

Ecological Integrity and First Nations

Paul General
Six Nations

Background

First Nations have always had the outmost respect for our environment. It is what we have been taught from birth. We are aware that our surroundings, all of our surroundings, have an undeniable impact on our lives.

We have been taught that all of what we are as a people we owe to our environment, this includes the social aspects of our environment, our parents, grandparents, brother, sisters, friends etc. but also the ecological aspects of our environment.

We are asked to give thanks for the things that surround us from which we learn how to conduct our daily lives. We should give thanks every day for these things at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day. This giving of thanks keeps us aware of what is important.

We give thanks for everything that is important to life, people, parents, grandfathers, the sun, the moon, the trees, the grass, the animals, the birds, the earth itself, the air, the rain, the water, the teachers. Everything which may impact life itself is thanked. We are no more important or less important than any other entity with which we interact.

When I am asked to discuss a topic such as ecological integrity and how it relates to First Nations or myself as a First Nations person I must admit that I do have a great many concerns as to the future of not only our people but society as we know it today.

I find that respect for the ecology has not been adequately taught to young people, in particular the young people who have grown up and been impacted by a more urban environment. It is very difficult to gain respect for one's surroundings when all you know is concrete and pavement. How is a young person to be influenced by trees and grass when there is none or one has to get in the car and drive to a location where trees and grass can be accessed.

The idea of not teaching respect for nature or the critical role our environment plays in our everyday lives is foolish on the part of government and dangerous on the part of society. Not demand the teaching the importance of maintaining and enhancing our ecological integrity, I believe, is fundamentally wrong. We are experiencing this lack of respect and diminished understanding by our young people

now and the ecological problems we see now are the result. These problems will increase in the future if society continues in its present path.

As various segments of society continue to make demands on our environment with little regard to the consequences of sacrificing the ecology we will continue to loose ground to what has come known as progress. Six Nations is located downstream from all of the major urban areas within the Grand River watershed and thus the majority of the population. This population has been predicted to reach two million within the next few years. Drastic changes in the land have been a result of this constant increase of demands from ever increasing population densities. This has been going on for several centuries and has not yet reached its zenith.

Trees have been removed for the sake of agriculture, urbanization, and economy. Vast areas have been paved over. Wetlands have been filled and even the natural drainage of the land has been altered in the name of progress.

Along the river where the alluvial soils have provided ideal growing conditions, the flood plains have been altered to accommodate agriculture, changing the natural flood cycles and volumes.

All of these changes to our environments have had drastic effects on all ecology. I stand by my belief that all things are related and interact accordingly and changing any one component or more of these components will have an effect on pour lives, even small changes have the potential to create major impacts on life itself.

The ecological integrity of the watershed has been comprised of many years, in fact for several centuries and continues to be impacted by change. All of these alterations have had a negative impact on the natural activities if the Six Nations people. How can we carry on a lifestyle which is in tune with what we have been taught and we know to be right as it relates to our surroundings. Today we cannot hunt in our traditional areas because of a change in concept of land ownership i.e. private property. Fishing has been impacted negatively by dams on the river impeding fish migration in the river. Farming has been impacted by surrounding land use practices

We obviously cannot hunt in urban areas, we have ever decreasing areas in the agricultural sectors where we can hunt or fish. An increasing practice is for corporations or well to do individuals to acquire large tracts of agricultural or forested land, fence it off and then attempt to change its use. They change it to suit their concepts of acceptable land use and when we attempt to hunt on this property confrontation occurs. This is a very feudal concept and one which I remind those who adhere to this concept of land ownership is the exact concept that caused their ancestors to rebel and eventually leave their homeland for this land. This need to own and change extends to public areas, such as parks and conservation areas.

Again the common practice is to determine what is acceptable activity in these areas usually excluding any activities first nations people may wish to engage in such as hunting, fishing, gathering or camping regardless of historical use of the land in question.

What has been lost by the general society has been, with much difficulty, retained by First Nations communities. Even with great pressure to change from outside influences we have managed to hang on to our teachings. One need only look at a satellite photo of the Grand River watershed to understand the importance of holding onto the simple principal of respect for our environment and ecological integrity. A Landsat photo shows the entire Great Lakes Basin with the Six Nations Reserve clearly distinguishable from its surroundings showing up as a small green square along the Grand River, why? Because we understand the relationship of ecology, we are the ecology and the ecology is us. A hunter stated to me some time ago while expressing his frustration over not being able to hunt deer where he and his father had hunted for many years. "Those white people should be just as happy to see a native hunting in his back yard as he is happy to see a deer, we are both indigenous to the area".

How can this message be shared with surrounding communities? I do not know if this message can be taught. How can one compare a few years of learning with a lifetime of experience, particularity when some of the decisions that will have to be made will be unpopular. Change will take many years but I believe Six Nations has chosen an innovative method to influence decision regarding the ecological integrity of the Grand River.

