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Aboriginal Maple Syrup Values Report

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Recommended Citation

Chretien, A. (2014). Aboriginal Maple Syrup Values Report. Wilfrid Laurier University (Canada).

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Aboriginal Maple Syrup Values Report

By Annette Chretien

This report examines the values associated with maple syrup practices in Aboriginal contexts. It is based on fifteen interviews conducted with Aboriginal people who have knowledge of maple syrup practices in Ontario.

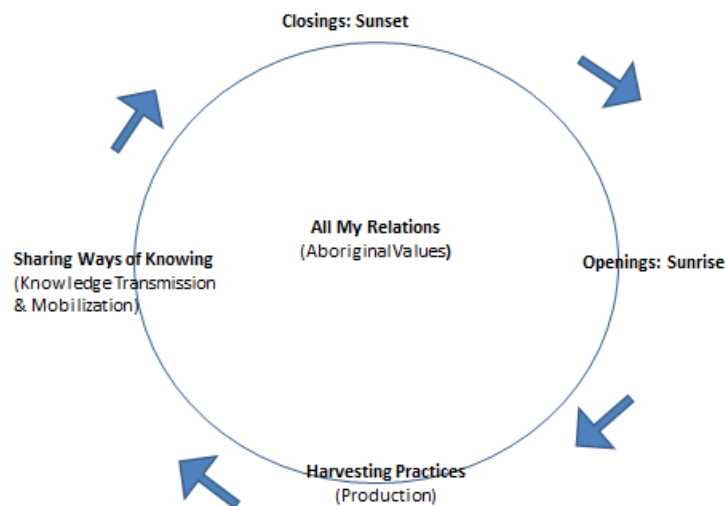
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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to explore the values Aboriginal people associate with the production of maple syrup, and associated maple syrup practices. The examination is based on interviews that were conducted by a graduate student throughout the summer of 2013. In all, fifteen interviews with sixteen Aboriginal people were conducted throughout the province of Ontario. A structured interview approach was used with the intent of collecting data that would be suitable for a comparative analysis and a preliminary understanding of Aboriginal practices, values and beliefs related to maple syrup. Interviews ranged from one to three hours and included producers and Elders with knowledge of maple syrup practices and beliefs in their respective communities. The interviewees included both First Nations and Metis people.

The model that is used here to both examine the collected data, and to present the results, is based on the Medicine Wheel and was developed by Elder Charlie Restoule, Annette Chretien, and Brenda Murphy. The model below was developed based on the values and stories that were gathered from the interviews conducted. In keeping with an Aboriginal perspective, this model is intended to reflect the information that was shared, and respect the ways of knowing this Indigenous Knowledge (IK) reflects. With that in mind, the interviews are discussed beginning with the Openings: Sunrise.



Openings (Sunrise)

Many different communities associate the running of maple syrup sap as the first offering of spring and its first harvest. This includes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike, especially maple syrup producers. "First Tap" is a common ceremony in maple bushes across the province. In fact, commercial producers and some communities host huge festivals and activities surrounding the first opportunity to harvest the sap. With regards to the opening of maple syrup season in Aboriginal contexts, there are some very distinctive and diverse beliefs and ceremonies practiced that are deeply rooted in traditions that can go back hundreds of years. Diverse practices and beliefs were clearly voiced in the interviews we conducted with both younger people and Elders.

The questions that were asked about "tapping and opening the forest" revolved around two main themes. First, there was the question of preparing for syrup making which included dealing with equipment issues, firewood, and finding the extra help that might be needed for production. It is interesting to note that the interviewees did not provide much information about preparatory work. This might be due to the fact that most of the interviewees were small backyard producers. Many producers also did not differentiate the process according to 'stages' but rather considered the process as a 'cycle'. The continuity of this belief means there is no clear differentiation between beginnings and endings per se.

