

Chloe Dragon Smith

Creating Ethical Spaces: Opportunities
to Connect with Land for Life and
Learning in the NWT



THE GORDON
FOUNDATION



IANE GLASSCO
NORTHERN FELLOWSHIP

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

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Chloe Dragon Smith was born and raised in Yellowknife, NWT. Of Dënesųłíné, French, and German heritage, she grew up close to her Indigenous cultural values and learned traditional skills for living on the land. Her mother is Brenda Dragon (from Fort Smith), her father is Leonard Smith (from Edmonton), and her Grandmother is Jane Dragon (From Fort Smith). Chloe has learned most of what she knows from her family and her upbringing. She spent four years obtaining a B.Sc in Earth Science from the University of Victoria. While now also educated in Science, she is keenly interested and has found her niche in working with people on the social/cultural benefits of the natural world, particularly where those values meet science and conservation. Chloe believes that relationships with the land are important for the health of individuals, the Earth, and our relationships with each other. She believes in the importance of cultivating those relationships from a young age. It is for these reasons that she co-founded an outdoor learning initiative called Bushkids, located in Yellowknife. She does the best she can to get out on the Land regularly with family, to keep her Indigenous world view and values strong and grounded through all the work she does.

DEDICATIONS

(*Thá'huná* means “live a long time,” and is our Dënesųłíné Yatia way of saying “thank you”).

Thá'huná, to my family and my ancestors – those who came before me and who have continually honoured our deep familial relationships with Land in and around the NWT.

Thá'huná, to my future children, my nieces, nephews, cousins, and our generations to follow. This work is for them, and there will always be more for them to do.

Thá'huná, to those who, over time, have contributed to this important conversation. There are many, many champions of on-the-Land learning in the North. Countless people have worked tirelessly, within systems that are not their own, and over many years. I am honoured to have the help and support of some that I personally know, and those I don't – all of whom have my deepest respect and gratitude.

Thá'huná, to my honoured Circle of Support: Rita Mueller (my Fellowship mentor), Sabrina Broadhead (my dear Auntie), Angela James, Jennifer Fresque-Baxter, Jessica Schmidt, and Wendy Lahey. These women of the Circle of Support have given me strength, confidence, and wise, thoughtful advice throughout this journey. This paper would not be the same without their guidance.

I would like to start by telling a story about our Earth, Water, Sky, Plants, Animals, and People. It is a story about connection and love. It is a story about the one thing that unites us all, and the one thing that we will never lose.

We are the Land. We are Nature.

We are the Water; our bodies are ninety percent Water. We are the Sky; our bodies need oxygen to breathe. We are the Earth; other Animals and Plants sustain our bodies, giving us strength. We are Nature, no matter where we come from, and no matter what else we are. To connect with Nature is to connect with ourselves.¹



¹ Canadian Parks Council, *The Nature Playbook: Take Action to Connect a New Generation of Canadians with Nature* (Canadian Parks Council, 2016)

