

# Responsibilities and Relationships: Decolonizing the BC Food Systems Network

A CFICE project report



BC Food Systems Network

Prepared by:

Dawn Morrison, Director, Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty  
Abra Brynne, Director, Engagement and Policy, BC Food Systems Network

Prepared for:

Community First Impacts of Community Engaged Research  
December 2016

## Background

The BC Food Systems Network received funding from the Communities First: Impacts of Community Engagement funds for a project that ran from December 2015 through July 2016. This report contains the original project intent as well as the lessons learned and reflections on the process from two of the key BCFSN staff involved.

**Project Title:** Responsibility and Relationships: Decolonizing the British Columbia Food Systems Network / Indigenizing our Praxis

## Project Summary and Goals

The BCFSN strives to build and maintain networks inclusive of diversity of cultures including Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. In 2012, with support from Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement's (CFICE) Community Food Security (CFS) Hub the BCFSN staff developed an evaluation to better understand how we can build our cross cultural capacity.<sup>1</sup> Recently, the BCFSN received funding that provides us with the opportunity to explore what has been achieved in the intervening years as well as what it means to truly decolonize our praxis in the day-to-day activities and conversations of staff and network members. We are working to understand what is the best and most appropriate relationship between our largely settler Network and the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty (WGIFS) who carries the voice and vision of Indigenous hunting, fishing, farming and gathering communities who have persisted throughout colonization.

Building on the existing Decolonizing Research and Relationships Methodology developed by the WGIFS, this project provides the time and space to reflect and deepen the understanding between core staff at the BCFSN on how we can advocate for more sustainable and just food systems in a way that is informed by Indigenous paradigms, protocols and practices. This project proposes to seek deeper understanding of the ways the Indigenous food sovereignty is being expressed, and will provide a framework for future community based research to ensure it aligns with the values and visions of the WGIFS in the 4<sup>th</sup> world reality in which we live.

Our efforts to decolonize our language, practice, and paradigm can contribute to building more respectful and effective community-campus relationships between academia and Indigenous communities. The Network has determined that in order to truly support food sovereignty in the region in which we work, we must better understand the impacts of colonization on both Indigenous and settler communities. Food sovereignty is founded on principles, practices, and policies of social and environmental justice. There can be no food sovereignty for Canadians until we redesign institutional frameworks to support and implement Aboriginal Title and Rights that will enable Indigenous peoples to protect, conserve and restore the complex system of bio-cultural heritage in the land and food system as a whole.

---

<sup>1</sup> The final report was titled, Cross-Cultural Food Networks: Building and Maintaining Inclusive Food Security Networks to Support Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Communities and was authored by Dayna Chapman and Wanda Martin, and the BC Food Systems Network. Copies of the report are available through CFICE and the BCFSN.

## **Project Outcomes**

The remainder of this document relates the lessons learned over the course of the project, from the perspective of Dawn Morrison and Abra Brynne.

### **In Dawn's words....**

As the Co-Founder and Director of the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, I have been consistently engaging Indigenous communities in food sovereignty meetings, discussions and conferences since 2006. I am grateful for the support from CFICE that has made it possible to realize myself in my roles and responsibilities of organizing, facilitating and translating underlying issues, concerns, situations and strategies identified by Indigenous hunters, fishers, farmers and gatherers in the BC Food Systems Network meetings, gatherings and beyond. The project has challenged me to find ways of overcoming high level of stress, tension and burden of educating, informing, and holding the space for highly contentious and triggering conversations associated with historical injustices and systemic racism instituted within the agricultural policies and practices, and the ongoing destruction of Indigenous land, water, food, and bio-cultural heritage.

I offer my reflections and insights for the purposes of building my internal capacity to mentor and share leadership with younger generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples who will be left with the legacy of upholding our sacred responsibilities to one another, and the land, plants and animals that provide us with our food. In the context of the larger whole of relationships, my personal reflections highlight the need to make systemic change by de-professionalizing relationships in community based research, and balancing out the burden of responding to the proclamations of truth and reconciliations made by settler societies. Responding to truth and reconciliation in a deeper more meaningful way will require additional supports (financial, technical and human) to enable the WGIFS to facilitate the development of research, actions and policy proposals for and by Indigenous peoples, and develop our organization in an autonomous and complimentary relationship to food system networks and coalitions being led by non-Indigenous friends and allies.

