

Wisdom Keepers' Gathering

Report
March 1-3, 2016





Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the participation of each Elder. The wisdom and guidance that you shared is invaluable. We need to be reminded from time to time of the reasons why we do the work that we do. Your perspective and insight informs our work and we are very thankful for this. Meegwetch to everyone who participated.

Also, thank you to Harvey Yesno for facilitating the gathering.

ATTENDEES:

Matawa Community Members/Elders:

Charlotte Legarde, Ginoogaming
Geraldine Baxter, Ginoogaming
Stanley Towegishig, Ginoogaming
Dorothy Legarde, Ginoogaming
Joann Towegishig, Ginoogaming
Priscilla Fisher, Ginoogaming
Liz Ferris, Ginoogaming
Capinias Wabasse, Nibinamik
Stephen Neshinapaise, Nibinamik
Tommy Yellowhead, Nibinamik
Matthew Jacob, Webequie
George Whitehead, Webequie
Calaney Ann Sofea, Webequie
Ananias Spence, Webequie
Pink Baxter, Marten Falls
Adrienne Okeese, Marten Falls
Elizabeth Achneepineskum, Marten Falls
Joseph Achneepineskum, Marten Falls
Bobby Baxter, Marten Falls
Maria Baxter, Marten Falls
Isaac Magiskan, Aroland
Mary Magiskan, Aroland
Maggie Magiskan, Aroland

Daniel Magiskan, Aroland
Dennis Magiskan, Aroland
William Magiskan, Aroland
John Shabogamik, Aroland
Jack Shabogamik, Aroland
Jerry Shabogamik, Aroland
Clara Gagnon, Aroland
Joseph Gagnon, Aroland
Alex Magiskan, Aroland
Charlene Neegan, Constance Lake
Stanley Stephens, Constance Lake
Leroy Ineese, Constance Lake
Linda Ineese, Constance Lake
Roger Wesley, Constance Lake
Robert Moonias, Eabametoong
Wally Slipperjack, Eabametoong
Margaret Slipperjack, Eabametoong
David Shawinimash, Eabametoong
Marie Boyce, Eabametoong
Robert Moonias, Eabametoong
John Slipperjack, Eabametoong
Lily Slipperjack, Eabametoong
Ellen Neshinapaise, Eabametoong
Susan Muckaday, Long Lake #58

Allen Towegishig, Long Lake #58
Ervin Waboose Sr., Long Lake #58
Louis Wesley, Long Lake #58
Barney Abraham, Long Lake #58
Narcisse Kakegabon, Long Lake #58

Neighbouring Community Members:
Luc McKay, Wunnumin Lake
Clifford Mamakwa, Wunnumin Lake
Jerry Quequish, Round Lake/North Caribou
Wilfred Wesley, Cat Lake
Rodney McKay, Windigo





Executive Summary

From March 1st to 3rd, 2016, Matawa Elders gathered together in Thunder Bay to discuss and share about our communities and our lives. We had 43 Elders from Aroland First Nation, Constance Lake First Nation, Eabametoong First Nation, Ginoogaming First Nation, Marten Falls First Nation, Nibinimik First Nation, and Webequie First Nation. We were joined by Elders from neighbouring communities who also shared their experiences with us, and staff members from Matawa First Nations Management and Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund.

We spent time remembering the past, talking about the current situation, and imagining a better future, based on what we know.

From all of our discussions, some key themes came up.

These include:

- The way things used to be – our Elders shared stories from their childhood and experiences so that we can know how our lives used to be
- The importance of teaching our children our values and sharing our culture – we heard again and again how necessary it is to share with our children and grandchildren so that our teachings are not lost.
- The importance of being united across our communities and working together – we were reminded that we all have similar experiences. We can learn from each other so that we do not make the same mistakes. We can succeed together.
- The need to take action to make change – we cannot have the same conversations again and again. We need to see action.

