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Special Communication

A giant step forward: Notes from the Aboriginal Talking Circle¹

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I think for many First Nations and Aboriginal peoples in general, caribou are the foundation of their language, culture, and way of life in the areas that they live in. These are rooted in the landscape and knowledge accumulated over the centuries. Life was about co-existing with the animals in their habitat, and the relationship was spiritual.

Although caribou is a species of great importance to us, governments have failed to achieve balanced and sustainable development. Linked to this is a failure to engage with the Aboriginal inhabitants of this land in land management.

We know that governments have continually refused to recognize the original owners' knowledge of the land. At the same time they have used imported laws to encroach on natural resources. It is because of this history that many Aboriginal people have come to this conference with some scepticism about whether dialogue will make a difference.

But it was interesting and meaningful, I think, that in the Aboriginal Talking Circle we were using a talking stick that actually belonged to an Aboriginal person, the late Jim Bourque, who was a Deputy Minister of Renewable Resources in the Northwest Territories. He passed on many years ago, in 1996.

Many of the Aboriginal delegates are also survivors of residential schools who were denied their identities. Even so, we possess a deeply rooted strength to

talk about the pressures affecting the woodland and barren-ground caribou. Many of the activities that threaten the existence of caribou were mentioned, such as development in mining, hydro development roads, deforestation, oil and gas development, tourism, and also the interventions of well-meaning preservation groups.

The Talking Circle is also about looking for Aboriginal perspectives on how traditional knowledge could be used to ensure that caribou continue to live on the lands intended for them. The Talking Circle provided many answers, but it will take time to peel away the layers of distrust, struggles, and identity theft before we get to the real core of the meaningful contributions that can be made to a forum like this.

We know that the North American Caribou Workshops have had a long history of holding an exchange of information every second year by the researchers that are knowledgeable in the field. But I came to understand that this 13th gathering marks the first time there has been large contingent of Aboriginal people taking part in it. This is a major step for the NACW as well as a giant step for the Aboriginal people who have participated and shared what they can in the short time that is provided in this forum.

It is also a big step to team up in learning how science can be integrated with traditional knowledge towards the continual survival of the caribou and its habitat. In the Aboriginal world as well as any other society, tradition is important. Tradition is what

¹ The following text is adapted from the closing plenary presentation by John B. Zoe, who shared a perspective on key messages from the Aboriginal Talking Circles.

makes people remember sources of knowledge, and the tradition of learning and listening is an important source. We have to find some ways of ensuring that a tradition is established of inviting people that have potential traditional knowledge to the forum, so that we're actually creating knowledge together.

In the end it's about how as a society we can co-exist with caribou in the complex, challenging, and evolving world that we live in today. In the end it's about trying to find some ways to affect policy, especially in the sharing of traditional knowledge. The concept of traditional knowledge has been slapped around over a number of years. But we need to find some way of applying it and experimenting with it seriously to try to make it a part of a bigger picture. Because like the art work that my friend Doug Urquhart presented earlier, it has a lot of a lot of meaning.

We can be sitting around the table in co-management processes, but it's no use if our special knowledge isn't recognized and used. One of the things that I've heard from elders is that we've been living

with the caribou for centuries, and we have stories of how animals and people emerged from one another. So we as traditional knowledge holders are really the voices for the caribou. One of the things that were really emphasized in the Talking Circle was that all information should be used as a source of knowledge about how we can move forward. This is something that we're doing for future generations, not only on the traditional knowledge side but on the scientific. It's the collaboration and how we work together that really sets the stage for the next generation. So if there's habitat encroachment or other threats to the caribou in the future, at least we will have examples of how we're dealing with it today – if we're successful. I'm sure we will be.

One priority is to ensure that the next caribou forum has a similar Talking Circle event. I'm sure that the Aboriginal people that participated in this forum will be further strengthened knowing that we can bring some really knowledgeable people to the next forum. Máhsi cho.