

November 2023

BUILDING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF INDIGENOUS-LED CONSERVATION:

Insights from Communications Strategies in Five National Parks

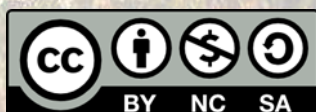
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Disclaimer: This report was produced with support from Parks Canada. The analysis set out in this report are those of the author. This report does not necessarily in whole or in part reflect the views of the Government of Canada.



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Acknowledgements

With immense gratitude and thanks to Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn, Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources and Parks Canada for taking the time to share their insights, collaborate on, and validate this work.

Special thanks to Kristy Tomkinson for editing and logistical support, which has been invaluable in executing the vision of the project. Thanks to the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership for supporting the production of this project.

Funding Acknowledgement

This work was produced with support from Parks Canada Agency.

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Introduction

The following report identifies lessons learned in building public support for Indigenous-led conservation. It highlights communications tools that the conservation sector might use in changing public attitudes about Indigenous-led conservation. It also includes steps on how to communicate in times of conflict (for example, the public not understanding Indigenous rights to land and harvesting activities in state-led protected areas).

This work was initiated by [Parks Canada](#) and intended to support the development of a set of communications guidelines to advance reconciliation in Canada's National Parks. Parks Canada [holds a responsibility and commitment](#) to recognize [Section 35](#) rights of the Canadian Constitution, the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's [Calls to Action](#).

While initiated by Parks Canada, this report can help inform and guide audiences beyond the conservation sector, including Indigenous governments, organizations, and communities in their work with environmental agencies or organizations and/or as they build their communications capacity.

The first phase of this work involved a [review of academic literature](#) on best practices in communications and marketing. This review 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.

The second phase of this work and emphasis of this report addresses this gap in the literature. This report highlights key learning from interviews with Indigenous organizations and partnering Parks Canada Field Units. 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.

Findings from the interviews complement and expand on insights from the academic literature and point to a need for broader change in conservation operations. This change includes co-creating space for engagement across knowledge systems to allow for different knowledge systems to interact equitably, with mutual respect, kindness, generosity, and other fundamental values and principles.

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.



A person looking through binoculars in Cape Breton Highlands National Park.
Credit: Alais Nevert, ©Parks Canada.

Gaps and Opportunities

The [academic literature review](#) of best practices for changing behaviour and public perceptions revealed key considerations for mainstream conservation issues. However, effective communications and marketing approaches for uplifting Indigenous rights, relationships, and responsibilities in around state projected areas is an issue that was largely unaddressed.

This may not be surprising, as communications strategies and initiatives are rooted in top-down frameworks that elevate Western messaging approaches ([Dutta, 2015](#)). These approaches often ignore or omit other ways of knowing by dismissing them as ‘unscientific’ and promoting only economically-driven, market-based ideas ([Artelle et al., 2019](#); [Bach, 2019](#); [Dutta, 2015](#)).

The anti-racism and social change literature provides key insights into building audience understanding and awareness of complex social issues. However, there is little guidance within the literature on how to transform audience attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions in support of Indigenous-led conservation.

The Indigenous-led conservation (and to an extent, the conservation biodiversity) literature thoroughly speaks to the rights, sovereignty, and agency of Indigenous Peoples in relation to protected areas. However, it does not offer much in the way of guidance for effectively translating and communicating these concepts to audiences.

As such, an important opportunity to shift public understandings of protected areas through effective conservation communications or marketing strategy will be in the development of initiatives that advance Indigenous rights and stewardship practices, while elevating and bridging Indigenous ways of knowing with behaviour change techniques largely found in Western systems of thought.

Conservation Communications: Case Studies

To address the information gap found in the literature, interviews were conducted with the following five Parks Canada-administered sites:

- [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 sections provide a brief introduction to each case study.

Cape Breton Highlands National Park

Of the field units interviewed, Cape Breton Highlands National Park was the only park that had received significant public opposition on a conservation project. As a result, much of the guidance collected from this case study relates to crisis communications.

Interviews with Cape Breton Highlands National Park staff focused on their communications strategy for a hyperabundant moose population project.

While European settlers had [extirpated the species](#) from the landscape by the turn of the twentieth century, Parks Canada reintroduced moose in the late 1940s. Since then, population levels gradually increased until a spruce budworm outbreak occurred in the 1970s and 80s.

Following the die-off of mature spruce trees in the higher elevation, a significant amount of new growth occurred, providing fodder for moose. This resulted in a moose population boom with negative impacts on the species and their habitat.

Following years of study, [a multi-year moose reduction project](#) was proposed by Parks Canada. Because moose hunting can be a very contested issue in the region, Parks Canada hosted conversations with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members. From a review of [media reports](#) at the time, and in conversation with Parks Canada staff, it appears there was a small but very vocal group of settlers who were resistant to the harvest.

While concerns varied, animal rights activists and sport hunters' perspectives were most predominately reflected in media reports. Meanwhile, for Mi'kmaq, the moose is, and has always been, a highly valued species and relation. This is reflected in present-day cultural teachings, stewardship practices and sustenance provision, and historically in petroglyphs at what is now [Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site](#). Hence, the Mi'kmaq felt it was imperative that the project be carried out respectfully and with Indigenous Peoples involved in each stage of the work.

Through partnerships with the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources (UINR) as well as Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn (KMK), Cape Breton Highlands' moose population reduction project was transformed from a harvest to what it is known as today – the [Bring Back the Boreal](#) project. This five-year project (2014 - 2019) focused on ecosystem regeneration and harvesting moose in partnership with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia.

With support from Mi'kmaw partners, communications shifted to include Indigenous Peoples' rights to harvest as part of the messaging to the general public. The re-framing of messaging was critical to the project's success; however, the project encountered racism. Mi'kmaw hunters conducting the moose harvest experienced hostility and hate speech from settler hunters and animal rights activists who were upset about the reduction in moose populations as well as Mi'kmaq rights to perform the harvest.