Key principles and values were also shared. These include:

- Protect our way of life for future generations
- Protect our languages
- Teach our children
- Protect our resources (Our land, our water, our animals, fish, fire, medicines)
- Lead our economy
- Connect with each other
- Plan to achieve our vision
- Preserve our native identity
- Listen to the teachings of the Elders
- It is important that we pray.
- Live with the Seven Grandfather Teachings and our Natural Laws
 1. **Respect**
 2. **Love**
 3. **Humility**
 4. **Truth**
 5. **Wisdom**
 6. **Honesty**
 7. **Bravery/Courage**
- Honour our women
- Guide the leadership

Portraits of the Elders were also taken and were shared with the Elders who were present.

This Gathering was an important time for the Elders to come together to recharge and to reunite in the powerful work that they are doing together. We hope to convene again in the early fall 2016 to continue these discussions and lay out a plan for moving forward.



Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction.....	7
What is important to us?.....	8
Key Themes from the Gathering.....	10
The way things were.....	10
Teaching our values.....	12
Being united.....	14
We must take action.....	15
Our Relationships.....	16
Our Strengths and Hopes for the Future.....	16
Conclusion.....	18



Introduction

From May 1 to 3rd, 2016, 43 Elders from the Matawa communities gathered together and shared about the past, present, and future of our communities. Elders spent time discussing concepts at their tables, sharing with the big group, and telling stories from their lives. Many important and powerful thoughts were offered to the group throughout the three days.

The first day of the Gathering was focused on sharing thoughts and stories about the past and current lives of the Elders. They spoke about the challenges they face, the history of colonization in Canada and how it has impacted their lives directly, and their values and principles. From these discussions, four main themes came up which will be presented in more detail within this report.

On the second and third day, the facilitators posed several questions to the Elders which they answered within small groups and then presented their thoughts to the bigger group. The questions included, "What is most important to us?", "How can we work together?", and "What are our strengths?". The answers to these questions helped to form principles for our communities to consider.

The Wisdom Keepers' Gathering was an opportunity for the Elders to come support each other. One Elder (Allen Towegishig) shared that "In the last two three weeks, I was lonely. When they say Elders are lonely, it's not for people or family, they're lonely for the way of life – hunting, trapping. I miss going in the bush by the lake. I really miss it. I was lonely for my language. We used to have big laughs and when we speak our language it comes out easier. I was afraid I'd start losing that. But coming here, it's like we all come here to "gas up" and get energized...."

This report outlines the main themes and ideas that the Elders discussed throughout the workshop. Our work does not end with these conversations. As Ananias Spence said at the end of the Gathering, "We've been talking about things and there are ways to move forward. We should try to find out to move forward." Our steps forward will be based on what is most important to us as g communities.





What is important to us?

One question that we discussed was "What is most important to us?". The reason we asked this question was to ground our discussions in what really matters. The Elders shared their values and told many stories to show why certain things are important. These values have been converted into principles that can inform our work.

- Protect our way of life for future generations
- Protect our languages
- Teach our children
- Protect our resources (land, water, animals, fish, medicines)
- Lead our economy
- Connect with each other
- Plan to achieve our vision
- Preserve our native identity
- Listen to the teachings of the Elders
- It is important that we pray
- Live with the Seven Grandfather Teachings and our Natural Laws
 1. Respect
 2. Love
 3. Humility
 4. Truth
 5. Wisdom
 6. Honesty
 7. Bravery/Courage
- Honour our women
- Guide the Leadership

"95 % of our kids don't know how to set a snare, their parents have been on welfare, they've been displaced from the land, it's hard to get them back there without the old teachings of how to live on the land."

(Roger Wesley)

"We are all related when it comes down to it."

(Allen Towegishig)

"If we work together, that's going to be our strength... If we all stand together, that's our strength."

(Daniel Magiskan)

"Teach our children and grandchildren these things. They need to be proud of what they are, keeping the traditional ways alive. That's important. To work together and be one nation. All of us in the room need to work together and move forward."

(Elizabeth Achneepineskum)



Key Themes

Throughout the three days, the Elders touched on similar themes. These included the way things used to be, especially relating to the quality of the land, water, and animals; the importance of teaching the children about our culture and values; the importance of being united as the 9 communities to collaborate, work together, and learn from each other; and the need to take action and move beyond discussions.

Each of the themes will be discussed in further detail, with direct quotes from Elders to illustrate their insights and sentiments.

