

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Connection to Land The Value of Land

Excerpt from *Contemporary Issues*

Government of Alberta ■





THE VALUE OF LAND

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THE VALUE OF LAND

Many Canadians, aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, feel a strong connection to land. Farming families, for example, often become emotionally attached to their land, particularly when a farm is passed from generation to generation. The longer people spend in one location and the more their lives revolve around the land and its natural life cycles, the stronger the bond becomes.

Modern society, however, has become very mobile. People are less likely to put down roots. They are also less likely to make their living directly from the land. To many people, land has become a commodity — something to be bought and sold. It has monetary value and practical uses, but little hold on their hearts and spiritual identities.

In contrast, land lies at the very soul of traditional First Nations and Inuit political, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual ways of life. According to the oral tradition, the land is physically and spiritually a part of people. It is part of their identity as humans. Teachings from the oral tradition maintain that the land has sustained humans, plants, and animals for thousands of years and will sustain them in the future. People care for the land and it cares for them in return, in a reciprocal relationship of giving and taking.

Many Métis people hold similar ideas, although in general their cultural connection to land relates more to political, economic, and social pursuits rather than spiritual beliefs.

ECONOMIC VALUE

In non-Aboriginal society, the most prevalent value attached to land is economic. This value is what the land or its resources can be bought or sold for on the open market. In this sense, land value can be quantified in dollars. An individual must own land in fee simple to take full advantage of this kind of land value. This does not mean they have to sell it. People who own land can use it as a security to borrow money. They can then invest that money in ways that generate income.

From an Aboriginal worldview, land is also economically valuable. It provides a place for people to make a living, in both traditional and non-traditional ways. Hunting, fishing, and trapping still play a role in many Aboriginal people's lives. Without a land base and access to unoccupied Crown lands, many of these ways of life would be impossible. An Aboriginal sense of economic value is inherently sustainable. Land is so much a part of other aspects of life that traditional Aboriginal people would no more destroy the land than they would destroy themselves. The end goal is the maintenance of a way of life and the community.

This excerpt on value of land ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Contemporary Issues*, Toronto, ON, 2005, pp. 111-117.

This is not to say that Aboriginal peoples today do not wish to take advantage of the revenue that can be generated from land. Forestry, energy, and mineral resources contribute to the prosperity of many Aboriginal communities. A wide range of other industries — from agriculture to tourism — also require land.

Aboriginal communities generally pursue such opportunities as a way to re-invest money in the community to strengthen it. Development is done carefully with an eye to the future generations and their needs.

CULTURAL VALUE

Aboriginal cultures are deeply connected to land. Aboriginal people's stories, histories, and traditions are tied to the land of their ancestors. By maintaining a link to that land and its resources, Aboriginal people can retain a connection to their culture.

For example, in the Métis culture, land means freedom and autonomy — it is a means to an end. It is what their people have demanded as their right throughout their history as a nation. Land is associated with an independent way of life that is inextricable from other cultural values.

In addition, land strengthens cultures and provides for their future. A common land base encourages people to live near one another and maintain elements of their culture, such as ceremonies, kinship ties, and language.

SPIRITUAL VALUE

For many First Nations and Inuit peoples, the cultural value of land is intertwined with its spiritual value. Traditional First Nations and Inuit spirituality is not separate from other parts of life. Spirituality is involved in every aspect of life and in every part of the world.

Some First Nations people use the expression *Mother Earth* to express the sense that the land gave birth to the people and nourishes them. In return, the people must respect, nurture, and protect the land, as they would a mother. Land is an integral part of a person's identity.

The land's spiritual value is sometimes tied to a specific piece of land. A particular location may be the place of traditional ceremonial gatherings, such as the Sundance. Another might be an ancestral burial ground or a site known for spiritual power. Métis culture is more associated with Christian religions, such as Roman Catholicism, so it has less of this sense of spiritual connection to land. However, some Métis people may feel a strong bond to the spirituality of their First Nations ancestors and relatives. If they do, they may share these spiritual connections to land.

EDUCATIONAL VALUE

For countless generations, First Nations and Inuit peoples passed on their traditional knowledge through everyday teaching. Children collected plants with their parents, learning what each one was used for. They listened to Elders tell stories about their ancestors, often while working alongside them on the land. An uncle might teach a nephew how to set a snare, or a grandmother might guide her granddaughter's hand as she learned to prepare a buffalo hide. Education was informal and part of everyday life on the land.

People observed the natural world around them and were accustomed to reading its signs of weather, seasonal change, and animal activity. People observed and experienced natural laws at work — such laws showed the hand of the Creator, which reinforced spiritual beliefs.

