

The Story So Far...

Indigenous Nations across Canada have been stewards and Guardians of their respective territories since time immemorial. It is a sacred responsibility to care for the lands, waters and the species that inhabit them. Indigenous Nations reclaiming their authority and jurisdiction over these lands and waters presents an opportunity to formalize and express this responsibility through initiatives like Guardians. This concept is not new – many Nations have been building their own systems of guardianship, some for decades. Some modern Guardian programs that were formalized early on include the Haida Watchmen, Mi'kmaq fisheries Guardians and the Innu Nation Environmental Guardian program.

Guardians are the “moccasins and mukluks on the ground” in Indigenous territories. They play a vital role in collecting and promoting intergenerational sharing of traditional Indigenous knowledge and incorporating it into decision-making at all levels of territorial governance. They help build capacity to engage with other land users, development proponents, and governments, thus strengthening decision-making. Guardians' specific priorities must be, and are determined at, the individual community level and can include monitoring ecological health, maintaining cultural sites, protecting sensitive areas and species, interpreting culture and heritage aspects for visitors, and contributing to land and marine planning and management.

After holding the first national workshop with Guardians from across Canada in Squamish, BC, with partners, in February 2014, three key priorities were identified:

- 1) Developing a better understanding and inventory of on-the-ground indigenous stewardship programs across Canada;
- 2) Increasing opportunities for indigenous stewardship practitioners in Canada to network and share experiences, program information, training resources, strategies and methodologies; and,
- 3) Developing a business case to support stewardship programs to better reach financial self-sufficiency and develop new and enduring partnerships.

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI) recognized that the time was right to extend the reach and impact of Indigenous Guardians right across Canada, and over the past four years has been at the forefront of advocating sustained support and national recognition of their importance.

A supportive resolution was passed by the Assembly of First Nations at the Special Chiefs Assembly in Gatineau in December 2015. The AFN National Chief, Perry Bellegarde, asked the Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI) to explore how to advance the concept of a national approach to Guardians, which led to the development of the process whereby ILI explored how the Government of Canada could become a partner at the national level. These efforts included hosting a Gathering in October 2016 of almost 200 Indigenous Guardians and leaders in Ottawa, ON, where the following vision for a National Indigenous Guardians Network was expressed:

Aspiring to catalyze, promote, support, connect and expand Indigenous Guardians initiatives across Canada, this vision empowers Indigenous Nations, governments, and our communities to honour

and fulfil our cultural responsibilities to our homelands and to enable a true Nation-to-Nation partnership with the Government of Canada and provincial and territorial governments on responsible territorial land and marine stewardship.

Persuaded by the power of this vision, the Government of Canada's Budget 2017 committed \$25 million over five years, starting in 2017–18, to support a pilot Indigenous Guardians Initiative to promote Indigenous leadership in responsible environmental stewardship, sustainable development, and the management of natural resources in Indigenous territories. The ILI was asked by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada to play a leadership role in developing the pilot initiative. The ILI is committed to ensuring that the design of the Network and the associated pilot is developed and implemented in the spirit of a Nation-to-Nation relationship between the Indigenous Nations in Canada and the Government of Canada.

The initial vision for the formation of the Network and the associated funding was to ensure a robust participation process with Indigenous Nations; to strengthen that broad participation; and to sustain the original momentum for a model of genuine partnership with the federal government in the formation of the Network itself. Notably, the ILI ensured input from established Guardians across Canada by hosting a completely funded National Indigenous Guardians Network Workshop, May 23-24, 2018 in Ottawa.

The participants at the May 2018 workshop articulated a common view that the Network will formalize an existing and growing grassroots movement within Indigenous communities across Canada taking up responsibility for lands and marine stewardship for the benefit of all Canadians. Further, it will enable a Nation-based model of self-determination and reconciliation premised on a shared understanding of jurisdiction (responsibility), decision-making (authority) and respect (reverence) for Mother Earth.

Participants acknowledged that Indigenous Peoples have had, and continue to play, a significant role in creating, protecting and monitoring high conservation values and landscapes throughout Canada. Concurrently, governments were reminded by two seminal reports *We Rise Together* and *Canada's Conservation Vision* from the Pathway to Canada Target 1 project, of the reality that Indigenous Peoples play a critical role in meeting national and international commitments to biodiversity conservation and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

In September 2018, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) and the ILI created the First Nations-Federal Pilot Joint Working Group for Guardians (JWG) to breathe life into the partnership contemplated in the Budget 2017 announcement.

The Indigenous caucus of the JWG is made up of an experienced group of Indigenous Knowledge Keepers from across the country who volunteered at the May 2018 workshop to help advance the work of building a National Indigenous Guardians Network. There are eight Indigenous members of the JWG, four federal members, and a number of ex-officio members from each of the partners to help guide the work.

This should be noted: a year ago ECCC applied the "distinctions-based" approach to the Guardians pilot (a result of one of the "Principles Respecting the Government of Canada's Relationship with Indigenous Peoples") which resulted in the \$25 million being divided among First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

Over the past five months, the JWG has had three, three-day long face-to-face meetings (two in Ottawa and one in Halifax), in addition to many conference calls and emails. Their work, guided by agreed-upon terms of reference (ToR), included determining:

- a training and education framework
- criteria and eligibility for future funding allotments to Guardians initiatives
- a proposed interim structure for the Network
- possible approaches to evaluation and developing the business case, and
- a continuing role for a new JWG

This will ensure the long-term future of a robust Indigenous-led National Indigenous Guardians Network, in addition to resources to support the expansion of Guardians initiatives in every Indigenous community and region that indicates an interest in developing one.

The First Nations' National Guardians Gathering in March 2019 in Vancouver is the culmination of this stage of the work – the partnership of ILI with Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) to develop the Network and present the JWG's efforts to a Gathering of Chiefs, leaders and, of course, Guardians for consideration. The budget is being stretched to provide travel and accommodation for as many participants from First Nations as possible to attend. The JWG is very pleased to be holding the Gathering in Vancouver. It is a way to honour the incredible trailblazing work of existing Guardians in what is now known as British Columbia.

Given the collective experience over the past several months, it continues to be the shared view of members of the JWG that Guardian initiatives will create new employment futures for many talented Indigenous youth and formalize meaningful positive roles for active community members rooted in their cultures and fulfilling their cultural responsibilities. As such, this work makes a clear and tangible contribution to all elements of the Government of Canada's strategic agenda and will produce concrete and wide-ranging positive results on the ground for all Canadians.