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Overview by the Aboriginal Talking Circle Coordinating Team

Aboriginal talking circle: Aboriginal perspectives on caribou conservation

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The 13th North American Caribou Workshop in 2010 was the venue for a remarkable forum of Aboriginal knowledge holders in which experiences and ideas about caribou research and stewardship were shared in a Talking Circle format. Facilitated by Danny Beaulieu (Denesųłné/Deninu Kų First Nation) and Walter Bayha (Délįnegotįnę/Délįnę First Nation), the Aboriginal Talking Circle took place over a full day as well as a half day, totalling more than ten hours. At least thirty-six Aboriginal people contributed to the discussion, representing thirty organisations and nearly as many First Nation, Inuit and Métis nations. Delegates converged from a geographical area spanning caribou ranges in six provinces and all three territories of northern Canada.

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Coordination of the forum was led by Daniel Gladu of the Center for Indigenous Environmental Research (CIER). A key to the success of the event was the establishment of a planning team well beforehand, providing an opportunity for interested participants to provide input into the design of the forum. The Talking Circle format was settled on as a culturally appropriate way for Aboriginal people to share, synthesize and create new knowledge across cultures¹. The proceedings were audio recorded, so it was possible to preserve and transcribe the knowledge shared. Each participant signed a consent form that defined the protocols for using the materials respectfully.

Members of the Talking Circle planning team (Micheline Manseau and Deborah Simmons) also participated in overall planning of the conference program, as well as editing of conference proceedings. This was critical in ensuring that guidance was fully conveyed about appropriate ways of situating Talking Circle within the conference, and providing other

venues for Aboriginal participation and leadership at the conference.

The central location of the event was a major advantage, since it both symbolically showed the significance of the role of Aboriginal people at the conference as a whole, and facilitated the flow of participants and audience to and from other sessions. Contributions by Aboriginal speakers and audience members to presentations and discussions in other sessions often showed linkages with issues raised at the Talking Circle. Talking Circle participants (Walter Bayha and John B. Zoe) were invited to contribute to the opening and closing plenary sessions, further underlining the meaning and value of Aboriginal perspectives and providing a way for the conference as a whole to become aware of key messages leading into and following from the Talking Circles. The flexible and oral nature of the Talking Circle process allowed individuals to progressively develop narratives over several iterations. For several individuals who were also scheduled to present in formal symposia and panels (Walter Bayha, John B. Zoe, Joseph Judas and Danny Beaulieu), this made it possible for more fully

¹ For a discussion of Talking Circles in indigenous research methodologies, see McGregor, Bayha, & Simmons, 2010.

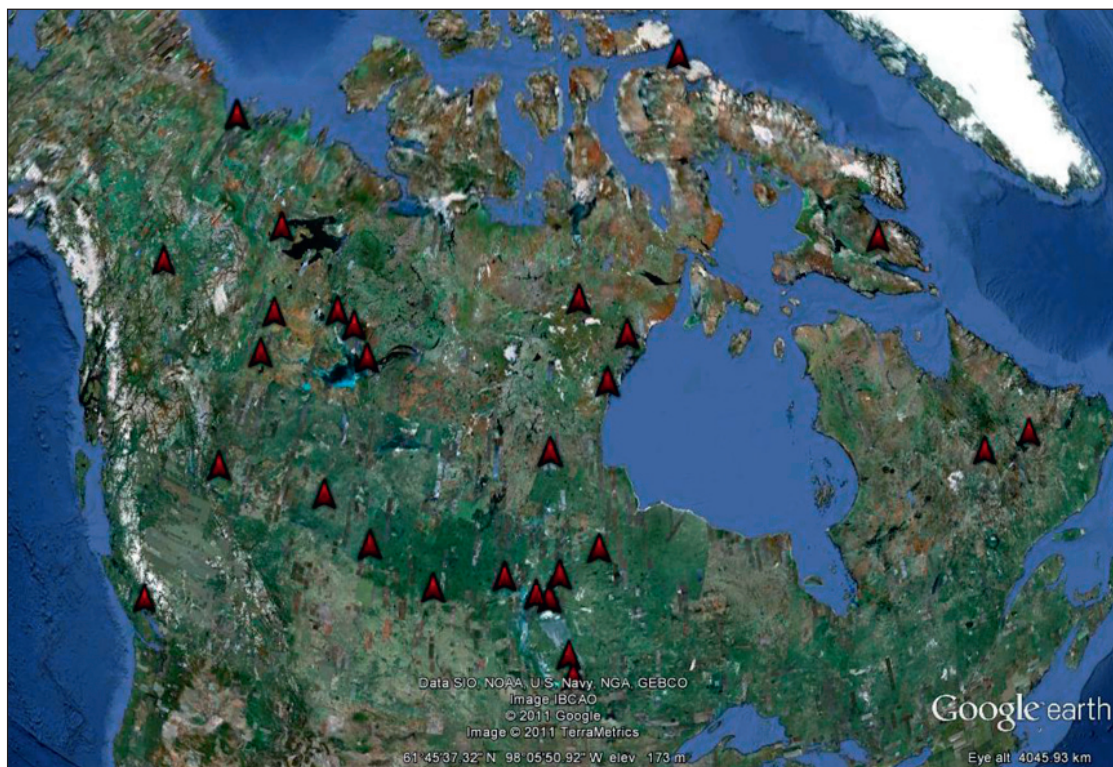


Fig. 1. This map, created during the Aboriginal Talking Circle, shows the geographical spread of the participating speakers across Canada.

developed narratives to be woven together as papers for publication in the present conference proceedings.