Second, questions dealing specifically with opening ceremonies, first tap, and 'waking up the earth' provided much more detailed information about the values associated with this stage of the maple syrup cycle in some Aboriginal communities. Some producers shared detailed stories about ceremonies that related directly to the opening of the season. Each of these stories was specific to the culture of that producer and their beliefs. As a group, there was a wide range of practices including more formal ceremonies stemming from a community belief, and more personal casual ceremonies.

Preparation for Maple Syrup Making

Preparations for maple syrup making in some communities begin with midwinter ceremonies, and praying for 'new babies', and the other products of spring like strawberries. These ceremonies are intended to meet the responsibilities of the ongoing relationship between people, trees and the environment. Some call these ceremonies part of how they 'wake up the earth', others called it the beginning of the new year. Since maple syrup is the first product to be harvested it represents ceremonial new life.

Other preparations are more practical in nature such as preparing firewood for the boil. These activities can take place many months before the season and in some cases after the end of one season in preparation for the next. One of the interesting aspects of the cycle is the relational way in which people consider one activity to flow into the next, not necessarily as a separate activity but part of an ongoing

cycle. There are also contrasting practices that are not rooted in more traditional beliefs.

One producer who is also a trapper noted that maple season coincides with life returning. At the same time as the waters would open up, the rivers in the area and the maple trees would open up indicating that life is renewed. For him this was an important event.

Another producer noted that when the sap water comes out that means they are starting the new year and the whole annual cycle again. Every moon Anishnaabe are doing something. It's not like a square calendar, it's paying attention to what's outside. There is the sap in March and that is where they start tapping and have the ceremonies around that water. After the sap water, then the fish comes, the sucker, that's when they are fishing. May is the flowers when they collect medicine and are still fishing. In June they get excited again because the strawberries are here. Maple season is sugar moon in March – ZHIISHBAK-GEEZIS is Sugar Moon. So that's important to them and when that time comes they gather the sap.

Spring, ceremonies, spiritual beliefs, the new year, were all terms that were repeated by these producers. Maple syrup making is a cultural practice and marker for the cycle of death and life.

Ceremonies, First Tap, Wake up the Earth

As mentioned above, ceremonial practices vary greatly depending on the community. One striking comment in terms of ongoing ceremonial practices in opening the forest was provided by a younger producer who expressed the challenges of practicing traditional Aboriginal ways of producing syrup. His story related how they wanted to have an Aboriginal person do an opening ceremony but local people did not want to do that. They did not want Aboriginal involvement. Eventually, regardless of these tensions, this producer has pursued a more active relationship with traditional Aboriginal ways through an Indian Mentoring Program. His efforts are aimed increasing awareness and building more inclusive relationships.

The challenges Aboriginal producers face is directly related to whether or not they wish to follow traditional practices, and whether or not they wish to be seen as 'Aboriginal' producers by the public. It is impossible to separate the challenges faced by Aboriginal producers in a contemporary world with regards to knowledge sharing and maintaining traditional ways of knowing. For example, one producer shared a story about Jesuit records complaining that the families would not go to church during the sugar season. This story is corroborated by sketches and family portraits that trace the practice back two hundred years in this location.

There is an intimate link between government policies and Aboriginal cultural practices of all sorts including making maple syrup. Many interviewees indicated that there were periods when making syrup was not practiced and that they are

currently reclaiming knowledge from the Elders who recall it from previous generations. One interviewee told a story about being forbidden from having ceremonies by the Indian agents and that longhouses were locked to prevent them. This is why knowledge was not passed down and they kept everything hidden to keep the men out of jail. They had to keep everything hidden some things were dropped, for them, maple sugar (meaning maple syrup practices) was dropped.

Harvesting Practices (Production)

Harvesting

A wide range of harvesting practices was described in the interviews, many of them directly related to the size of the bush and the purpose of the production. For example, some producers described community activities that were very personal in nature even down to tapping five trees, and producing only enough syrup for breakfast. Most were making syrup for family use or within the community. For these producers the technology remained fairly traditional and simple. However, some producers refused to use more recent technologies such as lines/tubes, vacuums and reverse osmosis because they felt these harvesting practices were harmful to the trees.