The Way Things Were

The Elders expressed sadness and scorn about the loss of environmental quality in their territory. The water, the land, and the animals have all been contaminated and this has gravely changed the way of life for our communities. Elders shared stories of industry and government contaminating creeks, lakes, and rivers, and logging indiscriminately. The animals' habitat has been forever disturbed, which changes the food system and lives of community members. Elders also shared stories from their childhoods about the pristine nature of their territory; how they could drink water from any lake, and fish abundantly.

"We used to swim in there but it was polluted from the sawmill. You can see the green stuff coming out of the pipe into the creek, don't know what chemicals they were using, but it went on for 20 years. There's nothing there now. They got what they wanted and left a mess behind." (Louis Wesley)

"One day trappers left and when they came back at night all the trees were gone from around their cabin. I have a picture. They left 5 trees around the house." (Jerry Shabogamik)

"When I was growing up, where I grew up everything was so different, everything was clean, you could drink water from anywhere. Now you can't do those things." **(Daniel Magiskan)**

"After the white man came everything was broken, everything was taken from us, even our way of life, our way of praying, that's why we say we survived. I'm one of the survivors. The first thing our Chief said on the river Attawapiskat, was, I'm home." **(Elizabeth Achneepineskum)**

"We go camping, the whole reserve sometimes, we bring all kinds of stuff, Indian stuff, we caught 10 moose there. There were 2 moose we couldn't eat because it was full of pus. How are we going to live like that? Fish are no good. They don't taste right. The rivers are yellow and orange. Not the way we used to see it. Used to be clear water." **(Dorothy Legarde)**

"We were never consulted as to what happens, that is why so much has been destroyed, like the fish. I remember how we were treated by the authorities – that our nets and guns were going to be taken away. This meeting is to talk about what's happening about our land and traditional territories, and to give some advice on how to stand up for ourselves, say "this is what we want." **(Daniel Magiskan)**

"I feel sad sometimes when I see the big trucks with our trees, and when I see that the lake has been destroyed. We have to repair what has been done." **(Ananias Spence)**





We need to teach our children our values and how to honour the teachings.

The Elders shared about how important it is to teach our children about our values, traditions, and way of life. They talked about our duty to teach our children how to honour the Creator and the teachings. The Elders shared that this would be one way to make sure that our Children will be able to stand up for themselves in the future. Fear was also present during these discussions; fear that we will lose our way of life if we do not teach our children. The Elders shared about what teachings are important to pass on, relating to the idea that we are all related. Nobody owns the land or water. The Elders know what to do.

"If we don't fight the land will disappear and the spirit of the Anishnawbe will no longer exist. We lose a lot of kids through suicide, drinking, drugs. I did that too. But when I started following the laws of our ancestors that took me away from that. That's what I want to do. What we want to do. Teach our babies to be wise. (David Shawinimash)

"We have to teach our children other ways." (Ervin Waboose Sr)

"As keepers of the land, the Elders know what to do. We know what to do. It's our community, our land, our traditional territory." (William Magiskan)

"Nobody owns the land, nobody owns the day, nobody owns the water. Except for One." (Ananias Spence)

"God put us here as Anishnawbe. He didn't put us in Europe. He put us here to protect this land. It is our ancestral land, from our great grandfathers and beyond... My great grandkids will know where they are from, my ancestor is buried in this land, just like we all will be some day. This land is sacred to us, it's who we are... I don't want my grandfathers to be dug out, our grandfathers and grandmothers lay in these lands." (David Shawinimash)

"Everybody is losing their ways of how they used to live, losing their language." (Stanley Stephens)

"That's what we want – respect for our land. We don't want it to happen again, this disrespect for the land. We want all the information, that's what the Elders are asking for." (Daniel Magiskan)

"We are all related when it comes down to it." (Allen Towegishig)

"We have to clean it. We don't want this. We don't want the pipeline to come. They should listen. We mean it when we say that. It's for our grandchildren. They're the ones we love." (Dorothy Legarde)





We need to be united and work together between communities.

As Elders shared their experiences, another key theme came out relating to the importance of working together and collaborating with other communities. Elders reminded us that we are strong when we are together. We cannot work against each other. The Elders also spoke about how we should learn from each other's successes and mistakes. The northern communities can learn from the experiences of the southern communities. This will help us be intentional about the path forward.

