

# Indigenous Climate Action Summary Report

Indigenous Strategic Discussions on City of Toronto Climate Strategies

November 2018

## Background

The City of Toronto's Environment & Energy Division and Resilience Office are working to develop a framework for collaboration to guide future efforts to involve Indigenous Traditional Knowledges (ITK) and Indigenous communities in designing and delivering urban climate action in Toronto. To initiate the framework development the City partnered with Indigenous Climate Action (ICA) to design, host, and report on conversations with Indigenous communities on urban climate action.

In October 2018 an Indigenous Knowledge Workshop was held as an opportunity for mutual learning with Indigenous communities about their worldviews, environmental ITK, and ideas for developing a process for ongoing collaborative urban climate action. The Indigenous Knowledge Workshop brought together local Indigenous Peoples in Tkaronto in a small gathering to discuss climate realities, find ways of moving towards a climate just future, and identifying opportunities to collaborate with the City on advancing Indigenous climate justice.

The workshop and partnership was funded by a Small Equity Grant from the Urban Sustainable Directors Network.



PARTICIPANTS AT THE OCTOBER 2018 WORKSHOP

## Introduction

On October 27, 2018, Indigenous people in Toronto met at the Harbourfront Centre to discuss the City's request for Indigenous input into the City of Toronto's climate strategies (TransformTO and Resilience Strategy). Participants included: an Elder; scholars/professors from Ryerson, Trent and York Universities and the Yellowhead Institute (an Indigenous think tank based in Toronto); people working for the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council; and people involved in climate and environmental work, including Indigenous Climate Action and Naadmaagit Ki Group. The day was broken into looking at the City's climate strategies (TransformTO and Resilience Strategy) and then discussion. Below is a brief summary of the discussions that day. Each key discussion point includes a kind of broad response. The term "response" is used here rather than "recommendations" or "action items" because the discussants generally agreed that a more in-depth consultation process would be necessary to support a more formal set of recommendations or action items (let alone policies) in ways that represented meaningful regional Indigenous consultation on these important matters.

## Summary of Discussions

### *We need more meaningful Indigenous engagement on these questions*

The discussants generally agreed that a quality consultation with Indigenous peoples on Toronto's climate strategy requires much more than a one-day event, and that, while well informed, those present could not claim to "represent" Indigenous peoples formally. It is important to develop meaningful Indigenous input into climate strategy discussions on an ongoing basis over time. This means more than a city-led "Aboriginal Affairs" committee. As one participant said, "Anishinaabe law and political systems are for the present and future." There was general agreement that Indigenous peoples have essential, far-reaching knowledge and practices that are missing today, grounded in the laws of the land and Natural and higher laws (which do not need validation through Canada's legal systems), and that consulting Indigenous peoples in relation to climate work cannot be an "add-on process" – especially given the challenges to effectively addressing our crisis, challenges inherent to the dominant systems around us. The city would do well to deeply consider and defer to inherent indigenous leadership and legal systems as they emerge (and they are emerging), and to relate to these Indigenous systems as reflections of the "law of the land." And so, the nature of the relationship needs to change in relation to climate work, from one that still reflects colonial domination to one that moves into a process of collaboration. After all, climate and other environmental catastrophes are intimately related to colonialism.