One operation collects sap in buckets and then transfers it to barrels to leave in the woods where it stays cool until they get to boil it all. Without a truck or tractor it is too difficult to transport all at once. They keep busy boiling continuously and cutting wood to keep the fire going.

A number of experimental harvesting practices were also revealed. For example, one producer taps different trees every year to see which one will produce the most sap. He also taps different types of trees such as black maple to explore the differences in quantity and quality between species. One commercial producer uses lines, tubing, and even a vacuum system. And then, he combines his state of the art harvesting technologies with a few buckets and spigots that serve as a monitor to assess and gauge when the trees are done. When the sap gets milky in the buckets he knows it is time to stop harvesting the sap. In his opinion, because the lines are a closed system, it runs the risk of drying out the trees. Another producer uses lines only to the bottom of the tree where the sap runs into 5 gallon buckets. One producer will only tap 'soft maples' (red maple) if he feels the hard maples are compromised that year.

A number of producers believe that commercial harvesting processes such as vacuums and reverse osmosis harms the trees, and takes more from them than we should. Another producer explained that they alternate which trees they tap every

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year. Many of the producers expressed a very deep concern for the safety of the trees. These producers are very careful to only take what they need and do not overproduce. These practices reveal the close relationship with the trees and environment that can only be developed by close observation and exploration. By getting to 'know' the trees individually, a healthy harvest can be assured. These practices also highlight the resistance to a commercialized approach that seeks to produce syrup for sale or profit.

The larger commercial producers also shared a mixture of state of the art approaches to harvesting that are still guided by traditional beliefs. Aboriginal beliefs and principles were still underlying the harvesting process. One large producer in particular stated that he purposely ended the season before the trees were completely 'dried out.'

Technology

The chart below describes the technology the interviewees use for harvesting and production. It is important to note that the way these technologies are used is varied. In some cases, the harvesting and productions practices were clearly dictated by profound beliefs. Granted this study is based on a small sample, however, it still indicates some very interesting approaches that are rooted in traditional practices and ways of knowing as noted in the harvesting practices discussed above.

Interview	Buckets and spigots	Lines	Reverse osmosis	Pots/evaporator	Fuel	Other
1)	buckets	No	No	Iron pails	wood	Deep concern abt reverse osmosis
2)	Buckets and spigots	No	No	Homemade evaporator and pot for final stages	wood	
3)	Buckets and spigots	no	No	Stainless steel	Open fire	Deep concern abt reverse osmosis
4)	Some buckets and spigots to monitor sap flow	Yes (2008)	yes	Pots and heaters for taffee-and commercial	Fuel and wood	yes

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				evaporator		
5)	Buckets, use ATV to gather and move sap, used to use horses	Lines to buckets only at bottom of tree	no	Homemade evaporator		
6)	Buckets and spigots		no	Pots and heaters-later homemade stove	Fuel and oil	
7)	Buckets and spigots for demos, cedar spline and bark	Lines and tubes	no	Pots and heaters-and big steel pan		
8)	Buckets and spigots-big barrels for sap and skidoos to haul		no	Pots and heaters-handmade evaporator	wood	
9)	Buckets and spigots-tried using sumac spigots		no	Commercial evaporators		
10)	Buckets and spigots		no	Pots and fire, stove to finish in the house	wood	
11)	Buckets and spigots, with lids and use spiles		no	Pots and boil in cast iron	wood	
12)	Buckets and spigots	Lines/tubes yes and no		Cast iron cauldron on the fire-flat stainless steel pan		
13)	Buckets and spigots-lines/tubes-collected sap with horses		yes	Small scale and commercial evaporators		
14)	Buckets and spigots		no	Pots and heaters, fire		
15)		Lines and tubes,	yes	Commercial evaporators		

		vacuum system				
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Many interviewees felt that using newer technologies would have negative effects on the trees and environment.

