

# INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

## **Submission by Valérie Courtois, Director, Indigenous Leadership Initiative to the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic**

**Regarding the significant and rapid changes to the Arctic, and impacts on original inhabitants**

**April 1, 2019**

Dear Honourable Senators, Kuei, ninu Valérie Courtois, Mashteuiatsh nutshin. I'd first like to begin by acknowledging that we are currently on the lands of the Algonquin People.

It's an honour to be here today. And to speak about Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, expertise and leadership in conservation.

My homelands in Labrador are often considered to be part of the Arctic region. However, my professional experience is rooted in the Boreal Forest.

Like the Arctic, the boreal is a globally significant ecosystem. It is the largest intact forest left on the planet. It contains a quarter of the world's wetlands. And it offers the last refuge for animals like the caribou that have lost most of their range elsewhere. Yet like the Arctic, it is also being altered by climate change and development pressures.

To ensure a sustainable future for these regions, we must turn to knowledge systems that emerged thousands of years ago. Indigenous Peoples have been the stewards of the boreal and the Arctic for millennia. And we know and are learning more every day about our awesome history through all those centuries.

It's a history of strong and diverse Indigenous Nations and flourishing cultures from coast to coast to coast.

And it's about traditions, practices, and wisdom to survive and to grow and the exercise of sacred responsibilities to protect mother earth and all the animals, fish and winged ones that share her with us.

It's also about our enormous contributions to the world as well... our songs, drums, our systems of governance, our art and our languages have greatly enriched civilization and continue to do so.

Our people know the mountains, the plains, the sea, the great rivers, valleys and trails. We know the ice and snow, fire, and the air we breathe. We are a place-based people and of the land, connected through it to all things.

The land is our essence. it looks after us and in turn it is our sacred duty to protect it.

## INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE ( ILI )

A look around the globe confirms the strength of Indigenous conservation. The traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples hold 80% of the planet's remaining biodiversity. From medicinal plants in the Amazon to the 5 billion birds that take to the air from the boreal each fall, Indigenous knowledge systems safeguard an abundance of animals, plants, clean waters, clean air—the natural systems we all depend upon.

Here in this country, Indigenous Peoples are asserting their stewardship responsibilities to lands and waters through guardianship.

It is a movement, a movement growing directly from the land — from the elders, from the youth, from a new crop of women leaders—calling for Indigenous leadership on the land.

We see it in the more than 40 Indigenous Guardians programs now managing traditional territories. And we see it in the incredible response to the available funding through the Canada Nature Fund to support proposed Indigenous protected areas that will sustain hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of healthy lands and clean waters.

Our Nations are honouring their cultural responsibility to care for the land. In the process, we are strengthening our communities and expressing Indigenous Nationhood.

We are also helping Canada meet its commitment to protect at least 17% of lands and freshwaters by 2020—an international commitment to help stem the loss of animal and plant species around the globe. Should those targets be revised in future international agreements, Indigenous Peoples are poised to contribute to that new target.

The movement of Indigenous guardianship is about a brighter future. A more sustainable future. Our collective future. We all rely on the land for our survival. It is in our shared interest to ensure those lands remain healthy and vibrant.

By working together, forging partnerships, honouring stewardship responsibilities, Canada and Indigenous Nations can create that future. In fact, the work is already underway.

Today I would like to discuss three key elements of Indigenous-led conservation: land use planning, protected areas, and Guardians.

### **Land Use Planning**

Many Indigenous governments are embracing land use planning as a tool for determining the future of their territories within a context of cultural responsibility. Through extensive community meetings, interviews, and data analysis, communities identify which lands they want to protect and which lands could be open for exploration and development.

Along the Mackenzie River, the Sahtu Dene and Métis designed a land use plan that honours cultural traditions, elders' knowledge, and Indigenous and western science. More than 700 people from Sahtu communities, government, industry and non-government organizations participated in the process.

## INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE ( ILI )

When it was finalized in 2013, communities proposed protecting Ts'ude niline Tu'eyeta, also known as the Ramparts, as well as several other areas.