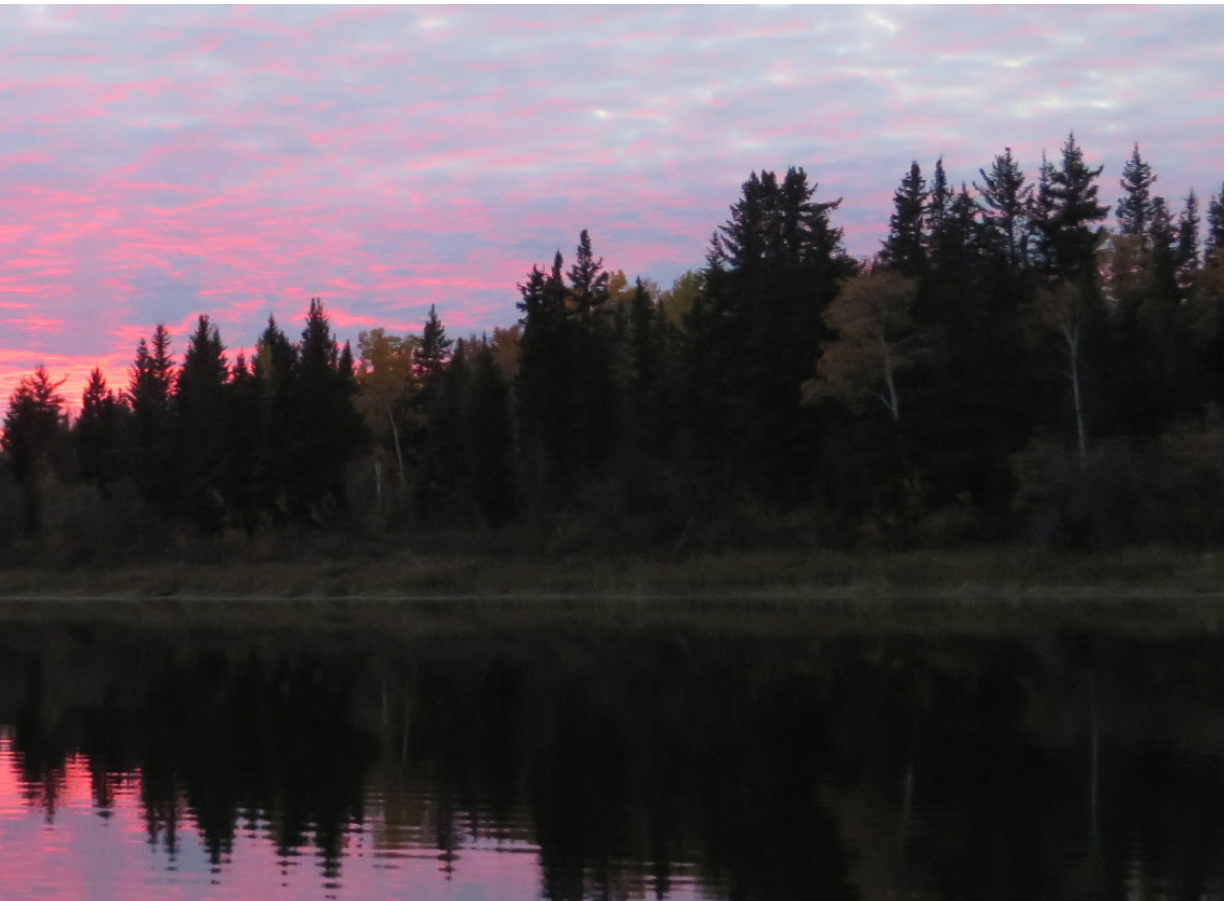


SITUATING MYSELF

Sézi Chloe Dragon Smith súlyé. Dënendeh ts'j'ást'j. Sé ts'í ?amá Brenda Dragon hulyé, Sé ts'í ?abá Leonard Smith hulyé. My own journey of connection began long ago with respect for those who came before me. I am referring to women who were shaped by the Land, generation after generation, life by life, who steadily and consciously pass on the values of the Land, of human connection, and of relationship. My Dënesųłíné ancestors lived seasonally and travelled all over the Northwest Territories (NWT): north of Great Slave Lake up to the tundra, and south of Fort Smith into northern Alberta and Saskatchewan. They are my maternal lineage and the two closest are my own mother, Brenda Dragon, and her mother, Jane Dragon. Within my memory, this story begins with them. My mother and

grandmother placed value on raising me with a connection to our culture and to Land, just as their mothers did before them. I am very grateful to my entire family for making these choices.

A place that is very special to our family is our cabin on the Taltson River, sitting on the banks where the river meets Deskenatlata Lake. It's a one-room cabin; eight bunk beds rest at the back, a table sits in the middle, with a wood stove and a tiny kitchen at the other end. It was this place where we lived with the Land, harvesting in the fall: moose, duck, rabbit, and fish. For my younger brother Joel and me, learning through explorative play shaped who we are today. We learned skills from our traditional ways of life and from the Land. We learned the value of engaging all our senses. We learned how to resist our



impulses, sometimes simply and repetitively by sitting patiently waiting for ducks to fly in. We learned about cycles of life and death through immersion in ecosystems, including harvesting animals. We learned to work together in emergency situations, or just difficult ones: for example, having to clean and transport a moose killed far down the lake, in blustery, wintery conditions. We learned basic skills from the Land including that Nature cannot be controlled and that we needed to be flexible and adaptable to our environment. The weather always teaches us that lesson! We learned to take opportunities as they come, and to always manage those opportunities with their inherent risks. I have grown to appreciate these wise life teachings from the Land, and I believe they could have only come from spending time with Nature.

In the NWT, we all live in a territory where life is constantly shaped by Land. Since time immemorial, the evolution of plants, animals, peoples, cultures, languages, knowledge, and ways of life have all taken shape on the Land. Relationships dictate this evolution: relationships with ourselves, others, the spiritual world, and the Land itself. Spending time outdoors allows us to tap into understandings of natural law – the way Nature is designed to work when humans are connected, respectful, and working in harmony with her. Ultimately, on-the-Land learning gives us the opportunity to understand Nature, and through that, ourselves and our interconnected cultures.



THE OPPORTUNITY

This policy paper presents opportunities to expand and integrate on-the-Land learning into daily life in the NWT. Education and learning opportunities in our territory are unique. This is, in part, because in recent history, governments, policy makers, school boards, and educators have demonstrated an understanding of the importance of education that is designed for the North, and by northerners.² I believe there is an opportunity to take this uniqueness even further, and align our education system even closer with who we are as northern peoples. Taking an asset-based approach³ means aligning goals with high priorities and aspirations, and basing actions on assets rather than liabilities. This

same concept of framing policy through opportunity was shared by Elder Mark Wedge at the first gathering of the 4th Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship cohort in Whitehorse, Yukon, February 2018:

“Western society tends to focus on solving problems. There are advantages to this approach, and policy generally follows Western philosophy. Indigenous peoples, however, are opportunists. We had to be – we might go out into the bush to set a net, and notice fresh moose tracks. Seizing the opportunity to follow those moose tracks is a matter of survival for us.”⁴

2 Northwest Territories, Education, Culture and Employment, *ILE Policy*, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/en/services/indigenous-languages-and-education-secretariat>

3 David Suzuki and Holly Dressel, *Good News For A Change: Hope for a Troubled Planet* (Vancouver: Greystone Books: 2002).

