

## **Conservation Approaches by the Walpole Island First Nation**

### **Completing the Circle**

Gchi-Miigwech Creator for this day and the days ahead.

Gchi-Miigwech (Thank you very much) to Carolinian Canada and the Ontario Land Trust Alliance for this opportunity to speak to you.

I'm Anishinaabe from Bkejwanong – the Walpole Island First Nation.

To help you understand or relate to where I'm coming from throughout the rest of this presentation – let's start with a few comparisons to how some English words are used by my people – the Anishinaabeg to describe our connection to our natural environment.

#### **Anishinaabemowin/English word comparison**

Aki	the Earth
The Land	Land, Water, Air, Habitats, Wildlife
Caring for the Land	Conservation of Habitats and Wildlife
All Our Relations	Plants and Animals and/or all life-forms
Bkejwanong	Walpole Island First Nation

Read poem by Marjorie Williams – The Circle Will Be Complete!

#### **Past Practices**

In the past, Caring for habitats and species was a necessity for my people – as we relied on the Land for our survival. The Land took care of us – in turn we were taught that we had the responsibility to be Caretakers of our natural environment – we were dependent upon Aki – the Earth.

This responsibility was instilled into our children through our traditional teachings – in particular our Legends & Stories that taught of deep respect for the great Circle of Life, which sustains ALL LIFE. These Legends & Stories had deep

moral implications that helped to cultivate our value systems within our young. Most of these Stories taught of how All Our Relations came to be and how they: 1) protected the Earth and its inhabitants; 2) were connected to the Creator in special ways; 3) gave themselves selflessly to help us humans survive; 4) were spirit guides; 5) taught us of the ways of our natural environment, and so on.

These helped to nurture my peoples' connectedness to the Land.

As our young people matured – they further enhanced their connectedness to the Land through gathering foods & medicines, hunting & fishing, spirituality & giving thanks through ceremonies, and learning from nature – as it formed a large part of their ways of life. Throughout the 5,000 to 6,000 years that my people lived at Bkejwanong – we took Care of the Land – you just have to look across our bridge to see the evidence.

This is the basis for why our community Bkejwanong and our lands and waters are home to so many forms of life – from abundant common species – to over 60 of Canada's rare and endangered species. These species live in the different ecosystems – such as rich coastal waters, wetlands, tallgrass prairies, oak savannas, and woodlands & forests – that are found at Bkejwanong – some of these ecosystems are deemed globally imperiled.

However, our connection to the Land has been eroding – as a result of the loss of my people's culture over the past 100 years or so – mainly because of the genocidal national policies and laws, the impacts of the residential school system, and so on.

### **Present Challenges**

Nowadays, our lands and waters are under pressure from numerous threats. Only a few families rely on the Land for food – because our waters, fish, and waterfowl are being poisoned by continuous and provincially legal discharges from industries, municipalities, etc. Our habitats are being subject to invasion by different exotic invasive species that have wiped out native freshwater clams; that out crowd native vegetation in our wetlands; that lay waste to some tree species in our woodland resources. It seems we get hit by a new exotic invasive species every seven years or so, which continue to weaken our habitats ability to rebound. Our natural shorelines are being eroded by the constant wave action created by numerous ships, freighters, pleasure craft, and recreational boaters that cruise up and down our waters everyday. Our own lack of proper long-

term comprehensive planning tools threatens our natural environment. And then there's the not yet fully understood impacts of climate change. Even modern amenities such as the TV, computers, Internet, i-technology, and video games have taken over our young people's lives – folks are no longer exploring, utilizing, connecting, and Caring for the Land as they used to.

When I started at the Walpole Island Heritage Centre 10 years ago – under its Natural Heritage Program – I used to get offended by tourists visiting our habitats – that would tell me that we had to protect our habitats and species because they were so rare. I felt we were conserving our Land, but not in the sense the tourists were used to – such as nature reserves, provincial parks, national wildlife areas, etc. that restrict access and activities.

Our Approach originally stemmed from our culture and traditional teachings & practices.

This Approach - a way of life that meant ALL our people had a responsibility for the Land – and an understanding of how important that fundamental responsibility was to the quality of life for all and to our long-term survival.

Through my work I spoke to landholders on Bkejwanong that had natural habitats remaining – they told me of why they kept their landholdings natural – for hunting, gathering foods and medicines, spirituality & ceremonial reasons, places they enjoyed for their beauty, outdoor classrooms, etc.

As the years went by I was noting the loss of natural habitats, first to agriculture, then to housing development. We mapped the losses over 100 years. It was alarming. I also noted the loss of my people's traditional practices – fishing, hunting, etc. I also noted the loss of passing on our traditional teachings, legends & stories – some of which used to be taught in our school when I was growing up.

