

## Reconciliation Through Traditional Ecological Knowledge

*Harley Courtoreille*

My name is Harley Courtoreille and I'm from Ahtahkakoop First Nation in Sandy Lake, Saskatchewan. Although I was originally from Tall Cree, north of here, I never really grew up there. They needed a goalie in Saskatchewan so I said, "Okay, I'll be your goalie." One thing I learned about a lot of Native people I met there is they would pray: my hockey teammates would pray to the ice, their goalie stick, or their leather glove. I had never experienced that before, but I started listening to them and it worked. I just found it quite amazing that they were so connected to the land that they were actually talking to their equipment, and I think our children need more of that.

I began my post-secondary education in Saskatchewan. I completed a Bachelor of Arts at First Nations University of Canada and a Bachelor of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. But while I was there, I found I was missing an Aboriginal perspective. I was sitting there one day and I was thinking, "I'm not moving. I feel like I'm swimming against the current here." So I looked at all the programs in Canada to see if I could find an Indian faculty, an Aboriginal faculty. Then, Jeannette Sinclair called me one day and it was like it was meant to be. The whole faculty has connected so much of my thoughts to their lessons. They've absolutely made this an incredible, spiritual, powerful experience for me. My research interests centre on the healing of our children through improving physical education in schools, and through using traditional music and Western music. I'm a residential school survivor and, if it wasn't for sports, traditional music, music in general, and plants, I don't think I would have made it to where I am today.

I am very interested in traditional ecological knowledge because my great grandfather practiced it and my father still practices it. They practice spiritual healing and doctoring with plants. My father stockpiles sage and *wegaze*, and he constantly drinks teas from the bush to prolong his life.

TEK—T-E-K—Traditional Ecological Knowledge made me realize that we are smart people. I remember getting sick as a young man and my grandfather doctoring me up. I was really skeptical at first. He used an animal medicine bag, seashells, water, and *wegaze* in his ceremony. I remember spending one night with him and not being sick the next day.

He then gave me some roots and sent me home. He said boil it for one minute, and then next time boil it for two minutes, and so on, until I boiled it three, four, and finally five times. He eventually made me feel stronger again. Then he took me up to the foothills in the mountains near Pincher Creek; he showed me what the roots were and where to pick them, and how to offer tobacco. After extracting them from the ground, he showed me how to clean them and store them. My grandfather was my greatest inspiration. He made me proud to be Aboriginal. He would get so excited when I talked about going to university. He knew there was something special about education.

### *Traditional Plant Use*

There are over 1,000 plants that have been used by Aboriginal people in Canada. They counted on these plants for survival. Many of these plants were and still are utilized by Aboriginal communities today. As described by Turner, Arnason, Hebda, and Johns (2012), these plants can be broken into three categories: food plants, utility plants, and medicinal plants:

#### Food Plants

Over 500 species of wild plants provided food for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Some of these foods are similar to those eaten today: roots, green vegetables, fruits, nuts, berries, seeds, and mushrooms. Traditional foods such as syrup, wild rice, and wild fruit are enjoyed in Canada by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples alike.

#### Utility Plants

Woods were of prime importance as fuels, and as major components of utilitarian items: buildings, dugout canoes, boxes, totem poles and implements like paddles, digging sticks, spear shafts, bows, arrows, and snowshoe frames. Sheets of bark, especially birch, were made into containers and canoes. Bark was also used to cover roofs and line storage pits. Fibrous tissues from stems, roots, bark and leaves served for twine, rope and weaving materials for baskets, mats, and clothing. Tree resin was used as glue and waterproofing. Plants provided dyes and pigments, scents, absorbent materials, abrasives, linings and wrappings, insect repellents, toys and recreational items, and personal adornment.

#### Medicinal Plants

More than 500 plants were used in indigenous medicine. Specialists could administer such medicines as herbal teas, as preparations to be chewed and swallowed, poultices, inhaled vapors, or a variety of other applications. Specialists could prescribe any part of a plant, either alone or in combination with other herbs.

Medicinal plants are the one kind of plant that I find we really need to continue using today. Aboriginal people have a very strong spiritual connection to the land. They heal through the spiritual connection of plants—with plants. Mother Earth is the giver of life, so her resources must be respected. Earth connects us to our ancestors. It is said we are all con-

nected (UNESCO, n.d). At the heart of this deep bond is perception. An awareness that all life—mountains, rivers, skies, animals, plants, insects, rocks, and people—is inseparably interconnected. Material and spiritual worlds are woven together in one complex web. All living things are imbued with sacred meaning. This living sense of connectedness that grounds Indigenous people to the soil has all but disappeared among city dwellers and is the cause of much modern alienation.

#### *Smudging with Sacred Plants*

Our four sacred plants are tobacco, sweetgrass, sage, and cedar. My grandfather used red willow fungus. He called it *wegaze*. He used it to get rid of negative energy. I have seen the sacred plants being used in all types of ceremonies. I have seen them used in schools. I believe that the use of these spiritual plants should be brought into the First Nations schools. I have seen children ashamed of themselves in entering Aboriginal schools and coming out of the school being proud of their Aboriginal heritage. My daughter is an example. She said to me, "Father, I am really proud to be Aboriginal after I attended that Native cultural school." As well, in the Native cultural school, the children started using their dreams and visions to guide themselves through life. The smudging ceremonies are really important for Aboriginal people and should be brought into Aboriginal schools as an Indigenous science based on our spiritual connection to the earth.

#### *Elders in the School*

We need to utilize our Elders in a more positive way to bring them into the schools. They hold and possess plant knowledge. Elders connect us to the paths (Clark & Sherman, 2011). It is by the way they live that Elders teach younger tribe members about the tribe's culture and traditional ways of life. It is through the oral traditions shared by Elders that social values and beliefs are preserved. Essentially, Elders are the libraries of Indian knowledge, history, and tradition.

Aboriginal people revere the environment. School should be including plant science in their science classrooms. Aboriginal knowledge systems pertaining to land do not match up with Western scientific perspectives pertaining to land, but Western science is responsible for many of the world's ecological disasters. Our earth is at a critical point in time. The Fukushima nuclear crisis is an example of this critical point in time. Before my grandfather passed on, I asked him, "What are your predictions, grandpa?" And he said to me, "There's going to be lots of natural disasters." I think we have to start taking better care of our earth.

#### *Reconciliation and Traditional Ecological Knowledge*

There is no room for hate in reconciliation. To reconcile, we must love, respect, and forgive, with the utilization of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and with the help of our Elders. TEK and our Elders should be in the classroom every day to foster a healthy environment. Plant knowledge teaches the children of the world an ideology that goes back thousands of years. Utilizing your Elders is the key. They must be respected for their traditional ecological knowledge. The use of Elders in urban or reserve schools to teach children TEK would support the mobilization of Aboriginal epistemologies. The traditional ceremonies associated with plants would contribute to the healing that needs to take place within Aboriginal communities, as a result of residential schools. I am a survivor of the residential school system. My father lost his leg in a residential school and he grew up with a lot of hate. I grew up full of hate, but then I met my grandfather and he reversed my hate and turned it into love. Now I think differently, and I find love is very powerful in protecting me from outside forces.

#### *References*

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