



# Building Public Understanding of Indigenous-led Conservation: Insights from Communications Strategies in Five National Parks

## Executive Summary

**Prepared by:** Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership

**Date:** November 2023

### Overview

This report outlines lessons learned in building public support for Indigenous-led conservation efforts. It highlights communications tools that the conservation sector might use in changing public attitudes about Indigenous-led conservation. This includes conflict resolution approaches, particularly around issues such as Indigenous harvesting activities in and around state-led conservation areas.

Initiated by Parks Canada, this work is intended to support the development of a set of communications guidelines to advance the agency's [responsibility for and commitment to reconciliation](#) in Canada's National Parks. This report can help inform and guide audiences beyond the conservation sector, including Indigenous governments, organizations, and communities in their work with environmental organizations and/or as they build their communications capacity.

A review of the academic literature found that there is minimal research done on the process of advancing communications that elevate and centre Indigenous voices, ways of knowing, and rights in relation to conservation and stewardship. To address this gap, the report outlines insights from interviews with Indigenous organizations and Parks Canada Field Units from five National Parks.

The interviews explored several approaches to communicating to the public about Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship practices, providing important considerations for elevating Indigenous rights, relationships, and responsibilities within their traditional territories through communications approaches. These findings emphasize the need for broader changes, including creating space for different knowledge systems to coexist with respect, kindness, and generosity.

This report argues that taking these actions is important for two reasons: 1) to develop meaningful, anti-oppressive, and effective communications practices for conservation; and 2) to advance conservation through reconciliation, as well as bring attention to and disrupt the colonial approach to conservation, racism in Canada, and the continued dominance of Western science in environmental management.

## Conservation Communications: Case Studies

The report outlines key insights from field staff within the following five National Parks:

- [Cape Breton Highlands National Park](#);
- [Fundy National Park](#);
- [Kouchibouguac National Park](#);
- [Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site](#); and
- [Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve, and Haida Heritage Site](#)

Interviews were also conducted with two corresponding Indigenous partner organizations:

- [Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn \(KMK\)](#), and
- [Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources \(UINR\)](#).

These sites were identified as having experience communicating about Indigenous rights, cultures, and stewardship practices.

The following insights further demonstrate best practices for uplifting Indigenous rights, relationships, and responsibilities through communications:

### **Indigenous Peoples are Rights Holders and Partners, not 'Stakeholders'**

Parks Canada's policies need to effectively reflect Indigenous Peoples as partners with treaty rights. Instead, Parks Canada staff are devising workarounds to policies that limit their ability to respectfully collaborate with Indigenous partners.

For example, Parks staff discussed having to delicately navigate the [Canada National Parks Act](#) (which prohibits Indigenous Peoples from harvesting in most National Parks) to allow harvesting in the park.

### **Early, Ongoing, and Meaningful Engagement**

Engaging meaningfully with Indigenous partners is not only legally and ethically sound but it is also essential for developing positive messaging in effective communications strategies. This approach can build trust, mutual understanding, and a capacity to address diverse perspectives and will require sustained funding and research support for Indigenous partner involvement in communications efforts.



## **Relationship Building Between Indigenous and Settler Communities**

Building trust is essential for effective communications strategies. While the academic literature emphasizes this, it fails to acknowledge the significant role conservation organizations and agencies can play in building cross-cultural relationships given their engagements with Indigenous partners and settler communities.

Early engagement and cross-cultural relationship-building can lead to more positive communications outcomes, better understanding of target audiences, and the ability to harness community knowledge and attitudes to design solutions that resonate with them.

## **Relationship Building with Indigenous Partners**

Establishing strong, lasting relationships with Indigenous partners, rather than relying on individual connections, is vital for effective collaboration and communications.

Long-term partnerships enable deeper project insights and positive shifts in public perceptions. To ensure continuity, organizations should invest in cross-cultural competency training for their teams, fostering trust and effectiveness even as staff change roles.

## **Relationship Building with Local (Settler) Communities**

As outlined in the literature, understanding social norms and biases is crucial for creating strategic messaging to influence audiences. Insights from Cape Breton Highlands National Park highlighted the need for two-way dialogue and tailored communications, especially for controversial topics like wildlife harvesting, to safeguard Indigenous Peoples' safety, sovereignty, self-determination, and harvesting rights.

## **Bring in Experts**

Engaging external experts like Elders, scientists, and facilitators can enhance message development and credibility in communications. These experts also help build trust, particularly for contentious issues. Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems is vital for honouring key principles, addressing public doubts, and establishing protocols when needed.



## **Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration**

Evaluating communications plans is necessary to assess effectiveness and reach. While Parks Canada conducts evaluations, interviews revealed that communication and collaboration between field units is limited. Nationwide knowledge sharing and conferences can enhance performance and relationships among staff.

## **Transform Hiring Practices**

Transforming hiring practices requires eliminating employment barriers for Indigenous Peoples, especially at senior and executive levels across the organization. This shift can create space for Indigenous employees to influence policies, programs, and communications, ultimately strengthening overall operations.

## **Build Youth Capacity Through Learning and Employment Opportunities**

While seemingly unrelated to developing effective communications strategies, building youth capacity has the potential to improve Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations around conservation issues. In turn, this can strengthen overall communications to support public understanding of Indigenous-led conservation.

For example, weaving on-the-land learning and language lessons into conservation education programs can profoundly impact Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. In addition, youth employment programs can build skills and foster trusting relationships, ultimately contributing to effective communications efforts.

## **Limit the Bureaucracy**

Bureaucracy can be a barrier to good communications work. For example, requiring high-level sign off on official responses to crisis situations can severely delay and diminish those responses. In addition, bureaucracy has the potential to perpetuate colonial harms.

## **A Two-Eyed Seeing Approach to Staff Training**

Effective cross-cultural training includes Two-Eyed Seeing approaches and weaves Indigenous laws, customs, and practices into resource management work. This demonstrates the value of the work from an Indigenous perspective. According to a number of Parks Canada field units, this kind of training is beginning to take shape but is relatively new and infrequent.