The Responsibilities and Relationships: Decolonizing the BC Food Systems Network project provided the time and space for the staff of the BC Food Systems Network (BCFSN) and Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty (WGIFS) to collaborate more effectively in generative learning, and organize time and space for analyzing and decolonizing the food system discourse within the cross cultural interface where Indigenous food sovereignty meets sustainable agri-food systems networks. The document titled Decolonizing Food Systems Discourse: Contentious and Complimentary Terms outlines more culturally appropriate language and terminology that was highlighted in the cross cultural discussions.

The project gave concentrated time and space to increasing understanding of the ways in which Indigenous land, food, water, cultures, and economies have been severely impacted by the historical injustices of Indian Residential School, and oppressive colonial land, water and agricultural policies and frameworks. Much of the conversational learning took place at regular staff meetings where we engaged in a collaborative process of developing and analyzing the network evaluation. The evaluation provided opportunities to learn about theories of change, and articulate and validate Indigenous worldviews and the transformational methods of decolonizing research and relationships to one another, and the land, water, plants, and animals that provide

us with our food. The cross cultural learning was significant in the ways it allowed for deep reflection on our collective ability to overcome adversity and realize the potential that exists within the gaps of knowledge where potential for future collaboration exists.

Building on the experiences and insights accumulated over the last 10 years of mobilizing Indigenous communities and their food related knowledge systems, the generative conversations brought deeper meaning and understanding to some key points of contention within the interface where sustainable agri-food system advocates meet Indigenous hunting, fishers, farmers and gatherers on a broader ecological, cultural and temporal scale.

Indigenous hunters, fishers, farmers and gatherers have created some of the most sustainable adaptation strategies of humanity, and are on the front lines resisting destruction of the remaining fragments of bio-cultural heritage. Indigenous peoples are leading campaigns that offer solutions to many serious environmental and social justice issues, concerns and situations that impact people of all cultures. Yet we remain vulnerable in the disparity that exists in funding programs, policy proposals, administrative and technical capacity, and social determinants of health outcomes at large.

The worldviews of the myriad of Indigenous peoples are similar, in the ways we understand the world is interconnected, and our diverse realities are entangled as parts of a large whole. In a similar spirit and worldview as the Standing Rock Sioux who have gained international recognition, for the ways in which they brought together people of all creeds and cultures from around the world to protect the water in the Missouri River, the WGIFS has been calling on settler society to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples who are leading campaigns and actions to protect lands, waters and biodiversity for present and future generations. World renowned food sovereignty activist Winona La Duke speaks about the limited ways in which settler communities have been stepping up to reconcile in a deep and meaningful way prior to this most recent campaign being led by the Standing Rock Sioux to stop Dakota Access Pipeline:

“Very few visit, and there is almost no civil society to advocate for the environment or the people. Let me put it this way, until this year, the Sierra Club had one staff person in North Dakota, and the American Civil Liberties Union had one staff member covering both North and South Dakota. It is as if North Dakota is just too comfortable for a progressive movement to visit or work in. Instead we have watched<sup>2</sup>.”

There are many parallels between Standing Rock and the campaigns being led by Indigenous peoples in so called BC who are resisting large scale extractive economic activities, such as Site C Dam, Kinder Morgan and Enbridge pipelines, open net cage fish farms, water sustainability, mining, conventional agriculture, etc. In the face of climate change, large scale extractive economic development, and the unsustainable path charted in the global food system, Indigenous peoples are migrating in response to coloniality and capitalism. We are calling on the broad majority of the public to push their colonial governments to stop and prevent any further destruction to the forests, fields and waterways where our subsistence hunting, fishing, farming and gathering strategies persist.