4 Mark Wedge (Elder), personal communication, February 23, 2018.



In the NWT, we can continue to build policy around the identities of peoples and Lands. These are our “opportunities,” to quote Mark Wedge, or our “assets.” We live closely with the Land; it is one of our strengths. Land is a major shaper, a definer of culture in the NWT, even in our modern shared culture, which includes a diversity of peoples from across the world. For instance, northern languages, food, art, clothing, and adornments, are all intrinsically inspired by Land. These cultural staples are embraced by all northerners, regardless of their backgrounds and ethnicities. Realizing our potential begins with policy changes that can lead to systemic shifts in the NWT: shifts to the foundations of who we are and where we came from. Since time immemorial, we have found those foundations through Land and community. It follows that this paper is a call to action to accept a shared responsibility for connection and access to Land.

THE OPPORTUNITY:

The GNWT can collaborate interdepartmentally to nurture holistic relationships between Land and community through relationships and on-the-Land learning.

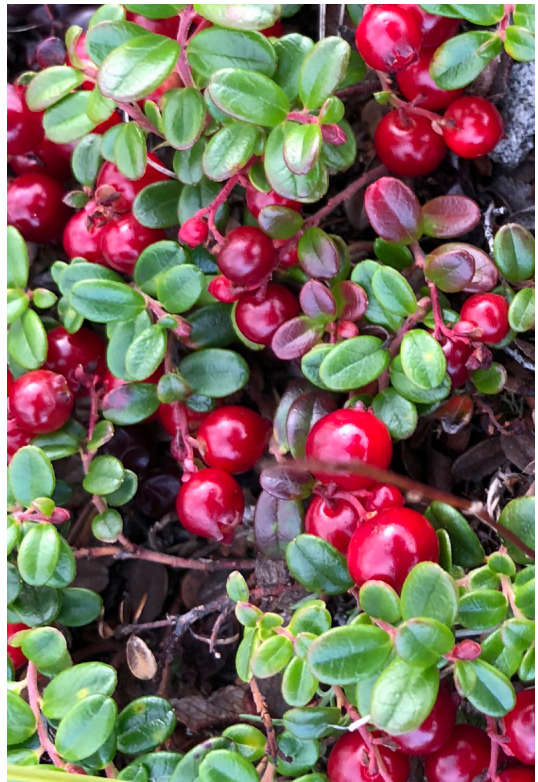
BACKGROUND: ETHICAL SPACE

1. WHAT IS ETHICAL SPACE?

Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have thrived on this Land, now called Canada. Many cultures and distinct peoples have taken shape, all intimately tied in co-evolution with Land. There are fundamental differences of worldview between Indigenous and European cultures, values, practices, and actions.⁵ Nature remains integral to Indigenous systems across the country, encompassing language, politics, governance, and education. Through colonization, these systems encountered different ways of being, inherent to Euro-Western cultures.⁶

An ethical space of engagement, as outlined by Dr. Willie Ermine, is a theoretical space between thought worlds, where engagement can happen in a respectful, balanced way.⁷ The foundations of Canada are built on two broad worldviews: Indigenous and European. This is exemplified by the historical treaties between First Nations and the Crown. These treaties are social contracts, historical models of ethical space that outline understandings about how society should function. An understanding of ethical space helps frame how the current systems for learning in the NWT are disproportionately embedded in Euro-Western conventions and why there is a desire to decolonize them. It is important to situate the conversation by naming the dominant knowledge systems and understanding how mainstream practices occur the way they do today.

As a person of mixed heritage – German, French, Dënesųłiné, Métis – I have personally examined, reflected on, and appreciated intrinsic understandings of ethical space. There are different ways that describe this merging of worldviews: “two eyed-seeing”⁸; “strong like two people”⁹; “walking in two worlds”; through all these articulations it is clear that there are undoubtedly separate and defined ways of interacting with the world that come about from both Indigenous and Euro-Western ways of knowing and being. I understand the former phrases to encompass all aspects of one’s being and how worldviews then manifest in our thoughts, principles, values, actions, and practices.



5 Willie Ermine, “The Ethical Space of Engagement,” in *Indigenous Law Journal* 6, Issue 1 (2007), 194-201.

6 Valarie Angela James, Chloe Dragon Smith, and Wendy Lahey, “Indigenizing Outdoor Play,” in *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. (2019).

7 Willie Ermine.

8 Albert Marshall, “Two-eyed Seeing,” *Institute for Integrative Health and Science*, accessed August 20, 2019, <http://www.integrative-science.ca/Principles/TwoEyedSeeing/>

9 Chief Jimmy Bruneau School, “About Us,” accessed August 20, 2019, <http://cjbs.tlcho.ca/about-cjbs>



Ermine says:

“[Ethical space] is a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behaviour, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. Presently, the norm of Western existence, the norm of its governance, becomes so pervasive in its immediacy, so entrenched in mass consciousness, that the foundations of its being become largely invisible to itself. The idea of the ethical space, produced by contrasting perspectives of the world, entertains the notion of a meeting place, or initial thinking about a neutral zone between entities or cultures. The space offers a venue to step out of our allegiances, to detach from the cages of our mental worlds and assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur.”¹⁰

The concept of ethical space was first explained to me by Piikani Blackfoot Elder Reg Crowshoe. He used one example of validating, and its different manifestations across cultural worldviews.¹¹ Elder Crowshoe shared that in his community, the culture is to write a song and sing it in ceremony to commemorate an event, or validate completed work. In Euro-Western systems (or the current mainstream system in Canada), documents and papers are signed. Elder Crowshoe asked us to consider how silly it would seem to a group of scientists, if they were asked to write and sing a song in order to publish their findings. He paused, and remarked gravely, “imagine how the Elders feel when they are constantly asked to sign papers.”¹² This outward manifestation of conflict within ethical space applies to the gamut of processes: our ways of learning, knowing, and being. Understanding, honouring, and celebrating in dynamic ways, through different worldviews, is essential to set foundations for ethical interactions.