How Six Nations has chosen to attempt to influence decisions is to get involved in as much of the process as possible with regards to the management of the Grand River Watershed. We have been involved for some time with many communities from its mouth to its source, this has given us one of several avenues to express our views at the decision making level.

The instrument which has been developed by the Six Nations Elected Council is called the Six Nations Eco-Centre a brief summary of the Eco-Centres activities that has been included in order to demonstrate the many areas where Six Nations feels it can influence decisions.

The Six Nations Eco-Centre

The Six Nations Eco-Centre was established in the summer of 1993 in response to a series of public meetings where discussions focused on the resolution of land use confrontations and improving understanding and tolerance. The Centre was originally designed to be an information gathering and dissemination Centre. It has grown to include the Six Nations Forestry Department, the Six Nations Wildlife Management Office and the Aboriginal Sports Circle. A major focus for the groups that share the Centre is education and fostering effective and meaningful

communication among watershed communities. Communication with private and government agencies ensures accurate and up-to-date information on proposals, projects, environmental issues and hunting and fishing rights both on and off the reserve.

The Centre provides educational opportunities and experiences through the development and implementation of unique presentations and demonstrations. These presentations and demonstrations are taken into the classroom and other public forums on an as-needed basis.

The goals of the Six Nations Eco-Centre are to:

- Provide effective communication with the Grand River watershed and beyond, thereby creating an atmosphere of understanding and tolerance of both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures that now inhabit the watershed.
- Facilitate effective educational opportunities and experiences for our schools and encourage our neighbors in the watershed to learn about our community.
- Educate and inform the non-Aboriginal communities about Aboriginal concepts of land, environment, forest, fish and wildlife and to encourage our community to better understand the difference in attitude towards the same issues of the non-Aboriginal community and work towards a harmonious common ground.
- Participate in and encourage co-operative management regimes within the Grand River watershed for the benefit of all and to ensure that respect for the river is paramount.

In 2000, the Six Nations Eco-Centre undertook the following activities:

- Received Grand River watershed conservation award
- Promoting reforestation with an annual spring tree give away for schools and community
- Offering the community the opportunity to ask questions at the Fall Fair and Home Show
- Developing an educational raptor and owl display with mounted birds for school groups
- Increasing awareness about snakes/animals through live snake presentations and displays
- Speaking at schools about the Rabies and Rabies Bait Program
- Hosting firearm safety and wildlife identification for school children and the general public
- Encouraging the protection of threatened and endangered species
- Contributions to many publications, co-authoring articles, assisting with the organization of various forums, presentations, workshops and seminars
- Encouraging sound forest management
- Working with many of the surrounding universities and colleges in a variety of capacities
- Monitoring of all projects which may have impacts on the environment in addi-

tion to monitoring the Environmental Bill of Rights (EBR) Registry website

- Providing a cold storage room for the storage of dormant trees prior to planting
- Acting as an information and resource Centre for hunters and trappers regarding rules, rights and policy changes
- Providing Federally and Provincially approved firearms safety courses
- Maintaining communications with Provincial, Federal and local agencies such as the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA), Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), Ministry of the Environment and Environment Canada
- Providing ongoing contribution to the Canadian Wildlife Service in areas of endangered species and related legislation
- Coordinating visits from such programs as Fairlake to their area schools while also coordinating the school's offsite field trips to other facilities
- Assisting the Apps' Mill Nature Centre in the operation of their outdoor education programs for Six Nations and Haldimand area schools. App's Mill uses many of the Eco-Centre's facilities to carry out programs
- Hosting the Wildlife Management Advisory Board. This group is comprised of members of the hunting community at the Centre

Committees and Working Groups:

- Haldimand Community Forest Initiative
- Migratory Fish Working Group
- Brant Resource Stewardship Network
- Dunnville Fish Ladder Operations Management Committee
- Dunnville Marsh Management Committee
- Grand Strategy Co-ordinating Committee
- Grand River Fisheries Committee
- Grand River Monitoring Committee
- Habitat Haldimand
- Grand River Fisheries Plan Implementation Committee
- Aboriginal Wildlife Advisory Committee for Canadian Wildlife Service
- Ontario Raccoon Rabies Communications Team
- Spills Notification Committee
- Six Nations Health and Safety Committee
- Waters Managers Committee
- Emergency Water Measures Committee
- Food Systems Partnership Committee
- Family Outdoors Club Organizing Committee
- Exceptional Waters Committee for the Paris to Brantford
- Caledonia Fish Way Committee
- Exceptional Waters Committee for the Brantford to Caledonia

The Six Nations Eco-Centre will work with all agencies; both governmental and non-governmental to ensure continued improvements in the Grand River watershed, now and in the future.

In 2001, the Centre will continue to work with the many diverse groups and committees already listed while simultaneously striving to establish new working relationships as needed.

References

Six Nations Website: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/3808/>