



NATIVE WOMEN'S  
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES  
AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA

## **Indigenous Women and Girls, Traditional Knowledge, and Environmental Biodiversity Protection**

**The Native Women's Association of Canada's (NWAC) contribution to  
Canada's 6<sup>th</sup> National Report to the Convention on Biodiversity**

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## **ABOUT NWAC**

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is a national non-profit Indigenous organization representing the political voice of Indigenous women throughout Canada. It was incorporated in 1974 as a result of local and regional grassroots native women's associations over many years. NWAC was formed to promote the wellbeing of Indigenous women within Indigenous and Canadian societies, and we focus our efforts on helping women overcome sex-based discrimination.

Today, NWAC engages in national advocacy measures aimed at legislative and policy reforms that promote equality for Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse individuals. Through advocacy, policy, programs, and legislative analysis, we work to preserve Indigenous cultures, advance the wellbeing of Indigenous women and girls, as well as their families and communities.

NWAC is actively committed to raising the national and international profile on many issues specific to Indigenous women, including violence against women, the overrepresentation of women in prison, poverty, violence against the land and water, and ongoing sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and girls, along with the many other violations to Indigenous women's basic human rights. As a leader both domestically and on the international stage, NWAC works to improve the human rights of Indigenous women and remains dedicated to promoting gender equality through research, policy, programs, and practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Land lies at the heart of social, cultural, spiritual, political, and economic life for Indigenous women. Land, water, and natural resources are key assets for economic growth and development. In fact, most Indigenous economies continue to rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources or resource extraction for a significant share of income, food needs, and employment. Land claims and land rights allocated by governments often conflict with traditional land possession practices of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Settlers utilized deliberate and systemic means against Indigenous communities in attempts to quell traditional practices and beliefs. As a result, community norms have been disrupted, including the intentional breakup of families, communities and nations, by imposed borders and the accommodation of new settler populations who now have third, fourth and fifth generations. Colonization is greatly responsible for the overthrowing of Indigenous forms of governance and self-determination such as the termination of matriarchies.

Indigenous women were introduced to new ways of living, whether by choice or force, limiting their capacity to care for the land. Current governing structures within Indigenous communities no longer recognize women's participation and contributions to the same extent as that of traditional Indigenous societies. Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse individuals continue to face under representation and a lack of political voice in local, regional and national governments. The advancement of reconciliation and decolonization will empower Indigenous women by returning their voices and knowledge to their rightful place as decision-makers.

Indigenous women cover every geographical region in Canada representing cultures rich in knowledge, history, skills, and environmental stewardship. Historically, Indigenous women were sustaining societies, totally reliant on the bounty of the lands. Indigenous women's close relationship and dependence on the land is based on their understanding that life and livelihood is dependent upon the nurturing and caring of the land. Despite colonial impositions, Indigenous women have retained their roles as stewards of the land and are calling attention to the potential impacts of climate change and environmental violence on a population that is already vulnerable. Indigenous women are observing and experiencing the impacts of environmental change and are calling attention to the imperative need for Indigenous women and girls to have their voices heard at decision-making tables.

For Indigenous women, biodiversity is vital for their survival and the survival of their families and cultures. The survival of Indigenous communities, their well-being and empowerment depend on biodiversity and the environmental abilities of Indigenous women to transmit their knowledge. Any changes to biodiversity will directly affect Indigenous women's and girls' health, wellbeing, and identity, including national and international policies on biodiversity.

While Canada may be in a strong economic position to react or respond effectively to ecological, social or economic changes, for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities it is proven to be expensive, not always possible or successful, and typically it is the ecosystems, communities, and individuals who must bear the repercussions of unforeseen hardships. Many social and

economic systems—including agriculture, forestry, settlements, industry, and transportation—have evolved to accommodate some deviations from traditional Indigenous systems.