---

2 View the full article in Indian Country here:  
<http://www.indiancountrynews.com/index.php/columnists/winona-laduke/14339-the-beginning-is-near-the-deep-north-evictions-and-pipeline-deadlines>

With this in mind, I offer these recommendations for future work that might serve to build stronger relationships of solidarity and mobilize sustainable agri-food system networks in support of Indigenous peoples conducting research, action and policy proposals for and by ourselves. Future cross cultural collaborations would enable the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty to more effectively focus concentrated time and energy on communications and outreach to serve Indigenous nations and communities. Development of improved communication and outreach tools and strategies could help to highlight Indigenous food sovereignty messages in critically urgent campaigns such as those outlined above.

While the gathering evaluation highlighted significant progress in transforming the food system, and increasing cross cultural awareness of Indigenous food sovereignty issues, concerns and situations, the work on decolonizing food system is only just beginning. There is a need to balance the burden of capacity and better understand the ways in which sustainable agri-food system advocates can stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples on critically important land, water, and fisheries governance issues, action and campaigns. While the intention to increase administrative capacity to work in horizontal management structures and processes was not fully realized, there was progress with respect to mutually agreed upon need to engage in a high level critique of provincial policy in the context of Aboriginal title and rights that have been encoded within federal laws and policies. Significant time, energy and support (financial, technical and human) is needed to attempt to understand how we might form and influence new policy frameworks that go beyond the practices and paradigms of the agri-food system.

The time has come to call on BC Food Systems Network steering committee, staff and membership to stand beside Indigenous peoples to advocate for the outreach and extension of diverse Indigenous knowledge systems in networks, learning and events and community based research. Demonstrating solidarity in decolonizing the land and food system would also involve speaking out publicly on current issues and campaigns impacting Indigenous land and food systems, and sharing relevant information on BCFSN email listserves, website and social media.

Increasing cross cultural capacity can be achieved more effectively on a network level by developing community agreements that highlight shared values and vision, and outline terms of reference on how the BCFSN can collaborate on the conceptualization of funding proposals that would more adequately support projects and activities that gain deeper insights into some key vulnerabilities experienced by Indigenous peoples in funding programs and policy proposals. Advocating for systemic change in a way that addresses underlying imbalances of privilege and power is required to disrobe the “emperor with no clothes” in the rapidly expanding Aboriginal industry where many non-Indigenous academic “experts”, consultants and researchers are building high paying careers in research and policy /advocacy work.

## **In Abra's words...**

Since our first actual Gathering as a Network in 2000, the BC Food Systems Network has sought to connect with, honour and learn from Indigenous people and nations in whose territory we meet and work. As settlers, like most of our fellow Canadians, our starting point was one of abysmal ignorance, carefully constructed and maintained, about Canada's colonial current and historical practices and policy. Over the intervening years, the Network's commitment to engaging with and learning from our Indigenous allies has enabled us to build relationships of trust and mutual respect.

The Network experienced a tectonic shift in our thinking in 2014, when we returned to the territory of the Secwepemc for our annual Gathering. In a session devoted to debriefing and planning our campaign to save the Agricultural Land Reserve, we were privileged to receive a history lesson from Indigenous Elder, Wolverine (William Jones Ignace). His words, delivered respectfully, brought into sharp relief the fact that our work on land had to shift and expand far beyond that devoted to agriculture and to include learning and efforts devoted to Indigenous land rights and justice.

As a founding and active member of the Network, I have been privileged to be involved in many of the significant shifts in our thinking and work. The funding from the CFICE project in 2016 enabled the staff to be more deliberately self-reflective of what it means to decolonize and indigenize our Network. This section seeks to capture some of my own learning, as a complement to Dawn Morrison's.

