially young people. Since I started with ILI I've done four major camps alongside my husband, Shúhtaot'ine Elder Leon Andrew. We are very proud of our work and our teams supporting on the land activities. These camps were rich cultural experiences and were spiritually rewarding. And most of all, healing. In all of this we are where we should be as humans, loving and accepting ourselves and others. This is where we are at our best. Ne'Rahten; Ká Tó- Willow flats; Pətlánejo was the third one, at Caribou Flats; Tets'exeh was the last one; This was truly a special experience for all 25 of us in the camp.

Through each successive camp, we could see the transformation of the young people as they learned. We learned what the young people needed as they became more confident to tell us. There was a growing realization that these young people, given the proper mentorship, guidance and resources can take up opportunities for leadership and excellence as Guardians of the land. They are the front lines in the North, addressing climate change food sovereignty and security, and participating in diverse local economies that support local governance of lands and resources.

I want my grandchildren to know how significant a role that the land plays in keeping the air clean, in keeping the water clean and providing food for us as a global population. There are so many things I wish for them. I worry too, because I know that the world is a different place and we have greater challenges. And we are trying to square the circle on our economic aspirations, on our technological aspirations, on trying to do all the things that are right to do with conservation. And I want to give them the gift of walking in the bush and seeing what I saw as a child. I would like them to have the gift of my language that my grandmother gave me. Those are all things that worked together that make us who we are. All of us, it doesn't matter who we are, whether we're Indigenous or not. We all need each other. We all need the same things. We need a good environment. We need to work together. We need to pull together.

These people that I went out with on the land these kids get it, they get it. They know that this is the place where they are the very best humans they can be. That's what I want for my grandchildren.