Fundy National Park

In conversations with Fundy National Park, the Menpae harvesting pilot project was discussed. This project involves an agreement between Parks Canada and [Mi'gmawe'l Tplu'taqnn Incorporated \(MTI\)](#) – an Indigenous organization representing eight of the nine Mi'kmaq communities in New Brunswick.

The Menpae project is focused on the recognition and revitalization of traditional harvesting practices, specifically spruce roots and gum as well as birch bark used to build canoes and other cultural objects.

Interviewees Shannon Ward, Indigenous Relations Advisor, and Carole Saucier, External Relations Manager, shared many communications insights, particularly around the Atlantic Salmon recovery project. They also shared the immense benefits of their newly established Indigenous Relations Advisor and Officer roles, including (but not limited to) their important contributions to cross-cultural relationship building, youth capacity, and outreach.

Kouchibouguac National Park

As part of the New Brunswick Field Units, both Kouchibouguac National Park (North) and Fundy National Park (South) are partners with Mi'gmawe'l Tplu'taqnn Incorporated (MTI) on the Menpae project. Their communications functions are a shared responsibility and each is responsible for ensuring proper implementation of the project in their respective administered lands.

Kouchibouguac National Park has two neighbouring Mi'kmaq communities and has Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with each, some dating back to the 1990s. These MOUs serve as functional agreements between Parks Canada and each Indigenous partner.

At the time of this report's publication, the Rights Implementation Agreements (RIA) were being negotiated with both Field Units in New Brunswick and MTI, and so communications regarding the project had been minimal (as per agreements between MTI and Parks Canada). Once ratified, however, the RIA will be key to developing an enhanced communications strategy.

Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site

Interviews with Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site focused on their relationship with the [Métis Nation of Alberta](#) and Métis local 845, the regional executive 3 branch of the Métis Nation of Alberta.

Through MOUs and contracts, the Métis local and provincial bodies provide cross-cultural awareness and interpretation work on-site. They also hold a space for ceremony and healing where all Indigenous community members are welcome.

While multiple levels of communication and engagement were discussed, an emphasis on collaboration, relationship-building, follow-through, and good leadership were highlighted as keys to a successful communications strategy.

Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve, and Haida Heritage Site

While collaboratively planned and cooperatively managed today, the genesis of Haida Nation, federal, and provincial support for this protected area can be traced back to conflict regarding unsustainable logging, rights to land, and a public proposal to protect a part of Moresby Island ([Parks Canada, 2011](#)).

Through the Archipelago Management Board's dual government representation and consensus-decision making process – which respects dual authorities and laws – the [Gwaii Haanas Agreement](#) established what has become a renowned example of cooperative management.

While the Haida Nation and Government of Canada have differing views on ownership of Gwaii Haanas, they agree that the Archipelago will be maintained and used in a manner that ensures the benefit, education, and enjoyment of future generations ([Gwaii Haanas Agreement, 1993](#)).



A person stands in the water in scuba diving gear, holding a sea urchin in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area, and Haida Heritage Site.

Credit: Scott Munn, ©Parks Canada.

Conservation Communications: Lessons Learned

The following insights, gathered from case studies and triangulated with data retrieved from the literature review, broaden the scope of and further demonstrate best practices for uplifting Indigenous rights, relationships, and responsibilities through communications.

While the identified lessons learned are important, they are mere steps in a larger journey to address the colonial legacy of conservation in Canada that continues to persist today. This is visible in the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous rights and ways of knowing in conservation management as well as messaging frameworks.

Violent settler colonialism also manifests in the oppression, criminalization, and harassment of Indigenous Peoples for asserting their treaty rights. This was demonstrated, for example, through the racist and violent commentary during the [Haudenosaunee deer hunts at Short Hills Provincial Park](#), the [hostility and violence directed at Mi'kmaw lobster fishers in Nova Scotia](#), the [murders of two Métis hunters in Alberta](#), and so much more. It is hoped that the following recommendations can help build recognition of protected areas as Indigenous territories that have, for millennia, benefited from Indigenous governance and stewardship.

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

In efforts to advance reconciliation in action and honour Canada's commitment to [the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), Parks Canada is working to advance a management framework that recognizes Indigenous Peoples as partners and amend the [National Parks Act](#).

As part of this work, Parks Canada is [moving toward establishing](#) Rights Implementation Agreements (RIAs) in Atlantic Canada, and preparing collaborative communications approaches and strategies with Indigenous partners in anticipation of its application. While broader amendments to operations roll out across the nation, Parks Canada must ensure Indigenous Peoples are widely understood as partners with rights to the land and cultural practices.

“We’re more than a stakeholder – we’re co-managers, this is what we do in Nova Scotia...and this can happen in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontariothe only way to fix this stewardship problem is to think of us as equals, from the start. We’re not just some public interest group and we need to be recognized as such.”

– Crystal Dorey, Communications Manager, Kwilmu’kw Maw-klusuaqn (KMK)

The issue of rights recognition is not only a legal issue but also a logistical concern that impacts everyday functionality for field units. Parks staff (e.g., superintendents, ecologists, communications managers, resource managers, etc.) discussed having to navigate legislation, like the National Parks Act, that prohibits Indigenous Peoples from harvesting in most National Parks – a right enshrined in Section 35(1) of the Constitution Act ([Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982](#)).

This means Parks Canada staff having to navigate authorities found within the Canada National Parks Act in order to allow harvesting and avoid cases being fought in court, which tarnishes trust and harms relationships. In other words, staff must find workable solutions within the current frameworks to avoid a situation where the only alternative would be legal recourse.

For example, the Menpae project of Kouchibouguac National Park is one where the harvesting of spruce roots and gum and birch bark for canoes was involved. For this project, Parks Canada staff had to issue a special activities permit, because harvesting on a regular basis is not permitted. Generally, such requests would be treated as exceptional, but through this process, Mi’kmaq rights are upheld, and ongoing harvesting is practiced.