The past year of reflection has certainly underscored how cumulative the learning is. In some ways, once one commits to self-education, it is not that hard to access good information, much of it from Indigenous scholars, about Canada's colonial practices and about the many different Nations that have resided in so-called Canada and BC since time immemorial. Having acquired even a rudimentary understanding of the systemic violence and genocide that has characterized the entirety of Canada's relationship with the first Peoples of this place, I find that I am unable to ignore those facts and they impact my daily life. As my reflections deepen and my knowledge expands, I find myself increasingly uncomfortable with all the systems and structures that perpetuate Canada's colonial rule.

The historical irony but colonial truism is that the newcomers come to dominate and set up systems that marginalize the original people. These very systems mean that we, as settlers, may not even be able to see where and how to give up our privilege. What is harder is to grasp is the range and depth of social, physical, environmental, cultural and political privilege that is mine simply through my status as a settler – as someone whose family, at some point in history, came from elsewhere. So the question of how to authentically be an ally of Indigenous people has to be understood in this context.

Some of the answers are found in language. Our worlds and worldviews are shaped by language. As someone who grew up on a farm, it took me years to be able to accept Dawn's objections to the language of "production" in relation to food. Farmers produce food, right? But embedded in that simple sentence is a narrow productionist view of nature and food systems that does not see and honour the ecosystem and all the beings in it for what it is but only for what it can produce for – most likely – a commercial market. I still struggle occasionally with my language when talking about food and agriculture, but Dawn has helped me to see that there are other values and views that can be applied to the human practice of interacting with ecosystems to nourish and clothe ourselves. I have been successfully kicked out of a production paradigm

and seek to apply that lesson to other aspects of my life, my language and worldview.

My personal commitment to justice has ensured that, once converted, I can no longer ignore the pressing issues that we must attend to if Canadians are ever to be in a relationship of justice with the Indigenous people who were here before us. However, as was made clear at our 2016 Gathering, which had a significant focus on decolonizing and indigenizing, we have to be sensitive to the fact that not everyone is at the same place in this work.

One of the tools that I developed and that was provided to each attendee at the Gathering was a “Decolonizing Pledge” with a list of activities from which people can choose. The intent of the Pledge is to suggest activities that will enable us as settlers to demonstrate our commitment to decolonizing our own minds and lives, and to take responsibility for educating ourselves, rather than rely on Indigenous people to keep holding our hands and guiding us.

The work of decolonizing is not easy but it is nonetheless necessary. The language can be strange and uncomfortable, the conversations difficult and emotional. As I have stated publicly, I believe that as settlers we need to get used to being uncomfortable if we are committed to decolonization, truth and reconciliation. However, that does not mean that we should not ensure that people are supported to understand the new language and find ways to deal with challenging emotions.

Sensitivity to language and our respective worldviews had a wonderful and significant impact on the development of an evaluation methodology for the Network. We had engaged an external expert who specializes in developmental evaluation and who has also worked with Indigenous communities in so-called Canada and elsewhere. He accompanied us on our journey of exploration to create a methodology that could reflect a more dynamic and less-linear approach that fit better with Indigenous worldviews and relationships. The image below was the result of multiple conversations and iterations of key evaluation questions and discussions of indicators as we worked our way to a model with which we all felt comfortable. It required that we all commit to taking the time necessary to come to such a model, and be open to re-visiting many of our preconceived notions.

In order to work closely together, we have to give space and time for Indigenous people to participate authentically and safely. Even better, when appropriate, we need to co-create our events together, so that we are coming together as equals. And we have to help settlers to overcome their fear of saying the wrong thing, of not knowing the right protocol if we are truly to become engaged, collaborators and allies.

Many years ago, a young Secwepemc woman challenged us to become accomplices – which may be the next step in our learning and efforts to seek justice. This means that, in addition to collaborating and making space for Indigenous voices, needs and activities, we have to seek out and attend events that Indigenous people organize. We have to show up, demonstrate solidarity for their efforts to defend the water, protect the land, and restore their Nations. But we have to do that on their terms and with respect. And sometimes that means that we must honour their choice to not have us there.

The past year’s work and reflection have made it clear that we need to be respectful, we need to learn together, we need to trust and be generous. And as a Network and its leaders, we have to model what the work of decolonizing and indigenizing looks like in our daily lives and in our Network’s praxis.