Most of the responses to rapid environmental change, such as climate change, among Indigenous communities are unplanned and often occur as a natural response to loss of control of their lands, cultures and natural resources. Rapid change often means Indigenous people must quickly adjust to ecological, social, political, or economic systems as well as imposed values and resource use. However, change is crucial if a traditional way of living is to be sustained for future generations. This will require the full acknowledgement that Indigenous women and girls need to regain their traditional roles as leaders and teachers within their communities. This is especially true with respect to traditional medicines as women are often the holders of this knowledge.

## **LAND, BODY, AND CULTURE**

Historically, Indigenous women have had a role as stewards of the land and have contributed to the development and achievement of sustainable environments in communities where our children grow up with a strong identification of and pride in who they are and constantly seek to broaden their knowledge of the things that affect them and their relationship with the environment and the land.

The connection between land, body, and culture is one of utmost importance to Indigenous women. Our relationship to the land is one that connects us to our ancestors who have come before us, and the generations to come. The relationship between Indigenous women and the land is often one of responsibility. Responsibility to the land and non-human entities means ensuring they are healthy and viable for future generations. Such responsibilities can range from acting as keepers and teachers of community-based ecological knowledge, to initiating action to protect the land and environment when it is threatened. What these specific responsibilities look like differ across communities. For example, an Anishinaabe woman has a responsibility to water. Anishinaabe concepts of relatives and beings in Creation that they have relationships with, and responsibilities to, go far beyond what dominant Western society views as the environment. Anishinaabe people have responsibilities to maintain certain types of relationships based on respect, consent, and reciprocity with all beings in creation. This is of course not necessarily the case for all Indigenous women, but stories and teaching around relationship to the land exist in almost all nations.

As Indigenous women, such relationships are inseparable from our cultural knowledge, teachings, and identity. Our identities are often shaped by time spent, knowledge learned, and gifts given from the land. Environmental degradation and extractive industries influence our ability to be able to carry out our responsibilities to the land, or engage in land-based activities integral to our cultural identities. Violence on the land translates directly into violence against our bodies and our ability to carry out and transmit our culture.

Many scholars have examined how environmental degradation has influenced the ability of Indigenous people to pass down traditional ecological knowledge from generation to generation.

## **INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS, THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT, AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Indigenous women are regaining recognition as leaders and positive role models to communities who build social support networks, keep culture intact and keep traditional languages alive. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women continue to preserve the social, cultural and natural foundations of their communities and established norms that retain traditions and challenge undemocratic practices. Despite being revered in communities, Indigenous women's contributions are seldom considered, especially when discussing environmental rights on both a national and international scale.

Indigenous women continue to live under a paternalistic, colonial system which continues to deny their right to self-determination. The Indian Act, which is designed to dictate every aspect of Indigenous people lives, is still enforced and directly affects the abilities of Indigenous women to access their culture. Many women continue to reside on-reserve, and many others have relocated to urban and rural areas. As vast sections of the country are still not covered by Treaties or land claims agreements and remain in dispute, Indigenous people, and more specifically Indigenous women, continue to be excluded from benefiting from the genetic and natural resources of this land.

### ***Social and Economic Impacts***

Economic development and fiscal capacity issues remain areas of concern and have built an environment where Indigenous women and girls are vulnerable because of their dependence on various government funding agencies. Current economic and employment systems for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities can force community members to seek outside employment and partnerships which affects traditional practices, the transmission of culture, and further undermines the role of Indigenous women, as leaders and teachers within their communities.

Migration of Indigenous people away from their communities not only impacts economic development in their communities but alters their fundamental world views which include Indigenous women, as knowledge holders and protectors of their cultural values and natural resources. Other opportunities for economic development are also impacted by the lack of protection of traditional medicines and natural resources provided by women and girls as outside sources seek to reap the benefits of accessing and utilizing (sometimes exploiting) these medicines and natural resources.

Aboriginal and Treaty rights are of particular importance for Indigenous people, as it is only through the vigorous protection of these rights that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people might survive as distinct cultures. The inability to access and benefit from the natural resources and traditional knowledge associated with these resources will impact Indigenous peoples' capacity to practice their traditions including Aboriginal and Treaty rights to hunt, trap, and fish, and to practice and sustain traditional knowledge and languages.