## *Bring Climate and "the Environment" out of their Silos*

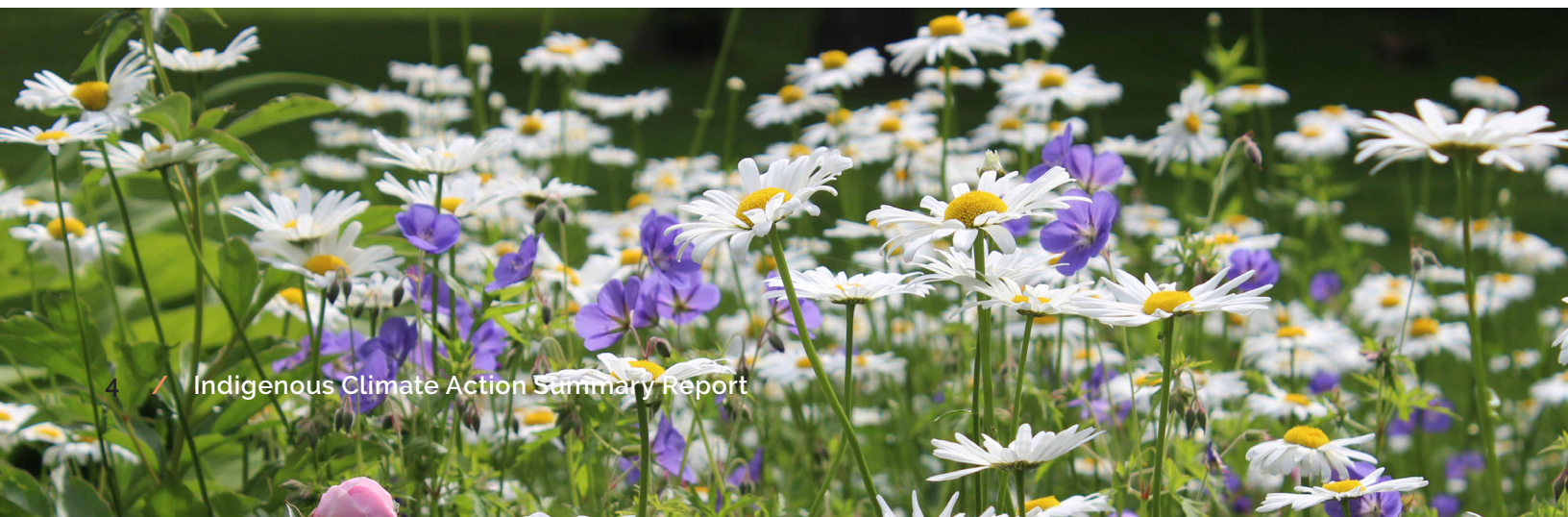
Indigenous views of the world do not have a separate category for the "environment" or the climate, as if such areas could be adequately addressed through a "portfolio" or "department."<sup>1</sup> There is a big difference between environmental activism and living in a deep relationship with the land and water of a given territory. The real issues need to be addressed in much broader and more elevated ways than they tend to be when considering "environmental policies." It was stated and agreed that environmental racism and issues are still aggravated by colonialism, and operationalized in laws and policies – and that it is essential to get deeper, and address colonialism at the root of it. To share just two from an indefinite number of possible examples, participants pointed out that:

- Ideas around biodiversity as generally conceived in Canadian political and scientific frameworks currently have no real grasp of Indigenous knowledge and science, which require more holistic/ integrated ways of thinking and living.
- Environmental issues cannot be separated from cultural and health related questions to the degree this is done in Canadian policy contexts; for Indigenous peoples, our cultural frameworks and practices actively celebrate and promote how mothers and women and the Earth and water are our first "environments", how women are keepers of water in many Indigenous cultures, and that this is inseparable from human health issues, which are inseparable from water health issues. The implications of culturally embedded perspectives are huge: "Environmental" policies ask relatively narrow questions about how to reduce emissions and mitigate or stall damage; Indigenous water walkers are asking us, "How do we get to a spiritually grounded and more fully integrated way of life where we can swim in, eat and drink from uncontaminated lakes and rivers?" Furthermore, this kind of question is inseparable from questions of health, social cohesion (including guns, gangs and "priority neighbourhoods"), and much more.

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<sup>1</sup> This oversimplifies approaches taken by Canadian governments and does not necessarily apply to the outlook of individuals working within these contexts; still, a distinction between broad cultural tendencies in outlook and approach can be made, with Indigenous cultural tendencies being generally more holistic.

DAISIES AT GUILDWOOD PARK (CITY OF TORONTO)



### *We need and support "Full Cost Accounting"*

The City's progress in meeting its own carbon emission reduction targets was acknowledged. However, participants pointed out that one effect of climate and environment strategies being addressed through "siloed" strategies is that cities can avoid facing their real contribution to overall emissions, by reducing what they are producing in the city, but not calculating where we are getting what we consume and how it is produced and imported. We are complicit in warming the planet because of what we buy. The devastation of manufacturing capacities in the Toronto area over the past 50 years means we don't know or control what is in the things we consume. Cities all around the world are only looking at how they are reducing locally, but globally they are a huge part of the problem. It was pointed out that 16 shipping containers full of the worst oil rival the daily emission of all the cars in North America. Another example of the complexity of the problem is how concrete and its use are completely unsustainable. "Full cost accounting" forces us to see things more holistically, and to develop approaches that bring us to reconsider our relationships to everything, including what is not immediately apparent, local or even regional. We must change how we look at everything, including our own socks, or our cell phone. As one participant stated, "If you want to ask how we change how things are done, it means starting from zero and building it back up." We will have real success if we have restored our ability to manufacture much of what we really need locally, and are still able to reduce our emissions and waste. This may currently be politically untenable, but it is both morally imperative and empirically essential for human survival.