To counter these losses – We began to change the way we looked at things – looking for opportunities and ways to move beyond the fears, pressures and threats that were eroding our natural heritage. We undertook various activities to do our part in conserving our habitats and species.

We mapped rare and endangered species and their habitats; developed educational resources; shared information with our community through various forms of communications & outreach; developed plans to guide our conservation and recovery efforts and participated in preparing other strategies; we collaborated with go-getters to do actual on-the-ground recovery of species at

risk; began to tackle invasive species; looked at ways to improve upon past activities – so we could use our limited resources more efficiently and with greater return; worked towards stronger collaborations; and began to connect with our youth.

Then the inevitable came – having to conserve our Land by way of modern mechanisms – conservation leasing arrangements and purchases of land parcels. Today, we have 316 acres of ecologically significant land at Bkejwanong under some formal means of conservation.

And, I'm very pleased to announce that we now have a registered charitable organization – the Walpole Island Land Trust to help us protect the nearly 3,000 acres of land at Bkejwanong considered hotspots for species at risk. I have complete faith that we'll raise the needed resources to formally conserve and protect these lands for future generations to benefit from and enjoy.

But – will they?

If our focus is narrowly on land protection – and not on a more holistic approach that places people in the natural environment Circle – then what chances are there for these lands into the future – if nobody appreciates or respects them?

I've seen older people in my community want to conserve their natural landholdings for cultural reasons – which I spoke of earlier. Through them, I learned the history of their landholdings, how they managed them (for example - with fire), Anishinaabe words to describe plants & animals, medicines found there that they used, ceremonial places where they gave thanks and maintained their spiritual connections to the Land and to our Creator, the different plants and animals that flourished there, different funny stories and experiences that they had, the natural cycles they noticed, and the pure enjoyment and deep love of those lands.

An elder in my community once told me that he noticed some medicine plants were disappearing from Bkejwanong. I asked him why? I was a bit surprised by his answer. He said – because we're forgetting how to use them. We're losing our connections.

I've also recently spoke to some young people that inherited some of the ecologically significant lands at Bkejwanong. I was seeking their interest in formally conserving and protecting their landholdings. They told me of their need for economic benefits from their landholdings. Some didn't know of what

type of habitat was found on their landholdings. Some didn't even know where their landholdings were located.

This is where the true challenges lay.

We can buy or lease all the land at Bkejwanong that has some ecological value to protect it – but if we don't take a holistic approach – that includes education, traditional management practices, and linkages for maintaining my people's cultural ties to the Land – then will more species disappear because we're losing our connections.

### **Our Path Forward**

Through our work at the Walpole Island Heritage Centre and its Natural Heritage Program – we are on a course that is guided by multi-year strategic plans that are rooted in conserving and restoring our community's rich natural & cultural heritage. With the aid of friends – we are developing a model for effective partnerships in the conservation and recovery of endangered ecosystems – looking to strengthen collective and collaborative approaches. We are looking to the future as our elders and ancestors have – taking adaptive approaches where we build on successive benchmarks and accomplishments and learn from best practices – continually evolving as our efforts unfold and bear fruit.

This is our Approach.

We'll offer assistance to those that will listen and we'll collaborate with those intent on true collaborative partnerships and who understand our limitations.

We've changed the way we look at things – and now those things that we look at are beginning to change.

I encourage you to look at us differently – maybe then you'll see:

Similarities instead of Unknowns

Opportunities instead of Barriers

Vision and Innovation instead of Complexity

We here are all different – we need to celebrate this diversity and support one another – just as nature supports its diversity. There are lessons to be learned.

Clint Jacobs, Walpole Island Heritage Centre

In time, The Circle Will Be Complete!

## The Circle Will Be Complete

*There is a dream of the time when the world will stretch  
forth its hand to seek the Spirit of the Indian Nation.  
It is in anticipation of this time that we will prepare our gifts.  
We will show all who would learn, the language of the soul,  
the rightness of nature, in which nothing is out of place.*

*They will learn of a dimension of existence which has long been lost,  
where the very dust under our feet is conscious of the sympathetic touch  
of our footsteps, for our soil is rich  
with the lives of our kindred.*

*When the time comes, our brothers will seek to know  
the strength of our People, our hearts will once again dance  
with the pride of long ago.*

*Because the Great Spirit would have it,  
we will give freely, as we did in past times.*

*In beauty,  
the circle will be complete.*

by Marjorie Williams  
Walpole Island First Nation