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BALANCE

**THE WHITEFEATHER FOREST
AND
FOREST CERTIFICATION**

SPEAKING NOTES

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**NATIONAL ABORIGINAL FORESTRY ASSOCIATION
NATIONAL MEETING
FOREST STEWARDSHIP AND FPIC**

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"As long as the grass grows, and the rivers flow, and the sun shines"

“I want my interest protected” (Elder Lucy Strang speaking to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources on indigenous forestry, caribou conservation, and future generations of Pikangikum people).



Our interest is to establish an indigenous certification standard

This presentation is about forestry certification and the Whitefeather Forest Initiative. We are seeking support for developing an indigenous forestry certification standard. But I want to begin with looking back to the development of our Keeping the Land plan for the Whitefeather Forest.

About 10 years ago the work to complete our Keeping the Land Community-Based Land Use Plan for the Whitefeather Forest was in full swing. It included participating in a discussion process related to protected areas. This process involved First Nations, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, and environmental group representatives. Pikangikum Elders participated in this dialogue.

During a lunch break at one of the meetings one of our technicians asked my father, Charlie, some questions: “Did you ever use Anishinaabe Eshkotay

(aboriginal fire)?" "No", my father said. Andrew then asked: "Did your father ever use fire?" My father replied, "Yes". "Where"? "All over Boogit, all over (miziway)." Andrew then asked: "Why did you not use fire?" "I was afraid of going to jail", was the answer my father gave. My father then talked about how our ancestors used fire to make food for many animals and birds. They used fire in a sustainable way.

This powerful indigenous landscape stewardship tool was totally suppressed by the OMNR.

At our own Land Use Planning meetings in Pikangikum during this time, other Pikangikum Elders also talked about how our people have used fire as a tool to make food on our land for many birds and animals. At one of these planning meetings my father-in-law, the late Norman Quill, discussed in the fire expertise of his father, Isiah.

Isiah would burn in the spring. Norman would watch as Isiah drew a fire map in the earth at the place he started his burning. He would draw precisely where the fire would burn. He would make a clock using a stick in the sand. He would mark the sun time when he was lighting the fire and the

time that the fire would be out and it would be safe to travel across the site. Norman said that his father was never wrong in his burning practices. His fires always burned the way he planned them.

These stories say a lot about our historical relationships to our lands. They tell a different story than the story non-aboriginal people usually hear.

The story that most non-aboriginal people in Canada tell the world about our lands describes our land as a wilderness before the White Man came. The story says that our people were “traditional” and “hunters and gatherers”.

We were primitive. This story has been used by the White Man to justify his position that our lands were empty lands – terra nullius. The newcomers simply could not comprehend that land management could sustain all Living Ones on the land. Or maybe they would not acknowledge this. Our lands were wilderness and were there to be colonized by the White Man.

The courts in Canada have often used language that betrays the prejudice and racism behind this story:

A civilized nation first discovering a country of uncivilized people or savages held such country as its own until such time as by treaty it was transferred to some other civilized nation. The savages' rights of sovereignty, even of ownership, were never recognized.¹

These words were written by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1929. But the practice of colonialism behind them continues.

We must find a different path. The balance we seek must be a balance where our culture and our Keeping the Land tradition is recognized.

The prejudice about us and about our lands has not gone away. In fact, we now face outside decision-making over our lands that threatens our very ability to survive as indigenous people. It threatens to undermine not only our customary stewardship but the possibility of our well-being as Pikangikum people on our lands.

Our plans involve indigenous forestry. I call our forestry “Anishinaabe Mitigokaywin.” This is not simply cutting trees. It is really about the holistic indigenous making of trees – sustaining the gifts of the Creator given to us for our survival and well-being.

Our Elders have gifted to the Whitefeather Forest Initiative a path – a plan – to implement Anishinaabe Mitigokaywin. This path rejects “plantation

forestry”. It rejects the turning of our forests into “tree farms” where trees become “crops”.

The non-indigenous forestry industry is checkerboarding our indigenous lands to the south of the Whitefeather Forest with what are to us very destructive results. The industry, with mandate from non-indigenous governments, is turning our forests into plantations. One goal is to force trees to grow more quickly. But the trees that are being planted and seeded after the land is plowed with practices like “disc-trenching” are sickly. They are often stunted, bent and deformed. They grow faster but their wood is soft. They do not have the health of trees that grow back after thunderbird fire. They are spaced so far apart that the well-being of many small creatures, such as rabbits, is severely impacted. For example, our Elders say that Jackpine plantations have a very negative effect on the food our rabbits need.