¹⁰ Willie Ermine

¹¹ Reg Crowshoe (Elder, Piikani Nation) personal communication, June 7, 2017.

¹² Ibid.

Ethical space between Indigenous and Euro-Western world views is important to consider in any Canadian context; however, here in the NWT, where the student demographic is 60% Indigenous, ensuring that Indigenous worldview is accounted for in education is essential to the success of everyone.¹³ The ever-present effects of residential schools in Canada emphasize the danger in rejecting cultures and worldviews. The consequences of an education system that does not value the identities, beliefs, and learning needs of Indigenous peoples has resulted in widespread socio-economic, environmental, and cultural difficulties across Canada, and the North contributes to this living narrative.¹⁴

In the NWT, institutions are still fundamentally European, although Indigenous concepts (language, culture, practices) are increasingly being incorporated. There is an essential difference between indigenizing a western system (regardless of the quality or quantity of Indigenous content added), and that of supporting harmony between two systems: ethical space. For harmony to be achieved, space must continually be created for Indigenous worldviews until ways of knowing and being can be rebalanced. Through this understanding of the current imbalances in the education system, we can allow freedom for Indigenous education principles to evolve and grow, not as add-ons, but as a dynamic whole. Achieving ethical space in education is an ongoing discussion of adaptive management, learning, and relational accountability.¹⁵ It requires constant

exploration. Sabrina Broadhead, Director of the Indigenous Health and Community Wellness division in the GNWT's department of Health and Social Services, shared the following: "to compromise, we let go of thoughts that do not benefit the greater good, and do not benefit our shared responsibilities. We must do everything we can to come together and understand each other."¹⁶

To achieve this balance, and to further the healthy self-determination of our NWT education system, more time must be spent on the Land as part of standard learning and curriculum. Indigenous education principles are place-based. Intrinsic learning comes from the laws of the Land, as they did for previous generations, and simply, as they did for my brother and me. Our Dene Laws are codified and inextricably rooted in natural laws of the Land, as are the Indigenous laws from other cultures. Perhaps most importantly, Land is an equalizer between all peoples; a safe place for cultural exchange and understanding. When we are on the Land, we naturally meet each other through our humanity. This is where we find ethical space. Because we are all part of Nature, our shared responsibilities to Land transcend systems and colonized protocols. There is a need for an acceptance of all worldviews and our collective strengths in order to care for ourselves, for each other, and for the Land, now and for the future generations.

13 Valarie Angela James, "The Shaping Influences of 'A Capable Person:' A Narrative Research of Elders' Stories of Raising Children to Inform Aboriginal Education in the Northwest Territories" (PhD thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2016).

14 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action*, 2012. Accessed October 21, 2019, http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

15 Valarie Angela James (Director, Indigenous Languages and Education Secretariat), personal communication, February 15, 2019.

16 Sabrina Broadhead (Director of Indigenous Health and Community Wellness, Health and Social Services, Government of the Northwest Territories), personal communication, May 18, 2019.



2. INTERDEPARTMENTAL GNWT APPROACH AND COLLABORATION

This policy paper is an open call and invitation to all departments and divisions within the GNWT. Holism is ingrained in Indigenous worldviews, as are the importance of relationships and our context as part of greater systems.¹⁷ A collaborative approach is a way to honour Indigenous values within policy: an element of ethical space. Additionally, the extensive benefits of learning outdoors will result in long-term social and environmental solutions for the whole NWT. Connecting with Land serves the cultural, environmental, health, and economic needs of residents. This is an opportunity of broad importance, and the government as a whole has a shared responsibility for the future of Lands and peoples in the NWT.

It should be noted that this is not a new idea even within public government; for example, the upcoming *Traditional Knowledge Action Plan* for the GNWT emphasizes all departments working together and widely considering Indigenous methodologies.¹⁸

For this paper, three lead departments have been identified to coordinate this collaboration. They are: Education, Culture, and Employment (ECE), Environment and Natural Resources (ENR), and Health and Social Services (HSS). These three departments have direct mandates to advance on-the-Land learning.

¹⁷ Willie Ermine (2000). "Aboriginal Epistemology." In M. Battiste & J. Barman (Eds.), *First Nation Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds* (pp. 101-111). Vancouver: UBC Press.

¹⁸ Northwest Territories, Environment and Natural Resources, *Sustainable Livelihoods Action Plan—Public Engagement*, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.enr.gov.nt.ca/en/services/sustainable-livelihoods-action-plan-public-engagement>

Education, Culture, and Employment¹⁹

- ▶ ECE is focused on implementing the Education Renewal and Innovation Framework through a renewed Aboriginal Language and Culture-based Education Directive.
- ▶ ECE is mandated to increase cultural programming and education, revitalizing Indigenous languages and promoting the use of official languages.
- ▶ The Department of ECE should work with education bodies to establish, maintain and monitor supports for JK-12 Indigenous language and education.
- ▶ Education bodies should provide quality Indigenous language instruction and relevant culture-based school programs for students as part of the education program for the education district.