The Supreme Court of Canada acknowledges that the Crown has a special fiduciary relationship with Indigenous people and has outlined the parameters of this fiduciary relationship and affirmed that the Crown has a legal responsibility to consult Indigenous people when their lands and waters are being affected. The federal government has a fiduciary obligation to protect the interests of Indigenous people, including the right to access and benefit from the use of natural resources. In the past and present, the federal government has acted counter to its fiduciary obligation in the face of negotiating at international and national environment and climate change decision-making tables, ignoring the distinct views and experiences of Indigenous women or Indigenous peoples.

Although the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) sets out a framework for benefit-sharing of genetic resources and acknowledges that Indigenous and local communities have rights to the genetic and natural resources within their territories, there are some countries that insist that the CBD was not designed to be a forum for the elaboration of rights of Indigenous peoples. It was hoped that this particular void in the international system had been filled upon the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which details Indigenous peoples' rights in a comprehensive manner and provides substance and meaning to the provisions of the CBD for Indigenous peoples. However, as noted by the Government of Canada, UNDRIP "is a non-legally binding document that does not reflect customary international law nor change Canadian laws, our endorsement gives us the opportunity to reiterate our commitment to continue working in partnership with Aboriginal peoples in creating a better Canada."<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the Government of Canada has expressed intentions to fully implement UNDRIP, however, steps are still being taken through the legislative process of enacting Bill C-262; an Act to ensure that the laws of Canada are in harmony with UNDRIP. Without full government support for instruments that will aid Indigenous women and girls in their efforts to be acknowledged as important partners in discussions regarding biodiversity and environmental rights, traditional knowledge will continue to be ignored, and the violence against Indigenous women will persist.

### ***Traditional Activities and Knowledge***

Indigenous women continue to challenge existing national and international mechanisms by being at the forefront of direct action and discussion protecting traditional lands and lives when the world's colonial governments and corporations commit violent actions and policy against the land and waters.

There are a number of existing studies that explore what happens when the relationship between land, body, and culture is disrupted for not only Indigenous women, but also Trans and Two-Spirited persons.

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<sup>1</sup> Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ap/ia/dcl/stmt-eng.asp>, last accessed March 9, 2011

Brittany Luby's 2015 study titled, *"From Milk-Medicine to Public (Re)Education Programs: An Examination of Anishinabek Mothers' Responses to Hydroelectric Flooding in the Treaty #3 District, 1900–1975,"* examines how hydroelectric development that occurred along the Winnipeg River, "jeopardized Anishinabek women's access to local resources that were essential for mother-work"<sup>2</sup>. Traditional food sources such as whitefish were contaminated, and Indigenous women risked poisoning their infants with methylmercury, "if they relied upon traditional foods while pregnant or breastfeeding"<sup>3</sup>. An elder who grew up in this territory, on Dalles 38C Indian Reserve, recalls how she was taught since she was a little girl that, "expectant mothers who consumed whitefish produced the highest quality of breast milk, a teaching that she passed down to her daughter and grand-daughter"<sup>4</sup>. With hydroelectric development and methylmercury contamination, whitefish were no longer a safe and viable food source. This is an example of how development, "affected the environment's ability to provide necessary resources to maintain women's reproductive health"<sup>5</sup>. This is just one example of how environmental degradation influences and disrupts the connection between land, body, and culture. Of course, this looks different across different communities and cultures.

Furthermore, a 2016 study by Anna Bunce, James Ford, Sherilee Harper, Victoria Edge titled, *"Vulnerability and adaptive capacity of Inuit women to climate change: a case study from Iqaluit, Nunavut,"* looks at how climate change impacts the ability of Inuit women to practice traditional cultural activities. In this study, they identified activities such as, "berry picking, sewing, and time spend on the land"<sup>6</sup> as being impacted by the effects of climate change. Participants in this study noted that these activities play a role in mental health and well-being, as well as maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity.

