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Ginawaydaganuc: The Birchbark Canoe in Algonquin Community Resurgence and Reconciliation (Chapter 5)

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Ginawaydaganuc: The Birchbark Canoe in Algonquin Community Resurgence and Reconciliation

CHUCK COMMANDA, LARRY MCDERMOTT,
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THANKS TO JULIANA LESAGE-CORBIÈRE

Omàmiwinini or Mamiwinnini people, also known as Algonquin, have lived in the watershed of the Ottawa River (the Kiji Sibi, or Kichissippi) for thousands of years. There is archaeological evidence of Indigenous peoples living in the territory from at least 10,000 years ago.¹ It is likely that people moved to this area as soon as the glaciers retreated from the area between Lake Champlain (south of Montreal, in what is now Vermont) and Lake Huron. Algonquin histories show that Algonquin territory covered much of what is now eastern Ontario and western Quebec, long before the territory was divided by colonial governments into those two provinces.

Our chapter focuses on teachings surrounding the building of an Algonquin-style birchbark canoe. These teachings are connected with the revitalization of Algonquin practices and communities as well as with reconciliation; as other chapters in this book also demonstrate, these practice-based teachings have important links to family and community, legal traditions, language, and relationships with land. Currently, birchbark canoe building is an important part of efforts to move toward both reconciliation and resurgence in Algonquin and other Indigenous communities. The canoe, being such an iconic symbol in Canada, also provides a means for people

across cultures to connect with one other. Projects involving the canoe bring people together in a unique way; the canoe acts like a magnet for people of all ages and backgrounds, offering a chance for them to connect, share stories, and learn about one another in the context of a highly skilled Algonquin community practice.

Canoe building has important applications as a strategy for the revitalization of Indigenous cultures and community healing. Over the past several years, canoe building has experienced a resurgence in popularity in Indigenous communities. Birchbark and other types of canoes are being built in places where there have not been canoe builders for many years, and people are relearning how to build canoes. Chuck Commanda, who learned the craft from his grandparents, travels to various Indigenous communities not only to build canoes but to build the capacity of communities to continue to make birchbark canoes. In some cases, he returns multiple times to help improve people's canoe-building skills and pass on more knowledge of the craft.

Canoe building also helps to make people aware of ways in which climate change is impacting the environment, for example, by changing the texture of birchbark. According to the teachings of the medicine wheel,² Indigenous peoples around the world have special responsibilities for taking care of the land. Building a birchbark canoe, depending as it does on the natural environment for materials, can remind us of these responsibilities, reconnecting people with land. By healing ourselves through the canoe, we can also work toward healing the Earth.

This chapter examines the roles of the birchbark canoe in Algonquin family life, survival, and governance, as well as in reconciliation. We highlight some of the most important lessons of the Algonquin birchbark canoe, in particular *ginawaydaganuc*, a principle of Algonquin and natural law that teaches how all things on Mother Earth are connected. The teachings described here are those we, the authors, have learned from our Elders and from the canoe itself, as we have come to understand them through our own experiences. The ways in which we understand them are constantly adapting and changing, depending on the situation of our lives and the people and environments we are connected with. Thus, this chapter is a snapshot of our understanding at the current moment, from the places we are grounded in.

Ginawaydaganuc and Natural Law

Algonquin Law, derived from the Creator, defines sacred responsibilities to others and to the Earth. A key principle of Algonquin law is *ginawaydaganuk*. The traditional Algonquin worldview conceives of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual connections to all of life and the life-givers, including the plants, animals, water, air, earth, and fire. Under Algonquin law, there is a collective and individual responsibility to honour these sacred gifts and ensure that they thrive. . . . It also requires respect for the needs of those to come and consideration of the effect of each act that we take upon the next seven generations. Rather than a reductionist approach, Algonquin law requires consideration of the cumulative impacts of actions on the entire web of life.³

Ginawaydaganuc, or Algonquin law based on respect for natural law, recognizes that all creation is interconnected spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. It reminds us of our first responsibility, which is to the continuance of life, and shows us that we have to live within Mother Earth's capacity to give.