Health and Social Services²⁰

- ▶ HSS has a mandate to support quality early childhood development in collaboration with existing organizations.
- ▶ There is a current focus on mental health and addictions which is ensuring that services are delivered locally with culturally appropriate methods. There is a new On the Land Healing Contribution Fund that supports healing and mental wellness.
- ▶ Healthy families are a priority, by focussing on wellness, and improved nutrition.
- ▶ HSS is mandated to create opportunities for healthy lifestyles and community leadership for our youth.



19 Northwest Territories, Education, Culture, and Employment *Mission and values*, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/en/mission-and-values>.

20 Northwest Territories, Health and Social Services, *About Us*, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.hss.gov.nt.ca/en/about-us>.

Environment and Natural Resources²¹

► Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (or IPCAs) and Indigenous Guardian programs are supported by ENR. These are nationally-supported initiatives with plenty of financial support and capacity behind them. IPCAs are Indigenous-led, and they strive to support Indigenous worldviews on the importance of connecting with Land.²²

► ENR is developing a Sustainable Livelihoods Action Plan, which recognizes the importance of learning on the Land for wellbeing, families, health, income, and food security. ENR plans to focus on supporting communities in their on-the-Land programming, in ways that make sense for them.

► It is becoming more common within ENR to decolonize meeting spaces by holding government meetings outdoors. ENR is supporting a workforce backed by multiple knowledges.



21 Northwest Territories, Environment and Natural Resources, *Sustainable Livelihoods Action Plan—Public Engagement*, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.enr.gov.nt.ca/en/services/sustainable-livelihoods-action-plan-public-engagement>

22 Indigenous Circle of Experts, Pathway to Canada Target 1, *We Rise Together 1* (Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, 2018), accessed August 3, 2018 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57e007452e69cf9a7af0a033/t/5ab94aca6d2a7338ecb1d05e/1522092766605/PA234-ICE_Report_2018_Mar_22_web.pdf

“Youth should be on the Land regularly as part of their learning and their families should be part of that learning. I can do any kind of job now, because I learned how to make things work with whatever I had; I didn’t have all the tools and parts. Everything is out there, on the Land. That’s why I take risks and started a business today. I’m not worried about losing it all, because it’s all out there. I didn’t go to school for a year when I lived in the bush. Everyone thought I would fall way behind, but when I got back, I was in grade 4 for a day, then they put me in grade 5. I got the scholastic award every year, top of my class. I even graduated early.”

DONOVAN BOUCHER, ROCHER RIVER

Connecting with Nature and learning on the Land have benefits that have long been understood by Indigenous peoples in the North. Land is inextricable from the cultures of northern peoples, and understanding the benefits of Nature for health and wellbeing comes so naturally to many of us. To shed more light on this connection, I had conversations with several Indigenous northerners, and have integrated quotes from them throughout the paper. From an Indigenous perspective, sharing knowledge orally through relationships is a valuable research methodology. Integrating the quotes throughout the paper honours the interconnectedness and holism of our worldviews.

From a Euro-Western systems perspective, there is a growing body of research in Western science that aligns with Indigenous knowledge and wisdom about the importance of Land. The Canadian Parks Council publication *Connecting Canadians with Nature* ²³ gives an overview of some of these scientific sources (see Appendix A).



23 Canadian Parks Council. *Connecting Canadians with Nature*. (Canadian Parks Council, 2014).



2. WHAT IS ALREADY HAPPENING?

There are many diverse and dynamic on-the-Land programs operating through Indigenous governments, communities, First Nations, GNWT departments, schools and school boards, businesses, and other non-profit organizations. The importance of connecting with Nature is already widely recognized across our shared cultures in the NWT. It is already a priority, with concrete steps taken to offer windows of opportunity, where possible. Examples of this include efforts to streamline and collaborate through the NWT On-The-Land Collaborative, which provides centralized access to funding and other resources to interested parties in the Northwest Territories.²⁴ The Collaborative is supported by ECE, HSS, and ENR, among many others. It is important to note that at the time of writing, schools cannot apply for funding from the Collaborative to run programs within a community.

There are many camps, trips, and outdoor education classes that involve school and community, and that do successfully create ethical space within isolated experiences. An

example of one of these trips within the context of school, is the annual trip to the Sweetgrass station by grade 8 students at Paul William Kaeser School in Fort Smith. These types of inclusive outings have great value and need to be supported. There is room for standard education curriculum to accept and entrench these types of trips and experiences. Further, there is an opportunity for the educational system to be flexible in the manner they are integrated into accepted curriculum, whether through school, family, community, or program.

Though expanding the breadth of experiences is important, the policy changes proposed in this paper would create continuity between extra-curricular experiences, by ensuring outdoor learning is *integrated* into everyday life, work, school, and community. It would not be seen as an add-on to the current system, but rather integrated in a balanced way that reflects and supports strong NWT identities. We are Nature. The Land is found not only outside our borders and away from our communities, but rather it is within them and it is within us.