Being able to carry out traditional roles and activities, especially for Indigenous women and girls, play a role in mental health and well-being, as well as maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity.

Acknowledging the important role Indigenous women play in the conservation of biodiversity is not enough. To determine what actions are required to promote Indigenous women's roles in biodiversity, traditional knowledge on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity must be valued and prioritized. The Convention on Biodiversity must stimulate and facilitate efforts at the national, regional and international levels, to overcome constraints and take advantage of opportunities to promote the inclusion of Indigenous women.

***Target 12 – By 2020, customary use by Aboriginal peoples of biological resources is maintained, compatible with their conservation and sustainable use.***

Indicators:

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<sup>2</sup> Luby, Brittany. (2015). From Milk-Medicine To Public (Re)Education Programs: An Examination Of Anishinabek Mothers' Responses To Hydroelectric Flooding In The Treaty #3 District, 1900–1975. *CBMH/BCHM*, 32(2), 364.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 365

<sup>6</sup> Bunce, A., Ford, J., Harper, S., & Edge, V. (2016). Vulnerability and adaptive capacity of Inuit women to climate change: a case study form Iqaluit, Nunavut. *Natural Hazards*, 83(3), 1427.



- Number of households participating in traditional activities
- Consumption of traditional foods
- Case studies illustrating customary use of biological resources

While respecting the conservation of biological resources is important, the target must also adhere to the sustainable use of the resources that respects the livelihoods of Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse individuals while preserving and protecting the environment. Historic and culturally-based roles of Indigenous women in relation to water and land must be recognized, respected and included during development, implementation and maintenance of any policy and programming related to the protection and sustainable use of biodiversity. Programs that promote the sustainable use of natural resources should be considered in relation to the local community's traditional livelihood in order to provide these local communities with viable economic alternatives. This is in contrast to treating economic activities around protected areas as a secondary aspect or the responsibility of other governments<sup>7</sup>.

The lack of protections for the conservation of biodiversity particularly impacts marginalized populations (e.g., Indigenous women, local Indigenous communities). In many Indigenous communities throughout the world, women play a key role in identifying and gathering water sources, harvesting, protecting non-human beings, and utilizing and preserving traditional ecological knowledge. Droughts, famines, floods, scarcity of water, threats to ecosystems, and the need to seek safe water sources further away from home; declining harvests, famine, floods, droughts, scarcity of water and the disappearance of crops harshly and oppressively affect day-to-day lives and livelihoods. Indigenous women and local communities depend on the natural resources that have been threatened by the expropriation of ancestral lands and natural resources, and the imposition of adverse land uses, without free, prior and informed consent. The cultural, spiritual, and socio-economic lifestyles of Indigenous women and local communities are interdependent with these lands and natural resources. By ensuring local Indigenous communities are financially self-sustaining on an everyday basis, they will be better positioned to focus on long-range biodiversity conservation and sustainability plans, and contribute to the Strategy's goals and targets.

Moreover, budgets should connect gender responsive funds to action plans. Some important measures include, working to ensure that funding agencies support local women's movements to access funds; encouraging commercial and private banks to support women's access to financial resources; and acknowledging the increased burden of unpaid work that women endure due to the lack of protections for biodiversity. Programs and projects that maintain and restore ecosystems can offer meaningful employment for Indigenous women and their communities. The

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<sup>7</sup> Claudia Sobrevila, Claudia. (2008). "The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity Conservation. The Natural but Often Forgotten Partners". *The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank*, page 31, <https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTBIODIVERSITY/Resources/RoleofIndigenousPeoplesinBiodiversityConservation.pdf>.

sustainable use of biodiversity should include capacity building for Indigenous women that may arise through education, employment, skilled trades and entrepreneurship opportunities. There should be targeted training for women, gender diverse individuals, and local Indigenous community members to be leaders in matters related to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity such as conservation, technologies, research development, reporting and the dissemination of information, the development of action plans, the participation on leadership councils, the mobilization of network building, budgeting and financial skills, and local and international human rights.