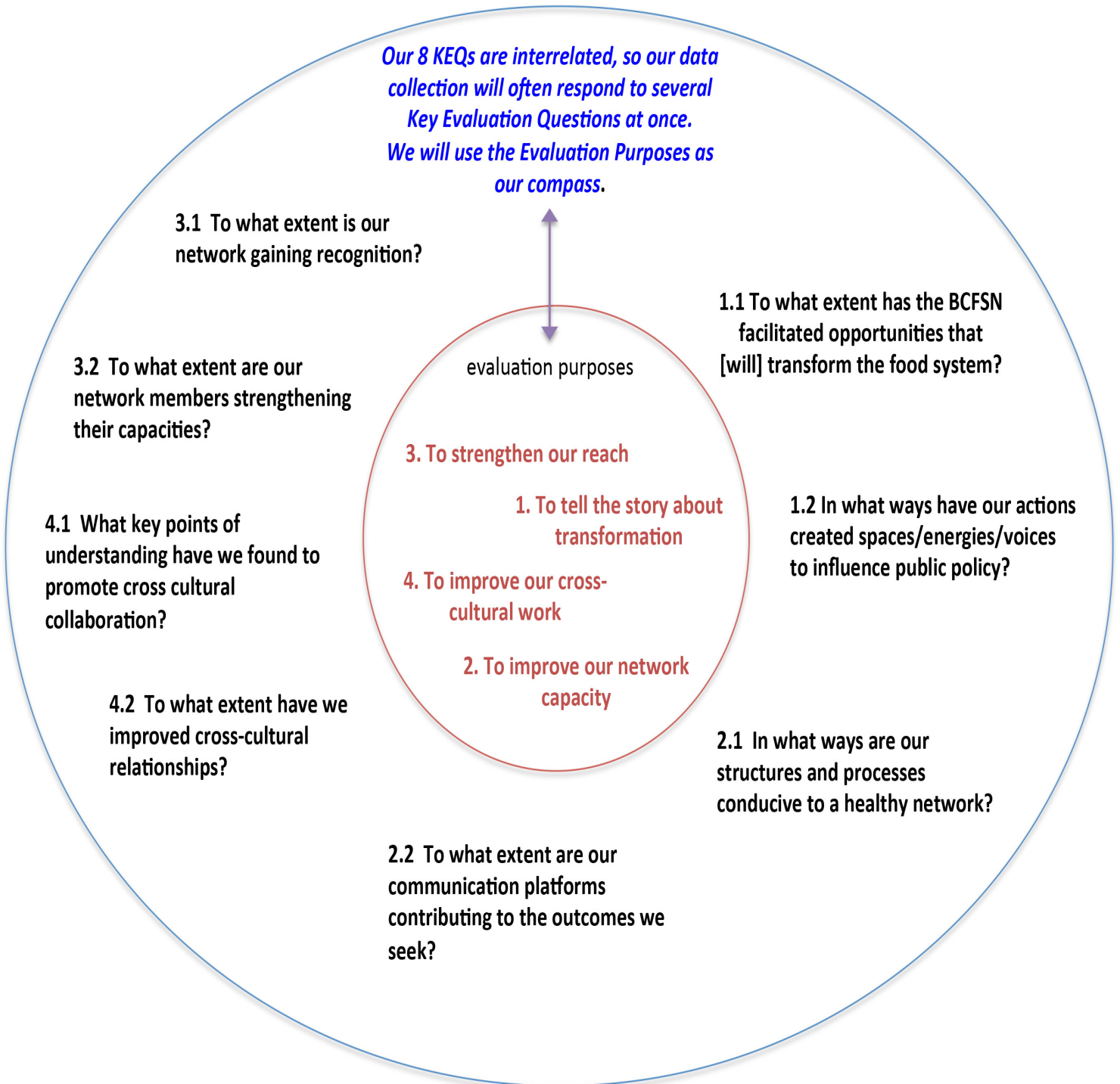
This means that we do not insert Indigenous participation and content into our events and work - rather, we seek out the involvement and leadership of Indigenous people from the start. We co-create. And that will mean that whatever we are doing will take more time than mainstream society may be used to accommodating. When working with people who, as individuals and in community, bear the deep toxic burden of Canadian colonialism, they have other priorities than our particular events or wishes for dialogue. Sometimes that means that meetings won't happen, that events must be delayed or cancelled and that we, as settlers, must accept this with grace and understanding - and adapt accordingly. Such adaptation is little to ask of settlers in the broader context of the changes and havoc we have wrought over the 150 years of Canada's existence.