### *Respect and engage meaningfully with Indigenous knowledge and practices*

Indigenous peoples will determine our own future - not merely as vulnerable people, but people with knowledge, who have ways to solve our own problems and contribute to broader strategies for addressing what is coming. Indigenous forms of knowledge need to be engaged with meaningfully in addressing climate change. The knowledge is misunderstood and incomplete if non-Indigenous researchers merely "extract the knowledge." "We don't need to change our knowledge and laws, even when the data changes" (for example, signs of when to harvest certain things may change, but the underlying knowledge structures and processes remain). Indigenous people need to deconstruct external, colonial forces and replace these with Indigenous presence from within. Our own prophecies and natural phenomena are informing us of changes, and we already know how to adapt. If the city does not account for and address colonization in its policies it will keep repeating the same problematic behaviours. So Toronto's Biodiversity strategy, for example, needs "decolonizing." We need to look at indicators for biodiversity differently - not just counting things, but rather asking, in a much wider way, questions that have a much more comprehensive focus: "Are we good ancestors?" "What do women's economies look like that are not consumptive?" Our culturally rooted principles are fundamental truths or guideposts for right behaviour, and are legitimate unto themselves. Western Eurocentric values are not everybody's values. For example, we need not centre individualism; we can centre collective wellbeing. We can and must consider how our children and the generations hundreds of years ahead can have a viable and safe future. In all these ways and more, the gifts of Indigenous peoples are vital to all people of all backgrounds.

### *Find ways to accommodate urban Indigenous cultural resurgence*

Indigenous cultural resurgence supports the meaningful realization of Indigenous peoples' essential contributions to how we may mitigate and respond to climate change. Most of that potential remains hidden. It is vital for the city to recognize and value urban Indigenous ceremonial life, which contains and frames many of the most important principles and values needed for addressing change and maintaining balance with the world around us. As one participant said, "How do I bring the values that I live by inside my home to the world outside my door?" One Elder was collecting rocks for ceremony at the beach and was fined by the city for stealing rocks, as if they were just for landscaping, when in reality it was a part of a larger process of recovering relationships and balance in this part of the world. Participants agreed on the importance of developing an understanding that the City needs to stand back and allow Indigenous peoples the "freedom to move." If someone lights a ceremonial fire on the beach, they are maintaining their traditions, in the present. It was acknowledged that the city has begun deferring to these kinds of ceremonies. This means there is not just one single set of laws to guide the future. It was agreed that Indigenous people do not need permission from colonial systems to be valid, and need to be able to "dream big and operationalize this;" "We need places to go where we can do our fires and ceremonies."

### *We need to reflect and relate to the realities "on the street"*

Too often, these conversations are a venue for those of us who are relatively privileged to be heard and form policies. Our work as indigenous people in Toronto in relation to these matters should be accessible to all urban Indigenous people, including people surviving on low income and living with diverse critical symptoms of deep trauma. Preparing for what is coming is not just for the "experts." It's not just about people we are told are leaders - academics, executives, and so on - the people in this room, or the people sitting on the city advisory committee. We need to ask where by-laws discriminate against people on the street; how women are at increased risk for violence in times of crisis; how healing from intergenerational traumas is a necessary aspect of re-integrating how we live with everything around us; and, how the usual ways of framing change needs to better reflect how we live together as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples - regardless of our privilege. Allan Gardens is a good example of how to live together in the time of climate change without Indigenous people being criminalized, where ceremonies and healing are happening in a difficult time and place. Ecological breakdown cannot be separated from social breakdown. "Stop sending in the people in yellow jackets; allow us to educate them on how we can work on solutions with indigenous people on the street." It was pointed out that, after all, the homeless know how to survive in the most difficult times - for example, how to survive without power.

### *Support Indigenous relationships with urban land, water, and food*

"It's not about air conditioners. It's about food sources and clothing sources. It's about slowing material economic growth and consumptive economies, challenging these consumptive economies." Indigenous people need more urban space, specifically much more access to land and water, as a vital way to demonstrate real strategies for climate change, which cannot be separated from Indigenous food sovereignty. Where can we grow large fields of corn, or even find places for wild rice? For many of us, Toronto is our land base; there are many Indigenous people who are from other places but who have to be here. One reason so many urban Indigenous people are not a bigger part of the conversation and strategies on climate change is, we are too busy struggling for basic survival, to work and feed our families, even to keep our children in our own homes, often because we don't have enough food and are suffering from traumatic responses to the stresses of poverty. We need to grow and store and manage our own food. There should be fields of food, not just small community gardens over-managed centrally by the city, but bigger plots and more community control. For example, eventually our city-run golf courses can and should be returned to what they have been for many centuries in this region: farms full of corn and other foods. Before long our rivers should be full of fish, managed through neighbourhood hatcheries by people living right nearby.

If all the above responses are able to evolve into practice on the ground, in keeping with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples endorsed by the City of Toronto, there need not be significant costs. None of this reflects a centrally managed, multi-million dollar program, so much as a movement toward community-based engagement and leaving much more room for Indigenous cultural resurgence in urban contexts. Any significant costs should be balanced out by savings and benefits.

*INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SURVIVOR LEGACY CELEBRATION AT NATHAN PHILLIPS SQUARE, OCTOBER 2018*