This knowledge of our Elders is now being confirmed by Western Science. As part of our work to develop value added forest products manufacturing opportunities from our strong wood, we are working with FPIinnovations. In

a comparative wood analysis they undertook for the Whitefeather Forest Initiative, FPInnovations noted the following:

*Plantation jackpine has multiple stem deviations into multiple directions....
Stem deformations in plantation grown jack pine trees may result in about 36% or 42% reduction in lumber volume or value recovery, compared to 5% reduction in natural jack pine trees (p. 153).*

This is a question of balance: Is our Indigenous Knowledge tradition really being affirmed and recognized as a guide for forestry certification? Or is everything being done to the rules of Western Science? This question of balance is important. How is it that Western Science provides for forestry certification of practices we know have harmful effects on our forests?

We are very fortunate that most of our Elders were born, raised and educated on the land. They have gifted us their Indigenous Knowledge and stewardship tradition to guide our forestry. Our Elders have given us detailed teachings that we now must follow in our practice of Anishinaabe Mitigokaywin. These teachings have been given so that our forestry can be carried out in a manner to sustain the freedom given by the Creator to all Living Ones to thrive on the land. These are teachings that we will use to

sustain and nurture both the diversity and abundance of life in our northern forests. Our responsibility is to apply these teachings in our forestry.

Our approach is already starting to be recognized. The revised Forest Management Planning Manual for Ontario now has a section specifically for the Whitefeather Forest. It mandates the role of our Elders and our Indigenous Knowledge and stewardship tradition in our forestry in the Whitefeather Forest.

Today the interest of outsiders in our lands involves a close relationship between two key outside groups. These groups are non-indigenous “industrial” forestry companies and non-indigenous “environmental organizations”. For example, they came together to sign what they call the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement. They gave no notice to First Nations that this agreement was being developed. And the negotiations to make land use proposals for our lands are being held without our participation. The Chiefs in Assembly of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation have condemned this. They have asked that it stop immediately. It has not.

What is happening is that there is an external process going on that is leading to our indigenous lands being carved up by others, including where forestry will occur. What is happening is that our forests is now are being divided into “wilderness” and “developed” areas. In the developed areas, the land is considered “degraded” by environmentalists because of road construction. But the real degradation that is occurring from the whole plantation forestry process. This is what is threatening our present and future well-being. By this I mean all Living Ones on our lands. It is at the heart of a lot of conflicts including with other First Nations who are our neighbours to the south.

The environmentalists strategy is to protect as much of what they call wilderness as possible from forestry. They are now using the concept of Intact Forest Landscapes to pursue this goal. The environmentalists use roads to define intactness because their position is that there have been no roads there is “wilderness”.

This denies the very history of our relationship to our lands.

There has to be another way.

There has to be balance.

This balance must be part of the rules of forestry certification.

As of today the balance that we need is not there. This is the threat that we see in Motion 65 which was passed at the recent Forest Stewardship Council General Assembly in Spain. Motion 65 does not prohibit plantation forestry on our lands. Instead it will carve up our lands into those lands where no forestry is allowed with plantation forestry being allowed on the rest.

This is why we are seeking support to pursue an indigenous forestry certification standard. This can happen within the FSC system. Perhaps we will have to do it on our own. But my people are determined. We have strength. I recently told people that IKEA might be a powerful company. But we have the strength of Aaki!

Our First Nation has passed a Resolution calling for an indigenous forestry standard especially for lands where we are the tenure holders that respects

our culture – a standard that creates the balance we need in decision-making regarding forestry on our lands.

We hope that other First Nations join us in this effort. We are ready to bring the full legacy of the teachings of our Elders to the process. We are ready to bring our Whitefeather Forest Initiative team to the effort.

We have our own way – a third way – and indigenous way – by which our ancestral forests in the north can be sustained and provide for our livelihood. My hope is that we will join together and develop an indigenous standard of forest certification for indigenous forests. This is how we can honour the teachings of our Elders and fulfill our responsibilities that the Creator has given us.

¹R. v. Syliboy, 1929.