Experienced people in the community modelled behaviour that showed respect for these laws. Knowledge and values were conveyed at the same time. Today, students in many Aboriginal-run schools learn traditional knowledge and values as part of their overall education. As in the past, learning happens inside and outside the classroom. Having a land base has another important educational value — it facilitates Aboriginal language use and preservation. People are encouraged to learn and use traditional languages if other people living around them speak those languages.

SOCIAL VALUE

Land has a significant social value. It provides an anchor and focal point for Aboriginal communities — it is home. It provides the location for social gatherings and spiritual ceremonies — virtually all of which traditionally take place in natural settings, using natural materials. Such gatherings reinforce a sense of community, feelings of belonging, a sense of identity, and self-esteem.

POLITICAL VALUE

The economic, social, cultural, spiritual, and educational values of land intersect with land's political value. Aboriginal leaders see land as an important component of self-government and self-determination. Land provides a springboard from which to work politically to meet community needs. Aboriginal peoples can work within or alongside the Canadian political system to ensure the success of their communities.

TALKING CIRCLE: The Value of Land

What I can't understand is when they go logging in the Swan Hills or Hinton area, they leave the land next to broke: there are no trees there, no roots, herbs, nothing. Why don't they put the farmers there, since it's already cleared and wasted land anyway? They should put the farmers where the loggers have already done the damage. Then they try to plant little trees there. Why don't they just cut down and drag out the big trees they need without uprooting the entire area? If they left the smaller trees, the wind wouldn't knock them down and the trees would re-grow a lot faster. Even if the government says people and jobs come first, they still have to have respect for nature, because in the long run it works against people. They can't see the future. There's a lot of damage being done to the environment that should be discussed in order to realize what's happening to our country here. We call it the blessed country, but it is sure to go back to rick in no time. I might not see that, but our great-grandchildren will.

— Russell Willier, *Cry of the Eagle: Encounters with a Cree Healer*

Elders possess generations of knowledge about traditional values and how they can be understood and used today. Russell Willier is a well-known Alberta Elder from the Sucker Creek Reserve in Alberta. Authors David Young, Grant Ingram, and Lise Swartz spent time with Willier to write *Cry of the Eagle: Encounters with a Cree Healer*. The authors describe Willier's reasons for wanting a section of the Swan Hills [in Northern Alberta] designated as a retreat for Aboriginal peoples. Read the excerpt and then discuss Willier's ideas or your own about Aboriginal land management techniques and how they can contribute to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies today.

This land [part of the Swan Hills) is in the centre of the area traditionally used by natives for vision-quest purposes. Logging is being done nearby, and Russell is concerned that the vision quest sites may soon be ruined. Russell would like to continue to have a place to take young people for a wilderness experience that would include instruction in the vision quest, survival skills, the Sweetgrass Trail, and other traditional native skills and knowledge. He would also like to instill in native young people traditional values connected with hunting, particularly a respect for the animals and a responsiveness to the delicate balance of nature. This means teaching them to exercise control over the numbers of animals killed, to vary the seasons and places in which animals are hunted, and to obey the fishing and hunting regulations

It is important that more native people become Fish and Wildlife officers. This would give them the authority to discipline those few who create problems for everyone, and they would likely have a better understanding of native needs and environmental issues. As Russell says, his ancestors have been hunting in this area for many centuries while maintaining long-term ecological balance. Experienced hunters had a vast knowledge of the resources of the land and the changing conditions of game populations. Their hunting practices were characterized by their willingness to exercise self-control. Even today, successful hunters who exhibit competence, skill, and spirituality, and who do not hunt excessively, are respected and are often contrasted with those who hunt recklessly.

Russell sees a great deal of waste of animal remains that could be used to regenerate wildlife. Most big-game hunters dispose of moose remains and other large animal intestines by throwing them in the dump. They should be required to leave the remains behind in the forest or bring them to the trapline where other animals can eat them. This is particularly important for large, commercial fisheries. Although fisheries located on Lesser Slave Lake are regulated by quotas set by the government, their means of disposal of fish-heads and other remains is not only wasteful, but also destroys wildlife. The present practice is to dump the remains in a large hole, which is then covered with lye. An animal that comes along and eats the remains dies of lye poisoning. This, says Russell, is representative of the wrong attitude that many non-natives have developed towards the environment, namely “grab, make a dollar, and forget about the rest.” Fisheries make considerable profits from their catch, and there are enough fish remains to feed many local animals. Dispersing these remains in areas where animal are starving should be mandatory. This would create jobs for native people in northern Alberta, where there is much unemployment.

— David Young, Grant Ingram, and Lise Swartz, *Cry of the Eagle: Encounters with a Cree Healer*