²⁴ NWT On the Land Collaborative, accessed July 22, 2019, <http://www.nwtontheland.ca/>

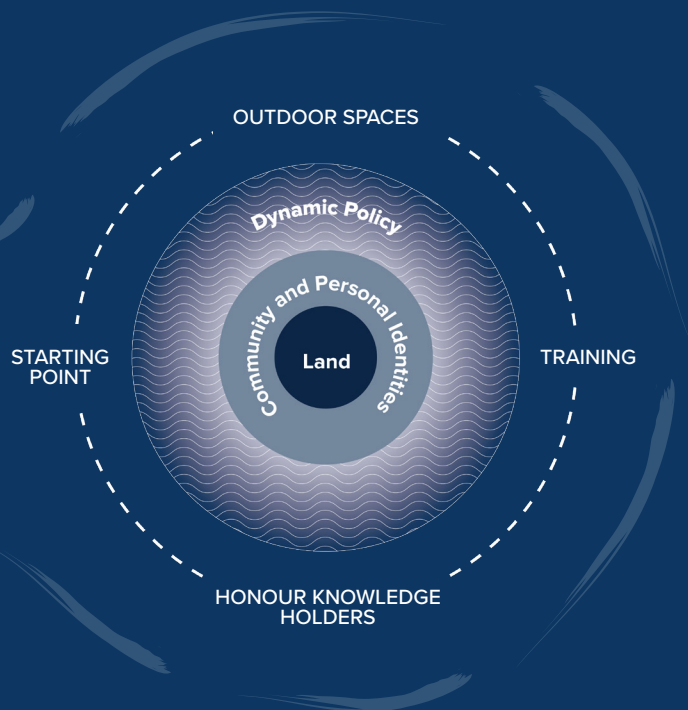
POLICY

1. POLICY JOURNEY

To optimize this opportunity, a few stages are essential as elements for success. These are laid out below, in the form of four reoccurring and simultaneous checkpoints. Rather than the conventional policy format of distinct options, the recommendations can be envisioned as a journey of adaptive management, checking in at new “starting points,” with instituted relational accountability to ensure the solutions are working for all. I acknowledge this not a traditional policy approach. Recognizing identities within the NWT, and how our relationships with Land shape us and our place in the world, adaptive and ever-changing policy is needed to serve our communities. Land is living and vibrant, and successful policy has to mirror that. A journey format is an opportunity to further decolonize policy, by taking a circular (balanced), rather than linear (growth) approach. ²⁵

One's individual awareness, the sense of a relatively personal self or psyche, is simply that part of the enveloping Air that circulates within, through, and around one's particular body; hence, one's own intelligence is assumed, from the start, to be entirely participant with the swirling psyche of the land. Any undue harm that befalls the land is readily felt within the awareness of all who dwell within that land. And thus the health, balance, and well being of each person is inseparable from the health and well-being of the enveloping earthly terrain.

DAVID ABRAM, *THE SPELL OF THE SENSUOUS* (PG. 237)



²⁵ John Ralston Saul, *The Comeback*, (Toronto: Viking, 2014).

Checkpoint: Starting Point

The starting point, or status quo, is where we evaluate what needs to change, if anything. It is where we adaptively assess where we are in time and space, and what can be improved for the future.

Checkpoint: Outdoor Spaces

Outdoor spaces would be made available at all schools (or within walking distance of schools), bringing each school up to a minimum standard of infrastructure. These spaces would also be open to families and the broader community.

Checkpoint: Training

Mandatory training would be offered to all GNWT employees, educators, and early childhood educators in the territory, including teaching the foundations and history of Canada and the NWT, the concept of ethical space, and on-the-Land competency. Indigenous peoples have spent much time learning Western systems, and the learning has not been reciprocated.²⁶

Checkpoint: Honouring Knowledge Holders

Supporting knowledge holders in the NWT is integral to guiding on-the-Land learning through a sharing of worldviews, and ways of knowing and doing. Support has to include appropriate compensation by providing salaries or honoraria for knowledge holders, and requires regular work with educators at each school for consistency. This option would be put into effect with the goal of elevating Indigenous systems, in order to create balanced ethical space within our institutions and within the GNWT.

“Relationship with Land comes with responsibility. People need Land, and Land needs people, we’re made of the same stuff. Learning on the Land should be mandatory. Giving children the chance to form a spiritual relationship with Land will serve them as a foundation for the rest of their lives. It will sustain them and it will sustain Mother Earth.”

STEVEN NITAH, ŁUTSELK'E



²⁶ John Ralston Saul.

2. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

When aligning with northern Indigenous worldviews, Land is at the center. What follows are the specifics of engaging with Land, and are led by the Land itself, by aligning with natural laws. This alignment requires many variations in approach depending on location, peoples, cultures, and knowledge frameworks. In creating outdoor spaces, each community will make choices based on their own worldviews and relationships, about how to include families and community, and how curriculum will be integrated outdoors. This place-based focus and inherent flexibility are integral to Indigenous worldviews. Paul Andrew, Shúhtaot'įnę Dene Elder, says that in our Dene culture we share stories for teaching and learning.²⁷ Each listener takes something different from the story, and whatever we take is what is meant to be conveyed at that time. Each interpretation is exactly what it needs to be.

My recommendations to implement this policy journey in the context of the champion departments (ECE, HSS, and ENR) can be summarized by the diagram on page 18, and follows with two concrete recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Relational Accountability

Establish a tri-departmental committee of the champion departments, ECE, HSS, and ENR, for adaptive learning and accountability to ethical space and the overall policy journey. This would include training, as well as honouring Indigenous knowledge holders (checkpoints 3 and 4).

2. Outdoor spaces

ECE, HSS, and ENR collaborate to support locally-appropriate outdoor spaces that are accessible to every school and community (including families) in the NWT (checkpoint 2).