In terms of data sovereignty, Kouchibouguac and Fundy National Parks collaborated with Mi’gmawe’l Tplu’taqnn Incorporated (MTI) to develop separate data sets that represent Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge systems respectively. This practice adheres to [OCAP®](#) and can avoid public backlash and [Access to Information and Privacy \(ATIP\)](#) requests that could potentially put Indigenous Peoples’ knowledge at risk.

Through this dual data set system, Parks Canada maintains all the Western data in their own management system and another set of data, containing everything related to Indigenous knowledge, is housed in or protected by communities through MTI.

Thus, if a request for information is received by the public, MTI has control over what they share (with the communities' permission). While critical to data sovereignty, this dual data set system is not national policy, so it is unclear whether it is implemented nation-wide.



Two people kayak near a rocky outcropping and a covered bridge in Fundy National Park.
Credit: Dale Wilson, ©Parks Canada.

As a representative from Kouchibouguac National Park put it: “We are hoping for progress, reconciliation, and facilitating rights. It may take years before these laws are modified.” Being a partner to Indigenous communities, they said, “Is ensuring a situation where [Indigenous Peoples] can protect their own knowledge and fulfill their rights.”

In summation, Parks Canada staff are having to devise workarounds to policies and practices that limit their ability to respectfully collaborate with Indigenous partners. While these work in practice, Parks Canada must amend their policies to more effectively reflect Indigenous Peoples as partners with land, knowledge and stewardship rights.

Early, Ongoing, and Meaningful Engagement

Early, ongoing, and meaningful engagement with Indigenous partners is necessary to respect the [duty to consult](#) and Free, Prior and Informed Consent as affirmed in the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#).

“You can’t be starting the relationship building work while a project is underway.”

– Maria O’Hearn, External Relations Manager for Parks Canada’s Cape Breton Field Unit

Failing to engage with Indigenous partners is not only ethically but legally problematic and leads to poor communications. For example, for the Bring Back the Boreal Project, Parks Canada staff and Mi’kmaw partners¹ talked about how important it is to have relationships established from the onset. Representatives from both Kwilmu’kw Maw-klusuaqn (KMK) and Parks Canada mentioned how communications would have been more effective if a more collaborative approach had been established from the beginning (rather than in year three of five).

Once regular meetings were established with KMK and Unama’ki Institute of Natural Resources (UINR), it was determined that the Bring Back the Boreal project needed to be reframed from a “moose population reduction exercise” (as Parks Canada had worded it) to a harvest that would improve the ecological health of the boreal forest as well as Indigenous food sovereignty.

This form of positive messaging is also an approach widely agreed upon in the literature as key to an effective communications strategy ([Bowie et al., 2020](#); [De Vries, 2019](#); [Wright et al., 2015](#)), and meaningful engagement can be a first step in developing positive messaging.

In partnership with KMK and UINR, messaging was revised to emphasize Mi’kmaq moose harvesting practices and their benefits. Harvesting fosters cultural, traditional, and intergenerational teachings, youth engagement, food systems (e.g., how important it was to distribute moose meat to the Mi’kmaq, supporting food security), cultural products (e.g., drums), and a sense of community pride.

¹ Mi’kmaq partners for the Bring Back the Boreal Project included [Kwilmu’kw Maw-klusuaqn \(KMK\)](#) and [Unama’ki Institute of Natural Resources \(UINR\)](#).

As messaging shifted to emphasize the project's positive aspects, there was a positive shift in relations with settler communities and media coverage. Through a consistent and collaborative approach to communications, partner voices were more involved in defining the work, mutual understanding was established, and trusting relationships were maintained. Indigenous partners can help ensure that meaningful, lasting relationships are able to address issues from a variety of perspectives ([Dutta, 2015](#); [Ferdinand et al., 2017](#)).

Thus, effective marketing/communication interventions must incorporate the time and space needed for this level of engagement, reflection, and examination. This offers opportunities for questioning biases and long-held assumptions as well as exchanging ideas and developing shared understandings.

This approach, however, requires prioritizing funding and research systems that support long-term partnerships (including funding for Indigenous partners' time, travel, participation in conferences, etc.). Listening to and documenting stories and lessons must involve deep and continuous engagement with Indigenous Peoples ([Fernández-Llamazares and Cabeza, 2018](#)).

Relationship Building Between Indigenous and Settler Communities

As highlighted in the literature (e.g., [Holmes, 2020](#)), building trusting relationships is imperative to how messages are received. A point not addressed in the literature, but identified by Parks Canada staff and Indigenous partners, is the important role conservation agencies can play in facilitating cross-cultural relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, given their reach with the public and interest groups.

For example, insights from the Bring Back the Boreal project illustrated how most of the communities (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) function distinctly from one another. Cape Breton Highlands National Park staff had a well-established relationship with the [Nova Scotia Federation of Anglers & Hunters \(NSFAH\)](#).

This relationship allowed staff to introduce Mi'kmaw Chief Rod Googoo to the NSFAH President, allowing for these leaders to have more in-depth, direct conversations with each other. Eventually, this relationship grew to one where if any issues came up, they would pick up the phone and talk to each other.

Park staff also organized for the two partners to do a series of aerial surveys, so they could observe the number of moose in the area and how studies were being carried out. Through the President's relationship with Chief Googoo, they were eventually able to educate the broader membership (an important vocal subset) about Mi'kmaq stewardship practices. This resulted in less hostility and fewer participants in the protests.

As this example shows, early engagement and cross-cultural relationship-building between settler and Indigenous communities can contribute to more positive processes and outcomes for communications strategies.

Such an approach allows for a better understanding of target audiences, strengthening not only an organization's capacity to co-develop communications with communities but also its ability to harness community knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. In addition, this approach allows for a focus on designing and innovating solutions that resonate with audiences.