As human beings, we need to be careful not to destroy our Mother Earth's capacity to give life—for example, by taking more than what she can give—and to recognize how dependent we are on the Earth for our survival. The recognition of our own dependency can lead to strong emotions when talking about taking care of the land, especially when principles of interconnectedness and responsibility come into conflict with colonial ideologies of ownership and resource use. It is also easy to misunderstand what *ginawaydaganuc* actually means. Sometimes we limit it to our responsibilities to each other as human beings, but the law implies much broader responsibilities to all beings. Even something as small as a blackfly is a part of creation that deserves our respect. We all hold the responsibility to ensure the survival of species into the future; this is another lesson that *ginawaydaganuc* teaches us.

Algonquin Elder William Commanda once said, "Respect for Mother Earth and all species and forms of life is fundamental to the true Indigenous way of life. Over the course of my own lifetime, I have witnessed our natural heritage damaged almost irrevocably at every level by unbridled greed,

opportunism and development, and uncoordinated federal and provincial management.”⁴

In order to correct the imbalances caused by this greed and mismanagement, it is necessary to recognize that “the land and the people are integrally connected and the protection of one is only found through respect of the other.”⁵ One way in which we are able to not only recognize but also experience this connection physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually is through the canoe. The birchbark canoe provides a way to remember and re-prioritize the fundamentally important connections that we all need in order to revitalize Indigenous communities and reconcile with one another. Many Algonquin, Anishinaabe, and other communities are drawn to this work and are turning to the canoe as a means of re-establishing and revitalizing spiritual connections to the land and water that in turn teach us and remind us about our own pre-existing principles and strategies of governance.

When describing *ginawaydaganuc*, Larry McDermott and Peigi Wilson write that “Algonquin law requires consideration of the cumulative impacts of actions on the entire web of life; this is how the Algonquin define sustainability.”⁶ Although Canada’s “policies of divisiveness and exclusion frustrat[e] Algonquin efforts to practice [*sic*] *ginawaydaganuk* and sustain the biological diversity of their homeland,”⁷ the canoe, in tandem with other practices that bring communities together and remind us of our collective responsibilities to one another and to Mother Earth, holds the potential for the revitalization of these fundamental elements of natural law.

The canoe teaches us from the four sources of intelligence—emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual—about the interrelatedness of the entire web of life. For example, when engaging with ceremonies related to gathering materials and building a birchbark canoe, the physical act of harvesting combines with spiritual and emotional connections to the canoe and to the Earth from whom the materials are provided. The work of building a canoe teaches ways of making these physical and spiritual connections, which in turn emphasize the interconnectedness that is a core part of Algonquin principles of sustainability and natural law.

Building a Canoe

Building a birchbark canoe is a creative act. It requires skill, knowledge, and empathy, and draws on the seven sacred teachings of love, honesty, humility, respect, bravery, wisdom, and truth. In order to connect with these teachings, it is important to take time. When we rush through a canoe build, often things go wrong. But when we take the time to take it all in—the quiet of the forest, the energy—and express kind words and thanks, things tend to go better. How we build a canoe reflects how we treat each other. When making a canoe, a person is acting in ceremony. When offering tobacco, other gifts, or kind words and thoughts as a ceremonial act, the spirits recognize a person's good intent. A person's intent can be off without their realizing it; therefore, it is important to have self-awareness when engaging in ceremony.

While collecting materials for the canoe, a person thanks the Creator for the specific trees, and the water, air, sun, and earth for giving those materials and for the knowledge to be able to build that craft. Giving thanks is an expression of both gratitude and reciprocity. Reciprocity is a way of expressing respect through giving something back while maintaining connections with Mother Earth, providing ways to connect to the seven sacred teachings. Expressing gratitude and developing relationships of reciprocity with everyone involved in building a canoe, including the Earth, teaches us how to honour the seven sacred teachings and how to honour all life.

Over time, things have happened to our people that have interfered with our abilities to work in ceremony and maintain these relationships of reciprocity with the land. Through disruptions to Algonquin communities, including displacement, division, and the imposition of colonial laws and policies, some Algonquin teachings about law and governance have been supplanted and need to be re-centred or revitalized. The Indian Act imposed a system of governance on Algonquin and other Indigenous communities across what is now Canada⁸ and, together with other discriminatory colonial policies and regulations, has created abusive power relationships and divisions of power that cut through communities and even families, creating unsafe spaces for expressions of traditional Indigenous governance. This leads to harmful competition within communities for scarce resources and makes it difficult to remember and follow the seven sacred teachings and

the ceremonies associated with them. Building a canoe is not always treated as a ceremony anymore.