There was a spiritual and historical aspect to the Talking Circle². The sessions were framed by prayer, spoken by elders Albert Boucher (Łutselk'e Dene First Nation) and Moses Bignell (Opaskwayak Cree Nation). Ceremonial tobacco was passed, and the final prayer by Moses included a tobacco teaching. Danny Beaulieu introduced the ceremonial aspect of the Talking Circle with a story about the history of the Talking Stick.

The initial two rounds of the Talking Circle required a full day to complete. This relaxed pace allowed for a gradual process of relationship-building among the broad spectrum of Aboriginal nations, while providing a scoping of key issues in caribou research and stewardship. During the first round, speakers briefly introduced themselves. A projected Google Earth map allowed each person to map the traditional territory, caribou habitat and cultures that they had inherited from their ancestors in relation to all the others represented in the circle (Fig. 1). By the

second round, participants had some understanding of the other members of the circle, so were comfortable to share a key story illustrating an interest or concern; this round was completed by the end of the first day. The third round allowed for some work in synthesis, reflection and analysis by participants, crystallizing where there was consensus, or where issues required further discussion or research.

There was general consensus that stories are an important means of preserving and sharing knowledge about caribou. There was also an emphasis on the role of language as a carrier of knowledge and meaning about caribou ecology, people's relationship with caribou, and the spiritual dimension of this relationship. At the same time, it was acknowledged that there are new challenges to be faced in interpreting Aboriginal knowledge in the context of environmental and social change. Through their stories, Talking Circle speakers all asserted the responsibilities of Aboriginal peoples as both knowledge holders and stewards of caribou; frustration was often expressed about the ways in which this role has been usurped by federal, provincial and territorial governments in the guise of science-based decision-making.

2 For an overview of the spiritual dimension in indigenous ways of knowing, see Willson, 2008.

One observation made by many in the circle was that the youth who are the future caribou stewards were for the most part absent from the discussion. The small number of youth who did participate were much appreciated by the older speakers, and remarks were often directed to them. An important lesson learned from the 2010 Aboriginal Talking Circle is that youth need to be part of the creation of new knowledge about caribou in order for traditional knowledge to remain alive and be carried into the future.

Talking Circle Protocol

The following protocol was distributed to participants and audience at the Aboriginal Talking Circle.

"When you put your knowledge in a circle, it's not yours anymore, it's shared by everyone."

Douglas Cardinal

This forum will be facilitated according to a Talking Circle protocol. Talking Circles vary depending on who is leading the gathering, the purpose, and who is participating. This circle represents the voices of all participants from north, south, east and west, coming together to share stories about their relationships with caribou.

This Aboriginal forum is arranged in two rings according to the four directions. The inner ring is the Talking Circle where one Aboriginal guest from each participating nation is invited to sit. This person will be supported by neighbours and collaborators in the second ring. People in the outer ring are observers who are invited to listen throughout the day.

The Talking Stick in this circle is being used for the first time. Facilitators Walter Bayha (Dél̓n̓egot̓n̓e) and Danny Beaulieu (Denes̓ł̓né) are responsible for guiding the circle, and will be stewards of the Talking Stick. The Talking Stick is a symbol of respect for the thoughts and stories of each person participating in the circle.

Whoever is holding the stick is welcome to speak, or they can decide to keep silent and pass the stick to the next person. All stories are respected equally, and there is understanding that stories are told without interruption. At the same time, speakers respect that all members of the circle need to have time to speak. The facilitators will signal if there is a need to think about time and the stories of others waiting to be shared.

References

- McGregor, Deborah, Walter Bayha, & Deborah Simmons. 2010. "Our Responsibility to Keep the Land Alive": Voices of Northern Indigenous Researchers. – *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 8 (1): 101-123.
- Willson, Shawn. 2008. *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Black Point, NS and Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing.

Danny Beaulieu's Talking Stick Story

About twelve or fifteen years ago, a good friend named Jim Bourque walked from Yellowknife to Fort Providence, and later walked from Hay River to Fort Smith, a total of about seven hundred kilometres over the two trips. During the first journey, he got to Mosquito Hill near Behchokò, a hundred kilometres from Yellowknife. That hill is pretty steep. So he walked off into the ditch and cut himself a willow. He used that stick to walk the rest of his journey.

Eventually Jim gave the stick to the woman who became my partner, Susan Fleck, who is now Director of Wildlife for the Government of the Northwest Territories. She told me the story of the stick one day when I was about to throw it out. I carved the bark off it, and saw that it was a diamond willow. I made this talking stick with the bottom end of Jim's cane and an eagle feather, to facilitate a traditional justice workshop with the wildlife officers in the Northwest Territories.

Jim Bourque was a trapper, a hunter, and he became a wildlife officer. He was also the president of the Metis Nation at one time. He became the Deputy Minister of Natural Resources in the Northwest Territories. He was well known for his respect and support for Aboriginal hunters and trappers as stewards of the wildlife.

So this stick has history and value to some of the people in this circle. The only rule is that only the person who is holding this stick speaks. Nobody is going to start arguing, there will be no cross-talk in the circle.