²⁷ Paul Andrew, Elder, Tulita. personal communication, June 28, 2019.

RECOMMENDATION 1

RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The tri-departmental committee would comprise the three champion departments (ECE, HSS, ENR), which would be subsequently responsible for integrating representation from both government and community. It is recommended that the committee not limit championing to the three departments, but bring in others from additional departments and the larger community, including knowledge holders of all ages.

Creating ethical space within relationships and institutions is a much longer and more committed process than simply establishing infrastructure, and this is where the roles of the three departments are critical. A tri-departmental committee tasked to ensure collaboration and relational accountability to the vision will be key to the long term success. This committee will ensure departments are aligning their budgets and yearly goals making it easier for schools, families, and communities to benefit from this policy. There is potential for the committee to collaborate and expand the work of the On-The-Land Collaborative.

The committee is a holistic mechanism to honour the interdepartmental approach. ECE would lead the school and learning aspects of the journey, while HSS and ENR would bring perspective on how to integrate community into the vision and shift existing, related policy. The roles of the champion departments must be balanced and equally committed. Schools must both reflect and belong to the community.²⁸ The importance of the interdepartmental approach is to help weave family and community into school based learning systems within the NWT.

RECOMMENDATION 2

OUTDOOR SPACES

While the policy journey is dynamic and will look different based on communities' contexts, there is a common need for outdoor spaces as a comfortable gathering place through seasons. The spaces would be located at or near every public school in the NWT. Schools are where our future generations are spending the majority of their time learning, and the responsibility for children remind us of the importance of long-term relationships with Land and community. Though located in close proximity to schools, it must be communicated and fully understood that these outdoor spaces are open for use to families and the community. The spaces are meant to serve as a baseline for cross-cultural exchange and understanding, for *everyone*.

“Supporting and working within/to create/to support/foster ethical spaces is, to me, a key component of reconciliation – we need to shift our paradigm to support these spaces to improve the work we do to support the people we serve. We need collaborative spaces to identify innovative solutions.”

JENNIFER FRESQUE-BAXTER, DIRECTOR, ON-THE-LAND DIVISION, ENR²⁹

28 “Second Place Winner: Gwich’in Land-based Education,” *EdCan Network*, 2019, accessed July 22, 2019, <https://www.edcan.ca/awards/the-ken-spencer-award/2019-winners/gwichin-land-based/>.

29 Jennifer Fresque-Baxter (Director, On-The-Land Division, Government of the Northwest Territories), personal communication, June 23, 2019.

This budget is recommended as a phased approach, with the recommendation to include as many schools as possible per year. If the spaces are being utilized to their fullest and the programming is running successfully, wood fuel costs would increase with more

use and maintenance would decrease with community stewardship. This knowledge is reflected in the table below. The numbers are based on the costs to set up wall tents at J.H. Sissons School in Yellowknife.³⁰

PROJECT ELEMENT	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	YEAR 5	TOTAL
Wall tent + set up	\$6,000	0	0	0	0	\$6,000
Wood stove and pipes	\$1,000	0	0	0	0	\$1,000
Fire pit	\$500	0	0	0	0	\$500
Firewood (400/cord)	\$800	\$1,200	\$1,200	\$1,200	\$1,200	\$5,600
Small woodshed	\$1,000	0	0	0	0	\$1,000
Maintenance	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$5,000
Total/space	\$10,300	\$2,200	\$2,200	\$2,200	\$2,200	\$19,100
Grand total for the GNWT over time, for 49 spaces	\$504,700	\$107,800	\$107,800	\$107,800	\$107,800	\$935,900 over 5 years

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“Identity is important to self-esteem; feeling and being a part of a bigger whole is one of the ways to build identity. Northern children with a strong sense of identity are resilient, adaptable and ultimately, will strive to seek their basic needs of connection and love. These characteristics contribute to the life goals of purpose, happiness, and fulfilment. Children who spend time in Nature are more likely to care and preserve their land and environment for themselves and for future generations.”

BRENDA DRAGON, THEBACHA

³⁰ Wendy Lahey (Co-founder, Bushkids NWT), personal communication, May 3, 2019.



THE VISION

“Indigenous literature is about being a capable person, being a good person. Not just taking care of your mind, but your heart, and your spirit. Across Turtle Island, we hear people talking about doing things in a good way. It is simple but powerful. The land means sense of place, sense of belonging, environment. It connects to big Western movements, but in many ways Land-based learning is coming back full circle to how we’ve always lived. We all have different words but it means the same thing. This shows how important it is.”

ANGELA JAMES, SOMBA K’É

There are endless ways for everyone in a community to engage with and contribute to ethical spaces. Specific parameters must be set by each community and space; however, there is room to develop a vision of how ethical space may look. There are opportunities and responsibilities for everyone, and the freedom to engage how we wish is where the beauty will arise. By trusting relationships and ethical space, we allow dynamic solutions to present themselves.

► **Children/Youth:** Outdoor learning in ethical space allows for the Land and children to lead learning. In addition to honouring Indigenous principles of education, many concrete facets of the current curriculum can be enhanced by learning outdoors, such as: inquiry-based learning, *Becoming a Capable Person*,³¹ *Dene Kede*,³² and *Inuuqatigiit*.³³ These opportunities for outdoor learning are for all children in the NWT.