One of the reasons for this loss can be traced to the impacts of colonialism in Algonquin territory and the ways it has separated Algonquin people from each other, from other Indigenous communities, as well as from the land. Ceremonies are not understood today as well as they once were. For example, we as Algonquin people understand the importance of offering tobacco, but not everyone still knows what the fundamental teachings related to tobacco are and why they are important. Many Algonquin people have grown up without being connected to ceremonies and only come to learn about them later in life. Ceremonies help balance us and connect us to each other and to *debwewin* (truth), but it remains the choice of an individual person whether to take on the teachings or not. Algonquin people know how to get the teachings back: we need to restore unity among our communities in order to be able to make the effort to bring the ceremonies back into our lives that can return us to the balanced life we once had.

The birchbark canoe offers one way of rekindling our connections with community and ceremony. In 2016, Chuck Commanda harvested materials for a canoe in the Thousand Islands area, where the St. Lawrence River meets Lake Ontario.⁹ Part of this process involved praying for the water of the St. Lawrence and praying for the beings that inhabit the water, including spiritual creatures of the water that are portrayed in pictographs and legends. Praying for others—for the well-being of the water itself as well as for those who depend on the water—helps us to travel safely over the water and to find the materials we need. It is important to remember that we should not just pray for ourselves and the work that we are doing. When a person recognizes the interconnectedness of all things, we recognize that we can pray for others—for the ancestors or for the Elders, for example—as a way to receive what we need for ourselves. Remembering our connections to others and acting with awareness of our own “loving responsibility”¹⁰ toward all beings in the world engages us with *zaagidowin* (love) and interconnectedness—some of the most important principles of Algonquin natural law.

Ceremony and principles associated with Algonquin law also need mechanisms by which they can be passed on from one generation to the next. One way of passing on knowledge in the canoe-building process is through teaching an apprentice. In the fall of 2017, Commanda took on an Anishinaabe

youth apprentice to be his helper and to learn the craft himself. Teaching a young Indigenous person how to become a canoe builder can give them a path in life and a reason to have both hope for the future and pride in their people. Learning the art of canoe building made a difference in this young apprentice's life, giving him more reasons to stay on a good path.

Learning the art of canoe making benefits not only the builder and their apprentice but also the community as a whole. Building a canoe can provide opportunities for people to experience and embrace traditional Algonquin laws and governance and how they might look in terms of contemporary application. In the face of colonial systems that have displaced and divided communities—such as arbitrary, government-imposed splits between status and non-status people; geographical divisions among what were formerly shared territories; or the ways in which Christian religion and natural law are treated as mutually exclusive—unity among people becomes a key part of Algonquin (and other Indigenous) community resurgence and revitalization. Building a canoe together has the potential to bring a sense of unity to a community. Bringing the knowledge of birchbark canoe making back to a community can foster feelings of pride and bring the community together.

Often young Indigenous people, born into a society deeply affected by colonialism, question themselves and their purpose in life. One of the most important remedies to this is to come together as a community. To be able to work as a community and for the community, rather than focusing on the self and personal gain, is extremely important, and this is something that building a birchbark canoe can help teach to younger generations. Canoe building brings people together to work on a project that has meaning for everyone involved. The whole community can participate in the build, including people of all genders, Elders, youth, and children. For example, in 2013, three Algonquin communities from the Ottawa Valley came together to build two canoes with Chuck Commanda. Many youth participated, along with adults and knowledge holders from the communities. The group went out in the woods together, had lunch, and harvested spruce root and birchbark for the canoes as a big group. There was no radio or phones or television, so participants all talked, shared stories, and told jokes to entertain each other. The day began with ceremony, which unites everyone and calls in the ancestors and other spirits to help us, and finished in ceremony, which released those spirits. Going out on the land in this way promotes intergenerational

knowledge sharing, and by taking away distractions and working in ceremony, participants are able to form better connections with the materials gathered, with one another, and with the land around them.