Relationship Building with Indigenous Partners

The above section outlined the importance of building trust and relationships for effective and respectful conservation communications. This section discusses the importance of in-depth, long-term relationships that go beyond one Parks Canada staff member with one Indigenous partner.

Erich Muntz, Resource Conservation Manager for Parks Canada's Cape Breton Highlands National Park, discussed, for example, the importance of in-depth, long-term relationships. While his team had been working to incorporate Indigenous knowledge in their moose studies, he suggested that, if Cape Breton Highlands National Park had developed a more meaningful relationship with Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources early on, they would have known about issues relating to moose that were initially missed.

It was said that UINR Moose Manager, Clifford Paul and Elder Danny Paul highlighted the possibility that the current moose population on Cape Breton Island are part of the original moose herd found on the island. It was thought these original moose have a distinctive physical trait called 'curly coat'. Then, during the Bring Back the Boreal moose harvest, moose with this trait were spotted.

Opportunities for better understanding this concept could have been explored through relationship-building. Indeed, long-term partner communications and weaving Indigenous knowledge with Western knowledge advances a richer project that has the potential to protect and conserve more species.

Weaving knowledge systems, or Two-Eyed Seeing/Etuaptmumk, is an approach advanced by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall. In Marshall's words, "Two-Eyed Seeing...refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to using both of these eyes together for the benefit of all" ([Bartlett, Marshall, and Marshall, 2012](#), p. 335).²

² For more on Two-Eyed Seeing, see [Bartlett, C.M., Marshall, A., and Marshall, M. \(2007\)](#) and [Marshall, A. \(2019\)](#).



A bull moose stands in the forest in Cape Breton Highlands National Park.
Credit: Alais Nevert, ©Parks Canada.

Through bridging knowledge systems, listening to UINR, Cape Breton Highlands National Park's Resource Conservation team gained a better understanding of not only the ecology of moose and moose habitat but also the Mi'kmaq relationship with moose and the importance of moose to community. These conversations helped to strengthen communications, which in turn contributed to positive shifts in public perceptions of the project.

In addition, it is important for long-term relationships to go beyond one person. While relationships stem from a very personal place, most people will change jobs at some point, and so it is imperative that strong relationships are fostered among teams.

This will require not only training staff in Two-Eyed Seeing and cross-cultural relationship-building but also requires that managers and leaders model good relationship building and cross-cultural literacy work with their teams. Doing so encourages trusting relationships at all staff levels. If one person leaves a role, the work can carry on in a good way, which is critical to developing timely and effective communications.

Relationship Building with Local (Settler) Communities

Evidence from the literature shows that sharing information alone is not enough to shift behaviours ([Abrahamse, 2020](#); [De Vries, 2019](#); [Farrow et al., 2017](#); [Hornsey & Fielding, 2020](#)). It is important to understand an audiences' social norms in order to harness biases, social influence, and to strategically design messaging to shape, reinforce, or change audience behaviour ([Holmes, 2020](#); [Kidd et al., 2019](#); [Kusmanoff et al. 2020](#); [Ryan et al., 2019](#)).

For example, a significant challenge in the Bring Back the Boreal project was getting support from the settler communities surrounding Cape Breton Highlands National Park. Maria O'Hearn, External Relations Manager for Parks Canada's Cape Breton Field Unit, shared how Parks Canada staff may have underestimated the negative reaction they would receive from community members.

Parks Canada held workshops, but they were more about informing the public of their options to address the moose situation and confirm their already decided upon approach. This left community members with little opportunity to contribute to planning, articulate their fears and concerns, and for Parks Canada staff to determine biases.

Aggrieved community members then took to the media and streets to vocalize their concerns, resulting in protests that escalated to threats of violence to Indigenous hunters. These incidents eventually shut down the work that first year.

If Parks Canada had provided more opportunity for community members to raise their concerns and contribute to the plan's development, staff may have been able to address issues in the moment and gain a better understanding of their target audiences' biases. Hence, if communications involve so-called 'controversial issues', such as harvesting wildlife, it is not sufficient to simply hold information sessions. Instead, discussions or focus groups, where there are opportunities for two-way dialogue, are necessary to get a better grasp on where various community members stand.

Even if concerns cannot be addressed, communications can be targeted to each audience, addressing issues before they come to light. Indeed, it is critical that a target audience's social norms are unearthed through two-way dialogue, thoroughly assessed and responded to, as failing to do so can impact not only Indigenous Peoples' safety but also sovereignty, self-determination, and rights to harvest.

Bring in Experts

Echoing findings from the literature, Parks Canada field units highlighted that bringing in external experts (e.g., scientists, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, professional facilitators with conflict resolution training) to assist with messaging development and/or delivery may prove helpful ([Green et al., 2019](#); [Kidd et al., 2019](#); [Ryan et al., 2019](#)). Experts can help to ensure appropriate messaging and framing ([Ferdinand et al., 2017](#); [Holmes, 2020](#)).

Experts may also be considered independent or neutral, allowing partners and stakeholders to potentially feel the conversation is not one-sided. This is especially true for potentially controversial topics such as wildlife harvesting. Representatives from Cape Breton Highlands National Park shared how inviting a scientist to reinforce the project's approach was helpful to build trust and mitigate discontent among audiences.

Experts can also build credibility. Individuals or groups with status or standing in communities can reinforce the 'expert choice' ([Chamberlin and Boks, 2019](#)). The literature discussed how trusted groups (e.g., firefighters and healthcare workers) acting as messengers for identified audience segments were most effective in influencing behavioural change ([Holmes, 2020](#)).

For the Bring Back the Boreal project, a senior Mi'kmaw RCMP officer who was specially trained in conflict resolution was brought in as a response to the protests and as a negotiator. The officer was said to be seen by many in the settler community as a friendly presence, but also as a voice of authority.