It also means that we must educate and sensitize ourselves to the ways in which our language and worldview marginalize and devalue Indigenous ways and perspectives. This can only be done by exposing ourselves routinely to Indigenous culture, language, events, media and the multiplicity of ways in which Indigenous people across so-called Canada are expressing themselves. And we must be prepared to be challenged and accept that challenge with courage, sensitivity and generosity.

Ultimately, it is my personal opinion that we, as settlers, are obligated to a form of affirmative action if we are to have any hope of moving into a respectful and honest relationship with Indigenous people and Nations. We have so much to make up for. Kahnawá:ke Mohawk scholar, Taiaiake Alfred calls for restitution, not just reconciliation. As a settler who has benefited so much from the removal of Indigenous people from the landscape of Canada, I must be willing to engage in a real dialogue with Indigenous people about what it means to secure justice for Indigenous people in Canada - and I must advocate to the Canadian government to recognize and act upon our obligations to the first peoples of this country.



BCFSN Non-linear Evaluation Model  
Developed in 2016, with support from Ricardo Ramirez of Guelph, Ontario



## **Decolonizing Food Systems Discourse – Contentious and Complimentary Terms**

Prepared by: Dawn Morrison, Director, BCFSN Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Prepared for: BC Food Systems Network

Date: August 25, 2015

**Stakeholder** – is a contentious term in reference to Indigenous peoples because it connotes we are 3rd party “interest groups”, rather than the original inhabitants of outstanding land claims areas.

**Resources** – capitalist language and linear productionist paradigm does not accurately reflect the Indigenous relationships to the land, plants and animals that provide us with our food. It is very low context and robs us of our higher context narrative that tells the rich history of our eco-social, and spiritual relationships.

**Utilized or underutilized land** – contentious term that connotes the doctrine of terra nullius that has dispossessed Indigenous peoples.

**Indigenous land ethic** - In contrast to colonialist notion of terra nullius that fails to recognize the sophisticated land and food system that existed in North America prior to contact with European settlers, Indigenous peoples have worked with, rather than against natural systems to shape and humanize the land and food system for thousands of years. Indigenous land ethic does not view the land and food system, or any part thereof, as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market economy, or a “resource” or “product” to be exploited for external means. Based on values of interdependency, respect, reciprocity, and ecological and cultural integrity, an Indigenous land ethic views humans as a part of nature and not separate or dominant over it.

The Indigenous land ethic converges with the Aldo Leopold land ethic in the way it views the land as an interconnected biotic whole. Recognizing there are serious social and political issues that stand in the way of completely reconciling Leopoldian and Indigenous ethics in a concrete way, they share similar ethics in abstract terms (Whyte, 2011).

**Wild or wilderness** - The terms wild and wilderness are subjective terms that are problematic in their primitive view of Indigenous peoples, and the ways in which they have estranged Indigenous relationships to the land, activities and nature. The terms assume the preservationist environmental ethic that does not recognize Indigenous peoples and our longstanding relationships to the plants, animals or land. It is based on terra nullius which is highly contentious in the way it has made us invisible in decision making matters impacting our land and food system.

The term wild describes a relationship in which we are not in control of the plant, animal or person. The term would be used most appropriately to describe the nature of our relationship to invasive species, rather than Indigenous species that have been enhanced through Indigenous harvesting and cultivation on a broad landscape level for thousands of years.