"We will be strong if we talk together, if we stand together. We cannot do things alone." **(Daniel Magiskan)**

"If we stand together, work together, understand together, we can do something about the damage." **(Ananias Spence)**

"They have to be aware, look at the southern Anishnawbe, what they have suffered, what we are still suffering. Even as we speak there's cutting going on about three or four miles from our home. Our people are just looking at this cutting, nobody is getting a job, nobody is working. Our traditional lake has a traditional burial ground there, they're clear cutting that because they said they consulted us and we said we could. We were never aware that we were consulted." **(Marcel Gagnon)**

"I know from my experience of what happened to our home. You should be aware, plan, be careful of what could happen in the future." **(Stanley Stephens)**

We must take Action.

Another important theme that came up was how the Elders do not want to continue having the same conversations again and again nor do they want to see the same things happening again and again. They want to see action and changes coming from their discussions. They talked about needing to do more to make sure that the change comes. The Elders also talked about how we need to draw on our strengths within ourselves and within the communities to make change; we cannot depend on anyone outside of our communities.

"I want to know what is our hope, our desire, how can we make things better. We've been talking about the same things over and over and nothing has changed. It seems like it is getting worse. The reserves are really going down because we've been depending on the government too much... As Elders we need to think about setting things in motion to go forward, not just talk about it, we need to give directions for how we would like to see things." **(Tommy Yellowhead)**

"Let's work together to help ourselves. We should make sure that all the things that we want and say and put towards the mining company – that's when they will be allowed to do what they want to do. They have to agree first to do what the people want, then they can go ahead. We all should be benefiting from the ring of fire. We were told that we were given this land and we are the keepers of the land." **(Ananias Spence)**

"Now they have to consult with us. If they want to come here they have to talk to us, this is not their lands, we have been here for a long time and we will always be here." **(Narcisse Kakegabon)**

"We are saying no to this no matter what. This is who we are. This is for the children, to save the land for them. We are already rich, the land is rich." **(David Shawinimash)**





Our Relationships

The Elders also spent time talking about how to be in relation with each other. They answered the question “How do we honour our relationship with each other?”. The Elders presented their answers and many common themes came up that are important as we move forward.

- Respect each other.
- Support each other.
- Share.
- Listen.
- We are all the same. We are all brothers and sisters.
- We must work together. Teach each other. Learn from each other.
- Love one another.



Our Strengths and Hopes

The Wisdom Keeper’s Gathering closed with a question related to our strengths. We wanted to end on a positive note, focusing on what we can use in our communities to build strong communities. Some groups also thought about hopes for their communities.

Strengths

- Our unity.
- Our role models.
- Our natural resources.
- Small businesses on reserve.
- We can teach our traditional ways.
- Our children love Junior Rangers.
- We are doing important work right now.
- Our children and youth are being educated.



Hopes

- Repair the roads into the traditional areas.
- Provide spiritual teachings for the youth.
- Bring families together to camp.
- Parenting classes for mothers from Elders.
- We need to have input on what's happening on our land.
- A community owned store.
- Communicate with our youth better.
- Our children will finish school.
- We want our communities to heal and be healthy.
- The government and structure works better for us.
- Our children speak the language.





Conclusion

43 Elders gathered together in Thunder Bay from March 1 to 3rd, 2016. They spent three days sharing stories, knowledge, and wisdom. The Elders talked about the way things used to be and what we need to teach our children so they can succeed in the future. They discussed the importance of working together and of truly taking action towards change.

The Elders reminded us what is most important. They shared about values and principles that guide them in their lives.

They also talked about how we can work together, within communities and between communities, to achieve our goals. We are all the same, they reminded us.

The Elders also discussed what our strengths are and how those strengths can help us build a better future. Related to that is the hopes that the Elders have for the future. They began discussing what this could look like.

This information will be used to guide communities in future decision making.

It is our hope that there will be another gathering for the Wisdom Keepers in the future so that we can continue to have these important conversations. It is important that the Elders come together to share and re-energize.

Meegwetch to all of the Elders, supporters, and staff who participated in the workshop.