Furthermore, engaging with Indigenous experts, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers will be critical as Parks Canada moves towards more fully weaving Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into their communications work.

Doing this is important for three reasons. First, to honour the [First Nations' principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession \(OCAP®\)](#). Second, it helps address any doubts or disregard the public may have regarding IKS. Thirdly, it helps create protocols for when IKS does not complement or conflicts with Parks Canada's approaches.

This shift in operations also highlights the importance of being trained in and operating from ethical space or other ['linking frameworks'](#) that engage with and respect the integrity of multiple knowledge systems.

In 2007, Cree legal scholar, Willie Ermine, [elaborated on this concept](#), identifying ethical space as a framework for promoting not only more equitable relations between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems but also between Indigenous law and Canadian legal structures.

As Willie Ermine [wrote](#), ethical space is “formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other”. Blackfoot Elder and scholar Dr. Reg Crowshoe has further developed ethical space as a framework for reconciliation, where reciprocity and equity of engagement and knowledge sharing is practiced ([Alberta Energy Regulator, 2017](#)). Operating from ethical space or other similar frameworks is key to nation-to-nation relations and reducing the predominance of Western science and settler land use approaches in the conservation sector.



A person lays out various colours of beads for beadwork at Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site
Credit: Scott Munn, ©Parks Canada.

Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration

The importance of evaluating communications plans and processes is also addressed in the literature ([Ferdinand et al., 2017](#); [Holmes, 2020](#)). While it was articulated that Parks Canada is conducting evaluations, sharing learning between field units was mentioned as an approach that could potentially strengthen communication practices.

Interviews revealed that field units can be siloed. Insights and lessons learned are often only shared with other Parks Canada field units on a case-by-case basis or when other field units ask for support. However, sharing lessons and supporting field units across the country can help enhance project planning and communications.

This way, all field units can learn from successes and challenges and improve their performance. National conferences were also raised as an effective way to share knowledge at a larger scale. Conferences also allow for increased relationship-building among Parks Canada staff at a national level.

Transform Hiring Practices

The literature says that recruiting more under-represented groups, particularly into leadership roles, is key to mitigating the effects of stereotyping and bias ([Chang et al., 2019](#)). This can also strengthen communications practices.

Eliminating employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is not only necessary to meeting Canada's commitment to the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action \(2015\)](#) but also has the potential to significantly strengthen Indigenous-led conservation ([United Nations, 2007](#)) and transform Parks Canada's communications practices.

"Having Indigenous employees has changed how we do business."

– Shannon Ward, Indigenous Relations Advisor, New Brunswick South Field Unit, Fundy National Park

Simply hiring more Indigenous Peoples, however, is not enough. Hiring practices would need to be overhauled, for example, requiring Two-Eyed Seeing competencies in job descriptions, and eliminating barriers that prevent Indigenous Peoples from occupying positions of power. This would allow Indigenous staff to steer decisions around policies, programming, and communications. Such a shift in hiring practices has the potential to significantly strengthen operations.

Indeed, hiring more Indigenous Relations Advisors has been a huge success for Parks Canada's communications work. Now, people like Shannon Ward (Indigenous Relations Advisor, Fundy National Park) have a team of people, from Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, Quebec, and New Brunswick, that meet regularly to share ideas with one another, discuss issues as they arise, brainstorm solutions, and thus do better work. To truly promote reconciliation, however, Shannon emphasized how this role needs to be implemented nationally.

Parks Canada's field unit staff also rely heavily on their Indigenous Relations Advisors. Shannon mentioned, for instance, how he receives daily requests from staff to support the weaving of Indigenous ways of knowing into projects and to brainstorm ways the general public can better learn about Indigenous rights, cultures, and ways of life. He also reviews communications materials to ensure Mi'kmaq translation and protocols are followed and he connects with Indigenous community members on all of the above. Thus, the Indigenous Relations Advisor is key to strengthening communications around Indigenous stewardship practices.



A man cooks over a campfire in Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site.
Credit: Ryan Bray, ©Parks Canada.

Meanwhile, places like Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site have been focusing on employing more Indigenous staff and currently, Indigenous Peoples make up close to 50 percent of staff. In addition, they bring in Elders and Knowledge Holders from community to conduct staff training.

However, more could be done. For instance, Greg Joyce, Site and Visitor Experience Manager of Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site, mentioned that securing funding for hiring Indigenous staff for summer programs in their unit is challenging due to competing financial priorities. Therefore, their Métis partners may need to find and apply for separate or additional funding so they can bring on the number of people they feel are necessary to do the work in a good way (e.g., cultural programming, teachings, etc.).

While programming may not seem directly connected to communications, this on-the-land learning is critical to elevating Indigenous voices and knowledge, which ultimately reflects on Parks Canada's messaging. Thus, additional funding must be allocated towards adequately paying and hiring Indigenous staff.

"If you're asking for people to come in and provide teachings, they should get paid for that."

- Crystal Dorey, Communications Manager, Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn (KMK)

Another consideration is to facilitate sufficient funding for Indigenous advisory committee members. For example, Indigenous committee members have been critical to improving Parks Canada's field unit communications messaging, project design, and implementation. They have significantly strengthened relationships between Indigenous organizations, Indigenous communities, and Parks Canada staff.

In fact, Indigenous Peoples are continually being asked for their insights, knowledge, and support for educational work. A number of Elders and Knowledge Keepers are asked to be a voice for their people and rights, and they should be more appropriately compensated. Not only are they experts (and should be paid as such) but their teachings are helping to ensure Parks Canada is able to do its work in a good way.

Another example of how Indigenous-led and staffed programs elevate communication practices is the [Haida Gwaii Watchmen Program](#). Watchmen are guardians, filling an eco-cultural conservation role. They also connect with visitors as the first point of contact when they arrive at Haida village sites, sharing their culture, language, ways of knowing, and more.