The Government of Canada should support mentorship programs to increase women in environmental rights and justice leadership positions. Prioritizing building pilot projects to improve access to Indigenous women entrepreneurs and women's groups for biodiversity plans, access funding, and access technologies would assist in achieving this target. The role of women, Indigenous peoples, and local communities should be enhanced within the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The identification of Indigenous women biodiversity champions or ambassadors in local Indigenous communities could help to promote the post-2020 global biodiversity framework as well as support their employment and cultural preservation.

The following are some exemplary initiatives that Indigenous women, girls, and Trans and Two-Spirit persons are spearheading in efforts to protect, conserve, and advance the environment.

Many traditional teachings for women and girls across all nations come from the land. For example, Ojibew Elder Liza Mother teaches the strawberry teaching to young women in her community, teaching them about Indigenous womanhood and bringing life into the world. Many Indigenous cultures consider the strawberry to be a woman's medicine, so when the environment in which the strawberry grows is threatened, so are the cultural teachings that accompany it.

The Tiny House Warriors: Our Land is Home project was started by two sisters, Mayuk and Kanahus Manuel in Secwepemc territory to protect the land, wildlife, and waterways from the development of the TransMountain pipeline. The homes are being placed along the pipeline route to assert traditional land claims, laws, and jurisdiction over the land. Not only will this project work towards protecting the biodiversity of the territory and the culture of the people, but it will also provide housing to those in the community which is enduring a housing crisis due to the "deliberate colonial impoverishment"<sup>8</sup> of the people. These women are committed to upholding their collective and spiritual responsibility and jurisdiction to look after the land, the language and the culture of their people. These First Nations women describe their initiative as "building something beautiful that models hope, possibility and solutions to the world."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://tinyhousewarriors.com/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

***Target 15 - By 2020, Aboriginal traditional knowledge is respected, promoted and, where made available by Aboriginal peoples, regularly, meaningfully and effectively informing biodiversity conservation and management decision-making***

Indicators:

- Number of mechanisms in place for Aboriginal traditional knowledge (ATK) to inform decision-making
- Case studies assessing effectiveness of established mechanisms for ATK to inform decision-making
- Case studies illustrating best practices in promoting ATK or having it inform decision-making
- Trends in linguistic diversity and number of speakers of Aboriginal languages

Indigenous knowledge is misunderstood and marginalized in current assessment and protection processes. In particular, it is often confused with traditional land use. Accessibility issues, including time, resources, language and communication methods, limit knowledge-sharing with proponents and regulators. Trust and lack of confidentiality were also identified as barriers to sharing Indigenous knowledge. It was explained that Indigenous knowledge must be collected following culturally respectful protocols, which include earning trust and building relationships with knowledge-holders and enabling them to maintain ownership of their knowledge.

The Government of Canada must improve the protection of ATK by countering widespread commercial exploitation of this knowledge and misrepresentations of Indigenous knowledge, projects and practices. As noted by a report for the World Bank, Traditional Indigenous Territories encompass up to 22 percent of the world's land surface and coincide with areas that hold 80% of the planet's biodiversity. This convergence of biodiversity-significant areas and Indigenous territories presents an enormous opportunity to expand and improve efforts to conserve biodiversity. Indigenous peoples are carriers of ancestral knowledge and wisdom about this biodiversity, particularly the women. By supporting the inclusion of ancestral knowledge and their effective participation in biodiversity conservation programs, it would result in more comprehensive and cost-effective conservation and management of biodiversity on a national and international scale.

Currently, national parks and protected areas for biodiversity are frequently carved out of Indigenous lands without permission, recognizing their legal rights, or compensation. Indigenous populations subsequently endure forced relocations which result in disconnection from culture, and increased vulnerability. Forced relocation is a root cause of Indigenous women and girls going missing or being murdered. This is another example of Indigenous peoples carrying an unfair burden for the conservation of biodiversity, which should not be occurring.