The canoe-building process helps to reinvigorate the Algonquin language as well, as people learn and remember Algonquin terms and concepts related to the canoe materials, ceremonies, and building process. After the canoe has been built, this process of language revitalization can continue through storytelling associated with the different uses of the canoe in community life, such as *pikodjamomin* (wild rice) planting and harvesting, shelter, transportation, and other knowledge about the waters and the lands.

As mentioned above, the process of building a birchbark canoe requires us to draw on the four sources of intelligence: emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental. Whatever a person has in their mind gets projected physically through their hands and will affect the canoe and the materials, as well as other people working on the canoe. Emotionally, a person cannot be in a state of anger to work on a canoe, because the anger will show through in the work. Spiritually, in order to do the work of canoe building properly, a person needs to act in ceremony and engage with the principles of *zaagid-owin* (love) and interconnectedness. One needs to be in a good spiritual state and remain in that state while building the canoe. In order to achieve this good spiritual state a person needs to show respect: respect for the place the material comes from; respect for oneself and others; and respect for the tools being used. Through learning that we are not better than any other being on earth, we learn about loving responsibility.

Other important lessons of the canoe have to do with patience. Teachings about patience have been emphasized by Indigenous Elders in many nations across Canada.¹¹ Remembering to wait and to be aware of when the time is right, and most importantly, to be willing to wait if the time is not right, when harvesting materials, is a principle that can make or break a birchbark canoe. Rushing ahead in imperfect conditions only results in wasted materials—it is necessary to take the time to harvest properly and respectfully, and to accept that one will not always find what one is looking for right away. Another principle related to patience is that it is important to not take too much when harvesting and to leave some material for future generations. In the case of birch trees, those trees that are left for future harvesting cannot be too big. If they are big birch trees, this means that they are close to the



FIGURE 5.1. Designs etched on a canoe built by Chuck Commanda at Murphy's Point Provincial Park in the summer of 2018. Photo: Sarah Nelson.

end of their life; smaller trees will still be around in future years for others to harvest. Patience also means remembering not to put one person's priorities above others'—the priorities of the trees, of the natural environment, and of other human and non-human beings need to be given equal weight.

Working with the birchbark canoe also can inspire people to protect the natural environment. Leaders in Algonquin and other Indigenous communities who have participated in canoe building have become motivated to be more involved with forestry, expanding their roles in taking care of the land by being a part of the decision making to keep the forests healthy and adopt Indigenous priorities for certain species. Forestry policy does not always acknowledge these priorities. White birch, for example, is “on the house” in Ontario, meaning that any birch tree ten centimetres or more in diameter can be industrially cut without restriction. This type of policy fails to consider

genetic diversity, species sustainability, or the high Indigenous cultural value assigned to this and other species.

The impacts of climate change as well as several generations of industrial logging can be seen in changes in birchbark, spruce root and trees, and in the quality of cedar trees. For example, a good way to tell when to harvest birchbark used to be by watching when the fireflies came out. Bark harvested before the fireflies appear is called winter bark—it has a darker inner layer of bark that can be scratched off to make beautiful designs on a finished canoe (see Figure 5.1). Because of changes to the climate, however, signs like these are not as reliable as they once were—winter bark can now be found long after the fireflies have come and gone. Spruce roots, used to sew the seams and gunwales of the canoe, are falling prey to a fungus that grows up into the root, discolouring and weakening the wood. Cedar trees, used for the ribs and sheathing of a canoe, have also suffered from over-harvesting. It is now more difficult to find cedar trees that are large enough to provide the gently curving circumference required to split the wood into thin sheathing to cover the inside of a canoe.

In many Algonquin communities, now diverse and spread out across colonially imposed boundaries, the knowledge to protect the environment, whether through government conservation practices or through time-honoured practices rooted in natural law, is often not readily available or has simply been replaced with colonial thinking. Bringing this knowledge back to life, community by community, is another contribution being made by the canoe.