According to Darlene Small, External Relations Manager of Gwaii Haanas, connections with Watchmen typically rank as the top experience in terms of visitor satisfaction. Additionally, visitors are asked to sign a [pledge](#) before visiting Haida Gwaii. This is an initiative of the Council of the Haida Nation that requires outsiders to confirm their commitment to honour and respect Haida land, way of life, heritage, laws, and culture.

Again, however, compensation is an issue. The Watchmen Program, for instance, has retention problems, with wages and isolation from communities being contributing factors. One way to address these concerns is to ensure Indigenous staff are better compensated for the cross-cultural, place-based literacy work they are doing.

Build Youth Capacity Through Learning and Employment Opportunities

As demonstrated, transforming public perceptions of Indigenous-led conservation requires going beyond mainstream, Westernized communication strategies. For example, building youth capacity through learning and employment opportunities may seem separate from efforts to shift public understanding of protected areas.

However, youth are the next generation of leaders, educators, decision makers and land stewards, so it is imperative that communications work also focuses on them. Furthermore, capacity development through employment and learning has the potential to strategically improve Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations around conservation issues and strengthen overall communications work.

For example, the Indigenous Relations Officer for Fundy National Park has been assisting the communications team with conservation projects focused on youth outreach, education, and relationship-building, working to elevate Indigenous ways of knowing in programming. This programming provides on-the-land teachings and language lessons.

According to Shannon Ward, Indigenous Relations Advisor with the New Brunswick South Field Unit, Indigenous officers working directly with students on the land through cross-cultural exchanges can have a profound impact on Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth.

Such 'communications' work teaches non-Indigenous youth that Indigenous Peoples, and in this case, the Mi'kmaq, are here and thriving. Their cultures, laws, languages, and livelihoods are not things of the past. This is key, ultimately, to understanding and respecting Indigenous rights, relationships, and responsibilities within their traditional territories.

At the same time, this is cultural revitalization work for Indigenous youth, centres their ways of knowing and allows for an opportunity to see themselves in a leadership role, which can strengthen their confidence and deepen their connection to language and culture.

Shannon also utilized the federal government's [Youth Employment Skills Strategy \(YESS\)](#) program to help employ Indigenous youth, especially those facing barriers and who may not have the skillset required for a Parks Canada position (as they stand today). He discussed how critical these opportunities are, particularly with so many Indigenous youth at risk. These types of programs not only help build skills but also trusting relationships. This, in turn, can contribute to effective communications work.

Limit the Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy can be a barrier to good communications work. For example, representatives from Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn (KMK) discussed how challenging it can be to address and manage crisis communications or 'hot topics' in a timely manner when working with governmental institutions.

Indigenous organizations and Parks Canada both require high-level sign-off on crisis issues. For example, KMK must get approval from the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw Chiefs and Parks Canada field units must get approval from the national office. However, KMK can obtain approval in one hour, while Parks Canada's timing is less certain.

As a result, if there is a crisis communications situation, KMK often formulates a response on their own and sends a release, sharing information with Parks Canada before they publish.

The problem is that the general Canadian public does not receive this crucial messaging. This happens because Parks Canada's national office can be slow to respond, and the public often does not follow communications from Indigenous organizations.

Due to pervasive racism, along with unbalanced and harmful media coverage of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, it can be assumed that the general public may not understand or support Indigenous perspectives during a crisis situation. And if the federal message is coming out significantly later than the Indigenous community's communications, it also has the appearance of Canada simply putting something out there for appearances sake, rather than in solidarity with Indigenous partners.

Moreover, bureaucracy has the potential to negatively impact Indigenous Peoples' lives. For instance, during the Bring Back the Boreal campaign, Mi'kmaw hunters said they experienced racist, colonial violence as settlers confronted them at the staging area, showing up to the park, yelling at them, and putting them at risk. If Parks Canada staff better assessed the inherent biases of their settler audiences and stakeholders, and the national office could streamline communications, it would lead to stronger support and responsibility in protecting Indigenous partners.

Additionally, it was noted that having to meet with every communication staff member at all levels of government could be viewed as disrespectful and wasteful of Indigenous partners' energy and time. This process creates an unproductive loop that fails to support the end process and goals. Thus, Parks Canada might consider finding ways to make sure the individuals who can provide sign-off are at the decision-making table, not ten people removed and days later.

Perhaps the co-governance structure of Gwaii Haanas' [Archipelago Management Board](#) (consisting of an equal number of representatives from the Haida Nation and Canada), which meets regularly and can decide on communications more quickly, could be implemented broadly; thus, strengthening communications, relations, and limiting bureaucratic barriers.

A Two-Eyed Seeing Approach to Staff Training

To elevate Indigenous rights, relationships, and responsibilities in and around state protected areas, Parks Canada recognizes the need for intentional relationship-building. This requires not only equity, diversity, and inclusion training but also training in Two-Eyed Seeing and operating from ethical space for cross-cultural engagement ([Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018](#)).



Two people stand in and near a river, collecting water samples and recording information in Kouchibouguac National Park. Credit: Nigel Fearon, ©Parks Canada.

Effective cross-cultural training includes Two-Eyed Seeing approaches and weaves Indigenous laws, customs, and practices with resource management work. This recentres 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. Cape Breton Highlands National Park, for instance, offered training with an Indigenous Relations Advisor, who met with staff in the field to share knowledge about 'place' from an Indigenous perspective.

Erich Muntz, Resource Conservation Manager for Parks Canada's Cape Breton Highlands National Park, also highlighted an example of conducting water quality monitoring. In this case, they invited an Elder to teach staff about the sacredness and value of water, beyond pH levels, salinity, and other measures. As a result, staff developed a new appreciation and understanding for their work to protect water. However, these types of field trips are limited and often occur only annually.

Thus, ongoing equity, diversity, and inclusion training as well as ethical space and Two-Eyed Seeing training for staff is an important step to influence employee behaviour change). The literature also suggests that training should be evaluated and reported on over time to improve effectiveness ([Chang et al., 2019](#)).