Local communities and Indigenous peoples' rights to their traditional lands and the resources within it must be recognized, and Indigenous peoples should have effective participation in the management of protected areas. The biodiversity conservation projects should be led by Indigenous peoples with dedicated funding provided to them. The target cannot be achieved without prioritizing the participation of Indigenous communities, with particular focus on

women, who have traditionally carried out important roles within the communities and have been disproportionately impacted by habitat loss, deforestation, pollution, and climate change. The importance of enabling their participation must be specifically and fully espoused in detail. Financial resource mobilization and capacity building must be prioritized for these groups to ensure their meaningful participation. Gender mainstreaming within national biodiversity strategies and action plans cannot be actualized without sufficient capacity building implementation.

Currently, Indigenous women are left out of decision-making tables concerning environmental protection. It is important to link international experts' views with grassroots knowledge to achieve holistic solutions; however, it is also important that Indigenous women are given the opportunity to share their knowledge at these tables on their own terms. Currently there is a gap between the traditional knowledge of local communities and the expertise of policy makers, as well as a gap between men and women's knowledge at the local level. To rectify this, governments and organizations must identify and build bridge mechanisms between Indigenous women grassroots movements and national and international policy groups to ensure the incorporation of local communities' perspectives.

Finally, we all must ensure that mainstream populations are more informed about traditional ecological knowledge and the importance of incorporating a gender lens regarding biodiversity conservation activities. Currently these viewpoints are inappropriately treated as secondary and tangential information. Taking a gendered approach should be emphasized to implement the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and any gendered lens should not be treated as a peripheral matter.

The following are some exemplary initiatives that Indigenous women, girls, and Trans and Two-Spirit persons are spearheading in efforts to protect, conserve, and advance the environment.

At Abegweit First Nation, funding from the Prince Edward Island Department of Agriculture and Forestry for a Biodiversity and Enhancement Hatchery has resulted in the economic empowerment of Indigenous people. This economic benefit closely ties to the traditional land stewardship role of the Mi'kmaq people while improving the economic stability and sustainability of the area by increasing fish population and biodiversity for the operation of the fishing industry. This initiative prioritizes educational opportunities for youth to increase their understanding of environmental interconnectedness, and embraces Indigenous ways of knowing and traditional knowledge.

At Tr'ondëk Hwëch'First Nation, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Teaching & Working Farm is hosted in partnership with Yukon College and funded in part by Yukon's Training Policy Committee. This results in a learning initiative which empowers youth through education and practice through the application of a homestead-farming approach to gardening. Nutritional food is grown in the community for the community while creating a greater awareness of which vegetables can be grown locally and sustainably.

## CONCLUSION

Our relationship to the land is one that connects us to our ancestors who have come before us, and the generations to come. The relationship between Indigenous women and the land is often one of responsibility. Responsibility to the land and non-human entities means ensuring they are healthy and viable for future generations. Such responsibilities can range from acting as keepers and teachers of community-based ecological knowledge, to initiating action to protect the land and environment when it is threatened. Indigenous women represent and maintain cultures rich in knowledge, history, skills, and environmental stewardship. Indigenous women's close relationship and dependence on the land and environment comes from their understanding that their life and livelihood is dependent upon the nurturing and caring of them.

The role of colonization, and the imposition of Western gender roles and forms of governance on Indigenous communities, cannot be separated from this process. Therefore, when we examine biodiversity and environmental conservation as a form of reconciliation between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, we must grapple with this whole history. This is easier said than done, and incorporating these ideas into research, policy, and programming can be complex and difficult for a number of reasons. These difficult questions are the important ones though. It is important to take time and make space to understand community-specific understandings of gender and environmental stewardship, and how this intersects with the work being carried out. It is also crucial to note that due to the history of residential schools and the imposition of Western concepts of gender, traditional understandings of gender are not always present in some communities and individuals as a consequence of colonialism. Ultimately, we all must grapple with the role that this larger history has played in creating our present environmental situation in order to truly address the root of the problem and move forward together in a good way.