Food Safety Practices

In this study, very little was shared with regards to food safety and what was shared came mostly from the larger commercial producers. One commercial producer is working towards getting CFIA approval although in his opinion maple syrup is by its very nature organic. He also has no woodlot certification, but has his own forest plan made a forester who presented the plan to the MNR for approval and licensing. This commercial producer would like more information on grading policies, and gets most of his information from OMSPA. He has also switched to disposable palettes from wooden palettes for tasting taffee due to safety concerns with public consumption.

As noted below, most of the producers interviewed were backyard producers where safety concerns are personal not public. Only producer mentioned boiling to government guidelines and higher (220 instead of 219) because he likes thicker syrup. Another producer related that they dump the sap in the buckets if it rains because they are concerned about the effects of acid rain contaminating the sap. He felt that the pollution would be concentrated by the boiling process and felt it could cause serious illness if consumed.

Commercial or Backyard Production

Int.	No. of trees/taps	Sap, syrup	Commercial	Backyard	Personal, Family	Community Wide
1)	Depends on how many people	depends	Never for sale	reserve	Yes (lots of people)	Yes-share for ceremony
2)	25-30 taps 2acre sugarbush	50 litres of syrup, 2000 litres sap	Never for sale	backyard	Personal use	Within community
3)	25 taps, 1 acre sugarbush	2 gallons of syrup	no	backyard	Personal use,	no

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					family	
4)	8100 taps, 180 acres	105000 gallons of sap, 2600 gallons of syrup	Commercial MNR lease		For sale	Local community
5)	350 trees, taps 3 acres out of 40	50 gallons of syrup	Not for sale	backyard	Personal, family	
6)	180 taps, 1 acre	150 litres of syrup	Not for sale	backyard	Family	
7)	300 trees	30 gallons of syrup	Not for sale (medicine)	backyard	personal	community
8)	260 taps, 10 acres	25 gallons			family	no
9)	180 taps, one acre	150 litres of syrup				
10)	35 taps, 3 acres	70 litres	No commercial sale	Settlement, not reserve	family	Not community, but in the school
11)	40-50 taps, 200 acres	10 gallons	no	mountain	family	no
12)	200 taps, 1 acre	11 liters of syrup	Never for sale		family	no
13)	30 taps, less than one acre	unknown	Never for sale		family	Give sap to pregnant women
14)	750 taps, 200-300 trees	30 gallons- best year 110 gallons				
15)	10,000 tap (Quebec)				Com.	

Knowledge Transmission "Sharing Ways of Knowing"

Learning to Make Maple Syrup

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With regards to how and when the producers learned how to make maple syrup, a number of different experiences and strategies were recounted. Some recalled seeing maple syrup being made and/or participating in the activities as children.

Many of the producers we interviewed remembered collecting sap or making syrup as children, some with great grandparents, other producers with grandparents. Notably, at that time it was for ceremonial uses not for commercial production. One producer recounted how his grandmother shared many stories during the time he was gathering his first sap. Another producer learned from his uncle in 1975, and his dad was also invited at that time. His dad talked about how he had learned from his grandfather. There were many comments about not knowing how many generations would have made syrup but it might have been discontinued due to colonization. No opinions were offered as to what extent that was an issue, but it was mentioned many times.

One producer said nobody has ever really taught him to gather to make maple syrup but he has always done it since he was a child. He went out and tasted the branches for the sugar. Early on in life, he was taken to visit the sugar bush and it a very primitive sugar bush. They were still using bark baskets and bark containers to gather the sap and things around at the time at a community level. At that time they had cauldrons made of steel. He tapped his first trees in the old ways to gather maple syrup for personal use.

Another learning process that was described was 'trial and error', mostly learning by doing. With regards to learning by trial and error one producer commented that it's not hard, and that they just sat down and figured out what they needed to do, and what material was needed. Another said he learned on his own turning to people in the community that had done it before. Asking questions of other producers and even using the Internet was a useful tool.