► **Schools:** Learning and curriculum move fluidly between indoor spaces and outdoor spaces. Each school has access to a defined space that is close enough for daily use. Schools celebrate local, Land-based Indigenous ceremonies and protocols in ethical space, both indoors and outdoors.

► **Educators:** Educators are given the opportunity to access local training and additional funding to increase knowledge and build comfort with bringing their curriculum outdoors, and working with knowledge holders and community to create ethical space in the classroom. This includes learning about Indigenous history in the NWT.

► **Families:** Families, including extended family members, have a place to go and they use the spaces, spending time outdoors together, cooking food, and engaging in healthy activities. Traditionally, Indigenous learning has happened through family and relationships. Welcoming families into learning is an important part of creating ethical space within schools.

31 Northwest Territories, Education, Culture and Employment, “NWT Key Competencies,” *Education Renewal*, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/en/services/education-renewal/nwt-key-competencies>

32 Northwest Territories, Education, Culture and Employment, *Dene Kede*, (Yellowknife: Northwest Territories, Education, Culture and Employment, 1993), https://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/sites/ece/files/resources/dene_kede_k-6_full_curriculum.pdf

33 Northwest Territories, Education, Culture and Employment, *Inuuqatigiit: the Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective* (Yellowknife: Northwest Territories, Education, Culture and Employment, 1996), accessed July 3, 2019. <http://inuuqatigiit.ca/2018/03/inuuqatigiit-inuit-curriculum/>



► **Workforce:** Outdoor spaces are welcome spaces for work that would normally occur in offices and boardrooms, including the potential for being used as work or meeting spaces, for health breaks, and as eating spots.

► **Community:** Relationships within communities are an essential part of Indigenous learning principles. The creation of accessible outdoor ethical spaces encourages community members

to participate in learning and knowledge sharing with schools. Because of the accessibility, older members of families and people with physical restrictions feel welcome to the space. Furthermore, these space provide opportunities for schools to branch out into the community. Learning does not end when the school day ends.



CONCLUSION

This policy fellowship has been a thought-provoking experience. As an Indigenous northerner, I have found that Euro-Western structures of policy feel incongruent for me, my worldview, and my measures of progress. With these recommendations, I have tried to weave elements of Western policy making with aspects of my own identity. I thought deeply about my upbringing and what I have learned from my family and from the Land, and how those gifts could translate into opportunity at every step of the process. It is my hope and belief that the concept of ethical space and learning from the Land will also resonate with other Indigenous northerners.

My conclusion from this process is that policy is deeply personal, and must be connected to us as policy makers and to our families and communities to truly serve our systems. This is messy, without a doubt - and it must be dynamic and ever-changing. It must be subjective. We can guard room to follow opportunities as they come, through the process of creating policy, and through implementation. John B Zoe³⁴ says that we must tell our story, even if we don't have all the pieces yet. Through this paper, I've shared what I know of my own story and my own understanding of Indigenous policy, at this time. I believe we must take the time and space to honour our stories, if we expect to honour people, communities and Lands through the instrument of policy in the NWT.

³⁴ John B Zoe, T'licho Nation, personal communication, August 16, 2019

APPENDIX A: SCIENTIFIC BENEFITS OF NATURE

The following is shared from the 2014 Canadian Parks Council publication *Connecting Canadians with Nature*.³⁵ These points are examples of the benefits of connecting with Nature, but there are many more which can be found both online and in this document.

- ▶ Children have greatly improved focus during classroom periods if they have spent time outdoors.
- ▶ Symptoms of ADHD and other attention disorders are reduced.
- ▶ Engagement and enthusiasm of students improves with time spent outdoors regularly.
- ▶ Having a classroom window that looks into a green space improves standardized test performances.
- ▶ Resilience and discipline increase.
- ▶ Observation, problem-solving and reasoning, categorization, creativity, imagination, risk-identification strengthen.
- ▶ Overall emotional and intellectual development is enhanced.
- ▶ Gross motor skill development – agility, coordination, and balance improve.
- ▶ Contact with nature allows us to put things into perspective, it helps give us a sense of purpose, and to be more outwardly focused.
- ▶ Time in Nature inspires episodes of ultimate happiness and spiritual fulfillment.
- ▶ Self-confidence increases.
- ▶ Urban residents living near natural environments tend to know more of their neighbours, feel a stronger sense of belonging to the community, and have a more positive view of their neighbourhood.
- ▶ Nature brings out more social feelings, more value for community and nurtures close relationships among neighbours.
- ▶ Nature helps prevent crime and mitigate some of the psychological precursors to aggression and violence.
- ▶ Playing in nature nurtures the development of empathy and self-awareness, removes the social hierarchy among children, and reduces instances of bullying.
- ▶ Adults that participate in group outdoor experiences have shown enhanced abilities to connect with others that carry over into their personal lives.
- ▶ The benefits of being on the Land for human mental health are almost endless, and are still being recorded.
- ▶ Stress levels (measured through cortisol) decrease when spending time outdoors.
- ▶ Blood pressure drops, and the overall immune system strengthens.
- ▶ Rates of healing increase.
- ▶ Living nearby to green space is the best predictor of individual physical activity.
- ▶ Connection with Nature fosters love for the environment, which is proven to lead to future environmental stewardship.







Creating Ethical Spaces: Opportunities to Connect with Land for Life and Learning in the NWT

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