### **First Nations and Aboriginal peoples**

Along the spectrum of Indigenous tribes in their varying degrees of dispossession, it is recognized that many identify more with the socio-political relationship with the state, rather than by social or cultural ties to their distinct tribe. While many Indigenous peoples have accepted the terms Aboriginal or First Nations to identify with in legal, political, or cultural contexts, the terms are considered by many to be subjugatory as they have been imposed by the nation state in the context of contemporary colonialism. The term Aboriginal is used most widely by the federal

government of Canada to define all of the original inhabitants (including the Indian, Inuit and Metis), while the term First Nations is a very divisive term that was first imposed by the BC Treaty Commission to enable individual bands/communities to negotiate treaties with or without the consent of the whole Indigenous tribe/nation.

**I recommend the term Indigenous:**

**Indigenous peoples** - There is no universal definition of what it means to be Indigenous that would match the diversity in cultures and characteristics found in the distinct Indigenous cultures, tribes and nations within what is known to the settlers as BC, or Canada. In all of the diverse socio- political, cultural and ecological contexts, the most appropriate term in which to identify each distinct tribe would be described by the Indigenous tribe themselves (i.e. Sto'lo, Squamish, Tsleil-watuth etc...), as opposed to being state imposed by the municipality, province or federal government. In an eco-cultural context, the term Indigenous is used to identify tribes that share a common heritage (ancestral, biological, cultural, and territorial). Recognizing that each of the distinct tribes and nations share similar worldviews, values and cultural strategies, the term Indigenous can be used more generally in socio-political context to describe the common struggles of Indigenous tribes that are striving to reclaim their collective voice, vision, perspectives and priorities in relation to the land and food system in contemporary colonialism.

## **BCFSN Decolonizing Pledge**

Prepared by Abra Brynne, Director of Engagement & Policy  
For the BCFSN Annual Gathering July 2016

The BC Food Systems Network acknowledges that the place referred to as British Columbia has always been home to 27 Indigenous Nations who have been here since time immemorial.

We believe that BC and Canadian society owes its prosperity to colonization. We understand colonization as a system that is founded on land theft, ecological destruction, racism, apartheid and genocide. We understand colonialism as an ongoing process that continues to benefit settler society; justice demands decolonization. When fully realized, decolonization would liberate the land, its people, and its settlers. We hold to a vision where Indigenous Nations and settlers share the land in a just and peaceful relationship, and where indigenous sovereignty is fully recognized, including political, economic, and territorial self-determination.

I therefore pledge to do my part to advance the process of decolonization for myself as well as for our respective and joint communities. I pledge to take the following actions before the end of 2016.

- I will discover upon whose territory I reside
- I will study and use Dawn Morrison's Decolonizing Food Systems Discourse: Contentious and Complementary Terms
- I will attend an event organized by Indigenous people
- I will read the Executive Summary of the Truth & Reconciliation reports
- I will read the Truth & Reconciliation reports
- I will learn about the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
- I will read the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*
- I will join the call for justice for the Murdered and Missing Aboriginal Women and Children
- I will read Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash*, Arthur Manuel's *Unsettling Canada*, or Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman* (for starters...)
- I will listen to *Unreserved* on CBC radio
- I will watch Aboriginal People's Television Network
- I will learn about the so-called "60's scoop"
- I will educate myself about the Residential School system and its impact
- I will learn the difference between a hereditary and an elected Chief
- I will volunteer at Indigenous events
- I will donate to Indigenous organizations
- I will educate myself on the difference between historical and modern-day treaties and why extinguishment of Aboriginal rights and title is unacceptable
- I will learn what nation-to-nation relationships might look like on the territory I live on
- I will organize a book club that reads Indigenous authors
- I will educate myself on the ways in which colonialism is not a thing of the past but very much present and pervasive today
- I will learn how environmental racism is practiced in Canada against Indigenous communities, for instance in Grassy Narrows First Nation territory
- I am willing to be uncomfortable, since what a truly just and decolonized Canada will look like is not yet known