When I did it myself, it was almost as though I knew how to do it without being formally taught how to do it because I had always observed it. So when I started to do it, it was almost as if I had already done it before and I didn't. So it was a very powerful experience for me. I would also hear stories about the process itself - I would ask people questions and one question that I asked (I think it was my uncle that told me) - you could almost see the sap running through the tree itself if you look at it a certain way and I had that experience myself. I was getting ready to tap a tree and it was almost as if you could see the best part of the tree to tap to position to drill a hole.

One of my uncles talked about the idea of blood memory - within our blood we carry the blood of our ancestors through our veins. And all of their experiences and the things that they would do we carry within us - it's a part of who we are, it's a part of our genetic make-up. When you're out there and practicing your culture, you're not just talking about it and actually doing it - there's something about it that feels right and feels like I've done this before and I'm supposed to be doing it. You just have a peace of mind doing it - you know it's a good thing.

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Other means of getting information included the Internet for those who are computer literate. The reason for researching how to do it was usually connected to maintaining the wellbeing of the trees. Some wanted to ensure that inserting the tap was done properly and that best practices were used to ensure that the trees are not harmed.

Finally, some beliefs attributed the knowledge to the animals who taught the other animal creatures like ourselves on how to get food from the land. More traditional practitioners said they went to ceremony to learn about what they needed to know. Some attended traditional learning centers in their community. Very few references were related to books, but one book that was mentioned was Frances Densmore Chippewa Customs.

All in all, there were varied means of learning how to make maple syrup and these choices were made depending on skills, training, networks, and beliefs. For those who wanted to continue cultural traditions, oral traditions were more important.

Sharing Networks

Family/Community

Sharing knowledge within and between families was very common in our interviews. What was interesting was the belief that the trees were also 'social beings' who constituted and had families of their own. One producer referred to them as having uncles and aunties and even their own nations. In sharing their sap, the trees were visiting and teaching the communities.

Some producers were smaller and kept the production within their own families especially if their family was large. Children between 7 and 12 were often included in these practices. However, many producers commented that older children were often disinterested and there were challenges in getting them to learn about the traditions and to participate in the bush. Some mentioned how the younger generations would rather be inside playing video games.

Outside Community

One elder mentioned that there is a big communication gap between Aboriginal communities and outside communities due to a number of reasons. One of the main reasons for her was that the ceremonies were performed in an Aboriginal language not English. Again, there was a wide range of knowledge networks based on beliefs and educational levels.

One producer consults with university labs for information and does a lot of reading. Some producers shared their knowledge and production with outside

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communities, meaning the public. These presentations which include lectures and demonstrations could reach up to 1000 people.

Even the large commercial producers were interested in sharing traditional knowledge and practices. To that end, they would include demonstrations and even lectures about how syrup used to be made and the stories that were passed down from earlier generations. One producer mentioned their tag line was 'blending tradition with technology.'

One producer referred to a spiritual renaissance which is going on in 'Indian Country'. As young people explore their connections to identity and seek ancestral knowledge there is a re-emergence of traditional teachings. Since people were not allowed to talk about spiritual beliefs without the concern of being legislated these traditions were either secretive or discontinued. Now, there is an opening to share these ways of knowing more publicly, but the healing process is slow and there is still some distrust.

One producer insisted that knowledge cannot come from books because our knowledge comes from the earth. It comes from those trees – those grandfather trees that are older than us, they know more than us.

Schools/Institutions

The relationship of maple syrup production and schools was evident in even the small producers. The number of schools and students involved ranged from having one class visit (for smaller producers) to having whole schools involved. One producer is developing a commercial relationship with local schools to use maple products for fundraising events.

There are also a number of producers who are involved in other institutions such as local political organizations or 4H clubs and such.

An interesting perspective on school settings was that the type of knowledge given to the students was watered down and sanitized. It was considered much better to have then learn in the bush through experiential learning.