Indigenous land use plans also provide welcome clarity. Companies interested in investing in projects know where development can proceed, and Crown governments can identify opportunities for collaboration.

### **Indigenous Protected Areas**

Indigenous land use planning often inspires the creation of Indigenous protected areas. These are places designated by Indigenous governments for conservation based on ecological and cultural values. They reflect Indigenous law and tradition, and they ensure Indigenous Peoples can maintain their relationship with the land.

Indigenous protected areas are created in collaboration with Crown governments, but Indigenous governments play the primary role in identifying and managing the lands.

Last July, for instance, the Dehcho First Nations passed a Dene law to create the Edézhzhíe Protected Area—a sweeping stretch of boreal forest, headwater lakes and caribou grounds west of Yellowknife. Then in October, Dehcho leaders held a signing ceremony with Environment and Climate Change Minister Catherine McKenna to designate it as a joint Dehcho Protected Area and National Wildlife Area. The new protected area will be managed through a partnership between the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Dehcho K'éhodi Indigenous Guardians.

Dehcho Elder Jonas Antoine said Edézhzhíe “will be a gift for the future.”

The Dene are not alone. I've visited communities and Nations across the country—from Déline to Misipawistik to Eeyou Istchee, to my own Nation's Nitassinan—that are using cultural protocols, Indigenous laws and innovative tools to conserve the land.

These Indigenous Nations have offered Canada partnership in achieving the goal of protecting at least 17% of lands and freshwaters by 2020.

### **Indigenous Guardians**

And many are looking to Indigenous Guardians to manage the land.

Indigenous Guardians serve as the “moccasins and mukluks” or “eyes and ears” on the ground. They are skilled in traditional knowledge and cultural protocols, and they are trained in western science. Drawing on this expertise, Guardians manage protected areas, test water quality, and monitor development projects.

Guardians' work is good for the land, and it's good for people.

## INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE ( ILI )

Australia has invested \$840 million in similar Indigenous Ranger programs. A study commissioned by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet found each \$1 invested in integrated Indigenous Protected Area and Indigenous Rangers programs can generate \$3 in social, economic and cultural benefits—including through reduced income support, health spending and justice costs. We see the same returns on investment in Canada with the over 40 existing programs here. We commend the initial pilot investment by the Government of Canada in Budget 2017, but significant and sustained funding is needed for Guardians to reach their full potential and for meaningful reconciliation at all scales relating to lands and waters.

### **Our Collective Future**

The benefits of Indigenous-led conservation are clear. Reconnecting with culture, healing from trauma and feeling pride in identity—all of it is rooted in the land. Guardians help foster those connections. Imagine how healthy our lands and communities will become when hundreds of Guardians programs are launched. With sustained, long-term support, we can deliver such important opportunities to more communities and more lands.

Now is a pivotal time. Canada has vowed to double its protected lands by 2020 and many Indigenous Nations have proposed new protected areas. Supporting Indigenous-led conservation is the most efficient and most effective way for Canada to reach its goal.

This country has a special responsibility to act. Canada is one of five nations that holds the remaining 70% of intact lands left on the planet. We still have vibrant lands and clean waters on a scale rarely seen today. Places like the boreal and the Arctic.

Our Prime Minister has said that there is “no more important relationship to Canada than the one with Indigenous Peoples”. Our collective future depends on the depth and breadth of our relationships between each other as Peoples, and, as important, our future relationship with our lands and waters.

By working together, Canada and Indigenous Nations can sustain these important lands for future generations. We can offer a model for the world of conservation rooted in respect, responsibility and reconciliation. And we can take a sustainable route to our shared future.

Thank you,



Valérie Courtois  
Director, Indigenous Leadership Initiative  
International Boreal Conservation Campaign  
[vcourtois@borealcanada.ca](mailto:vcourtois@borealcanada.ca)  
[www.ilinationhood.ca](http://www.ilinationhood.ca)