Cross-cultural competency training for staff can also address Parks Canada's internal communications process (e.g., info bulletins to staff, community leads talking to staff, etc.). In reflecting on their internal communications for the Bring Back the Boreal project, for instance, Representatives of Cape Breton Highlands National Park expressed how preliminary (and ongoing) anti-racism training would have improved the Bring Back the Boreal campaign messaging and implementation.

For example, Maria O'Hearn, External Relations Manager for Parks Canada's Cape Breton Field Unit, shared how some staff did not understand the reasoning behind a Mi'kmaq-led harvest.

According to Maria, this may have been because some staff were unfamiliar with treaty rights, leading to confusion about Parks Canada's approach to the harvest. The key lesson here was that training on treaty rights, cultural awareness, cross-cultural literacy, anti-oppression, and racism should happen well before starting any project.

This training should also be proactive and ongoing, and not just when a potentially controversial project is hitting the ground. Taking this approach will improve relationships with Indigenous partners.

Additionally, since staff often come from local communities and may have personal connections with individuals who oppose the work, they can contribute to on-the-ground communications and address any concerns.

Indeed, Parks Canada staff may run into those who oppose projects while out in the grocery store, or taking kids to school, and so on. As such, staff are met with resistance in their everyday lives, and if they are not equipped with the right information, it can create more disagreement and conflict. It is, therefore, critical to ensure all staff understand why elevating Indigenous-led conservation is important not only to the success of projects but also to communications.

Because everyone is at different levels of knowing, investment in training needs to be a priority. This also includes a commitment to being present at project meetings, actively participating in events, and travelling to Indigenous communities to listen and learn from Indigenous partners.



A person smiles at the camera sitting on rocks while another person snorkels in the water to look at salmon in Fundy National Park.
Credit: Nigel Fearon, ©Parks Canada.

Conclusion

This report highlights communications tools that can support building public understanding of Indigenous rights, relationships, and responsibilities within their traditional territories in and around state-led protected areas. It outlines findings from interviews with Indigenous organizations and Parks Canada staff. These interviews expand on and provide insights specific to conservation communications not offered by [the literature](#).

Generally, Parks Canada and Indigenous partners share similar perspectives on the stewardship of nature. This was articulated as an important foundation from which to (re)build relationships.

Building relationships was identified as a crucial element for effective communications work. Lessons learned emphasize the importance of mutual responsibility and cross-cultural collaboration. This requires the prioritization of ethical space or similar frameworks of respectful engagement, encouraging cross-cultural knowledge sharing, and the fostering of trusting, long-term nation-to-nation relationships.

Operating from ethical space or similar frameworks requires recognizing Indigenous Peoples as partners and rights holders, not stakeholders. Respectful communications work includes understanding, uplifting, and centring Indigenous systems of knowledge, language, laws, customs, protocols, and practices. Furthermore, it requires in-depth and ongoing Indigenous rights and anti-racism training to ensure all staff are engaged in cross-cultural work in a good way.

Additionally, continuous investments in relationship building are essential to ensure equitable collaborations. This includes supporting Indigenous youth to revitalize connections to their cultures and enhancing relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities concerning conservation matters.

At the operations level, hiring practices must be transformed, removing barriers that prevent Indigenous Peoples from occupying positions of authority or leadership. Also necessary is a more efficient sign-off process for communications. This will not only allow timely crisis communications management but also strengthen relationships and show solidarity with Indigenous partners.

Key lessons from Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn and Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources, combined with insights from five National Parks and findings in the literature review, support efforts to transform conservation communications approaches and practices. The above recommendations can help build public understanding of Indigenous knowledge and governance of their homelands, contributing to conservation through reconciliation and more equitable stewardship relations.

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Appendix: Literature Review

The first phase of the research for this report involved a comprehensive academic literature review on behaviour change interventions related to conservation. This involved exploring the following domains: 'Conservation Biodiversity', 'Social Change', 'Anti-Racism' and 'Indigenous-led Conservation'.

Searching through the '[Web of Science](#)' and '[JSTOR](#)' databases, key words included: biodiversity conservation and/or Indigenous stewardship/agency/rights/harvest* or anti-racism AND behaviour or social change AND communicat*, or market*, or message fram*. From hundreds of results generated, 17 Conservation Biodiversity articles, 21 (combined) Social Change and Anti-Racism, and 12 Indigenous-led Conservation articles were identified as relevant to this research.

The literature states that behaviour change interventions are marketing tools that can help convince people to think or act in a certain way. These strategies, which have been developed in the fields of marketing, social marketing, and psychology, include techniques like persuasion, nudging, education, and community-based campaigns. They have been used and studied extensively in projects that promote public health advocacy projects (e.g., the impacts of smoking) as well as some environmental campaigns (e.g., communicating the science of climate change, reducing meat consumption, etc.).

While the field of conservation marketing is rapidly growing, research has not, however, focused much on the topic of Indigenous-led conservation, as indicated by studies conducted by [Dutta, 2015](#); [Kidd et al., 2019](#); [Ryan et al., 2019](#); and [Thomas et al., 2019](#). In addition, standard approaches to evaluate the success of campaigns in terms of behaviour change have not been well established (see, for example, [Bowie et al., 2020](#); [Bennett et al., 2017](#); and [Thomas et al., 2019](#)).

A Summary of Conservation Communications Best Practices

The following nine best practices are summarized from the literature and can help build public understanding around conservation issues. These insights are gathered from behaviour change interventions in the research areas of conservation biodiversity, anti-racism, social change, and Indigenous-led conservation.

While these best practices have been thoroughly tested in public health and have shown promise in social marketing, they require further testing in the field of conservation marketing.