Other Producers (IMSKN)

Most of the producers who were interviewed were very interested in a knowledge sharing network. The type of information they were interested in sharing included traditional teachings, technologies, and harvesting and production practices. There was also much interest in mentoring young people with regards to cultural ways and teachings.

There was a considerable interest in learning about moving from a backyard, family-based operation to more sustainable commercial enterprises. However, most were not clear on whether or not these would be economically feasible. It was felt

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that if larger more successful producers, and if more information was readily available this type of move could be facilitated by a knowledge sharing network. Many producers also felt this type of initiative could help with distribution challenges.

With regards to how knowledge could be shared through such an initiative a range of preferences was expressed. Many producers preferred face-to-face communications such as workshops or presentations and learning by watching others doing it. Community gatherings were also mentioned as an effective means of sharing knowledge. Others were comfortable with e-mail or other online media communications.

Shut Down: Sunset (Closings)

Wrapping Up

Little information was provided about the end of the season per se. Given that maple syrup production is seen as a cycle, many of the activities are connected not so much clearly defined. It was mentioned that it is about values, and the whole process is like the chicken or the egg. Which one comes first?

One producer mentioned that trees that are cleaned are much bigger. And, the trees will grow much bigger if you clean around them. So you make wood with the little bush around the trees in the spring.

For bigger producers, the cleaning of lines and removing fallen trees or limbs is more important.

Aboriginal Values: "All My Relations"

Spiritual Values

Almost all the producers who were interviewed considered maple sap and syrup to have medicinal qualities and uses. Because it is considered to be 'medicine' as well as food there is a healing that accompanies the process of making it, using it, and sharing it.

One of the common associations with drinking sap water was made with the value of sap to women, especially pregnant women. Many of the producers harvested the sap specifically for this purpose.

One producer defined spiritual, environmental, cultural and ceremonial values as all-encompassing. In his opinion, all of these values, beliefs, and ways of knowing were part of a lived experience. We are embedded in nature, and a holistic,

experiential way of being in the world was the best way he could find to describe his values.

As mentioned above, maple syrup was considered part of a 'spiritual renaissance in Indian country'. This comment highlights the fact that many Aboriginal people and communities are reclaiming this as part of their traditional practices, and culture.

Social Values

One producer recounted that the ceremonies are a communication with the entire earth, the air, water and humans. This is how relationships are built between humans with the trees and the environment. As mentioned above, the trees are considered to be part of the social network which includes their own social network and other beings. This relationship is intimately connected to the spiritual beliefs mentioned above.

Pride was also a very important aspect of maple syrup production. This includes pride in ancestors, community, and culture. The reclaiming and preservation of a maple syrup making tradition was at the heart of all the producers we spoke to. In doing syrup, the community was building social relationships with their neighbours and other communities as well. These include all the various levels mentioned in the knowledge sharing networks discussed above.

Commercial/Market Values

Most of the producers insisted that their syrup was never for sale because of its value for ceremony and community. What is most important is the value for life and the elements that the practice represents. Having said that, substantial interest was expressed in the possibilities of developing commercially viable operations if the information was made more readily available. For some, it would become a source of income if it was deemed financially feasible.

For some producers, the relationship with the government comes into play with regards to having to adhere to industry standards. Many would prefer not to be subject to inspections or regulations on how to produce syrup. The legacy of colonialism is still felt with regards to the banning of ceremonies and certain practices.

Many producers also mentioned that if the syrup is produced for financial gain it takes away from its original purpose and medicinal values. They also mentioned that once you feed a greater number of people it then becomes sterile and subject to policies. This is not considered to be the 'natural way.'

Commercialization is considered as 'taking' but never giving back. It is also considered to alter the product because of the production practices. Notably, the large commercial producers who were interviewed indicated that they integrate

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their own traditional beliefs and practices in their commercial operations. All in all, the beliefs and values could be said to move in both directions.