Go Beyond Information Provision

Communications strategies need to go beyond simply providing information. Conservation practitioners have traditionally relied on the 'knowledge-deficit' model to change behaviour ([Kusmanoff et al., 2020](#)). This model assumes that audiences have an information gap that needs to be filled. However, evidence shows that this approach alone is not effective (see the following studies by [Abrahamse, 2020](#); [De Vries, 2019](#); [Farrow et al., 2017](#); [Hornsey and Fielding, 2020](#)).

Human behaviour is determined by many factors including a person's values, attitudes, social and personal norms, and identity ([Kidd et al., 2019](#); [Kusmanoff et al., 2020](#)). For instance, people want to be seen behaving in a manner consistent with their beliefs and self-ascribed traits ([Holmes, 2020](#)). It is important to understand the social norms (e.g., biases, social influence, habits, etc.) of each target audience when crafting messaging. This information can be gathered through focus groups, for example, and can help shape, strengthen, or change how audiences respond (for example, see [Ryan et al., 2019](#)).

Take a Multipronged Approach

To effectively move individuals to a desired behaviour or attitude, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. A combination of nudging (such as labels and visual prompts), targeting social norms, and informational campaigns were identified as key tactics within the literature (see [Bowie et al., 2020](#); [De Vries, 2019](#); [Ferdinand et al., 2017](#); [Kusmanoff et al., 2020](#); [Selinske et al., 2020](#)).

In addition, different communications campaigns or initiatives will require techniques to shift audience behaviour ([Selinske et al., 2020](#)). A review of the literature reveals that there is no single theory or framework that is most effective for conservation marketing. Rather, different communications initiatives draw on different behaviour change techniques ([Ryan et al., 2019](#)). Messaging testing is encouraged to understand what techniques work best for each campaign or initiative.

Integrate Interdisciplinary Design, Implementation, and Evaluation

Many studies in the conservation biodiversity literature argue that changes at the policy level are required for effective human behaviour change. The literature also suggests that conservation agencies and organizations need to do more than change policy to decolonize protected areas or reduce racism.

Communications initiatives need to be action-oriented, interdisciplinary and include researchers, partners, practitioners, and others to ensure that reconciliation and anti-racism programs are being conducted appropriately. These experts can also ensure that the communications process is guided by the best available information ([Ferdinand et al., 2017](#); [Green et al., 2019](#); [Holmes, 2020](#); [Kidd et al., 2019](#); [Ryan et al., 2019](#)).

Communications strategies need to be informed by research, apply theory and practice, evaluated by a researcher, and tested to ensure they are being conducted appropriately ([Ferdinand et al., 2017](#); [Holmes, 2020](#)). Evaluation is particularly important to ensure the effectiveness of messaging with each target audience and can be used to inform future campaigns ([Holmes, 2020](#)).

Avoid Negative Messaging

There is widespread agreement in the literature that avoiding negative messaging (e.g., that a targeted activity is socially disapproved but widespread) is key to an effective communications strategy. Instead, providing 'good news stories', incentives, and choices, is often more positively received by target audiences (for example, see [Bowie et al., 2020](#) and [Wright et al., 2015](#)).

[De Vries \(2019\)](#) expands on this strategy, suggesting additional design approaches to further improve 'positive' messaging effectiveness: keep the message simple, ensure the details are balanced (e.g., advantages and disadvantages), and provide a call to action.

Co-Develop Community-Based Social Marketing

For effective communications campaigns, the literature encourages community-based social marketing, or co-developing communications initiatives with communities and target audiences. (For example, see [Bowie et al., 2020](#); [Fries et al., 2020](#); [McKenzie-Mohr et al., 2014](#); [Ryan et al., 2019](#); and [Thomas et al., 2019](#).)

Public health marketing research finds that co-designed communications initiatives can harness community knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour, and can help design and innovate marketing solutions that resonate with target audiences. This approach empowers target audiences by involving them as active contributors, rather than passive recipients of behaviour change interventions. It helps to ensure a successful intervention or campaign.

Co-developed communications strategies also offer more opportunities for interpersonal communication (e.g., through public events and community engagement) and reduce psychological distance (which can undermine the agency of audiences) by empowering participants to contribute. This results in audiences feeling that their experiences and expertise are valued ([Dutta, 2015](#); [Kusmanoff et al. 2020](#); [Wright et al., 2015](#)).

Build Trust

Building trust is crucial for behaviour change interventions. Trust is a big part of how audiences are created ([Holmes, 2020](#)). Audiences are not ready-formed containers waiting to be filled with information.

Instead, they are influenced by their strong loyalty to certain media ([Holmes, 2020](#)). Peer testimonials or reviews and media appearances can help build credibility.

In addition, endorsements are particularly helpful to reinforce the 'expert choice' ([Chamberlin and Boks, 2019](#)). According to the literature, finding trusted groups to act as messengers (e.g., firefighters, healthcare workers, etc.) for identified audience segments are especially effective in achieving behavioural change ([Holmes, 2020](#)).

Invest in Ongoing Training

The literature on behaviour change interventions recommends providing ongoing, and intensive equity, diversity, and inclusion training for all staff ([Chang et al., 2019](#)). The training can dismantle prejudice in the workplace and avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes in communication initiatives and messaging. Training evaluations should also be long-term and documented.

Additionally, the literature suggests devoting resources to recruit more under-represented groups, particularly into leadership roles, and changing processes and structures to reduce stereotyping and bias ([Chang et al., 2019](#)).

Monitor Social Media

Before, during, and after a campaign, social media activity should be monitored and moderated for hate speech. In research conducted by [Alvarez-Benjumea and Winter \(2018\)](#), they found that moderately censoring hate content reduced the occurrence of further hate comments.

In this environment, people seemed to be influenced to behave in more socially acceptable ways, even when they remained anonymous and other participants were unknown ([Alvarez-Benjumea and Winter, 2018](#)). However, excessive censorship had the opposite effect and instead resulted in significantly more hostile comments.