The Canoe in Algonquin Family, Community, and Political Life

The birchbark canoe continues to be a link to Algonquin cultural strength, retaining the power to bring people together for a common cause. *Omàmiwinini* refers to “the people who gather,” in a social sense; *mamiwinini* means “nomad.” The canoe embodies both of these meanings: by enabling movement throughout traditional lands, it helps Algonquin people to maintain governance structures, community ties, and connections to land. It also contributes to reconciliation through *zaagidowin*, the sacred

teaching of love, as part of honouring *ginawaydaganuc* and the ways in which we are all connected.

Traditionally a family vehicle, respectfully constructed from materials in the surrounding environment, the birchbark canoe connects Algonquin communities with one another and with the land and water, as well as with newcomers. Knowledge of canoe craft and waterways within Algonquin lands has facilitated Indigenous resistance to colonial incursion, Indigenous resilience through maintaining family and community ties, and reconciliation through education and sharing of Algonquin teachings and histories.

Building birchbark canoes has always been a practice shared among the whole family. As with all aspects of life, you need to have balance. For example, in the teachings of the medicine wheel, children are at the centre, then women around them, then Elders, then the men around the outside. You need to have everyone doing their part in order to have balance. It is particularly important with the canoe to have women involved because of women's traditional relationships with water in Algonquin and other Anishinaabe communities. Water is the giver of all life, and our relationship with water begins well before we enter this world, in the womb. As carriers of the gift of this life-giving water, women are constantly in relationship with water and in Anishinaabe cultures are always the carriers of water in ceremony. All water, including the water we produce (such as tears) or the water we can't see (such as water in the air, or water underground), is acknowledged in water ceremony. Through women's responsibilities for bringing life into the world, in relationship with water, we learn about our loving responsibilities to one another and to all beings.¹² As Deborah McGregor writes: "Loving responsibilities and obligations flow from natural laws and thus are not mandated by governments through legislation, policies, funding or programs. Instead, knowing our responsibilities gives us power to act."¹³ Water is the first medicine, and as the canoe travels along the waterways it is travelling along the veins of Mother Earth.

In old pictures showing Algonquin people with the birchbark canoe, often women and men are together, with children in the middle. Especially during a special gathering, children were included. Children are always listening, even if they are doing something else. By involving everyone in the community, the canoe can help to revitalize the Algonquin language and oral traditions (see Figures 5.2 and 5.3).



FIGURE 5.2. Mary and William Commanda, Chuck Commanda's great-grandparents, with a canoe they built. Source: Chuck Commanda.

FIGURE 5.3. Chuck Commanda with his grandmother, Mary Commanda, and a canoe they are building. Source: Chuck Commanda.

At the beginning of contact with settlers, Algonquin people used their skills and knowledge of canoe craft, waterways, and Algonquin lands to avoid danger and to find other places to practise our culture, especially in the face of settler hostilities. There are histories and genealogies that tell how settlers wouldn't have been able to survive without Indigenous peoples' help through the winter, in the early years of settlement of Algonquin territories. At least one of those histories/genealogies expresses lament over no longer seeing the Algonquin canoes travelling the Mississippi. Over time, however, settlers came to our territories bringing other ideologies, including different ideas about how to interact with land, based on ownership and extraction, and supercilious ideas about religion. When our communities began to be oppressed by these ideologies and threatened by settlement, we used the canoe to move to other places to avoid them.

In those times when we had to pack up and leave right away, the canoe was there and ready. The people we were running away from didn't have horses at the time; they would have had oxen and would have been slower. Settlers made the journey, for example, from Brockville on the St. Lawrence River to Perth, inland between Kingston and Ottawa, in ox wagons. These wagons would often bog down on the road, which was in very poor repair. The journey took a long time, and many settlers succumbed to illness, malnutrition, or exhaustion.¹⁴ It was very difficult for settlers, to say the least, in the early years in this area.

Through these years, Algonquin communities would gather together, facilitating resistance and maintaining community ties. In the winter we dispersed to pursue snaring, trapping, and hunting in smaller groups, but there were spring and fall gatherings facilitated by the canoe. Such gatherings would include communities beyond the Algonquin. Indigenous peoples could cover long distances by canoe—it was nothing for someone from northwestern Ontario to come and visit with Elders in the local Algonquin communities in the Ottawa River valley. Even in the years when the French and English were fighting over territory, we as Algonquin peoples would still gather, to socialize, trade, and govern. And we got there by canoe.

Over the centuries, the canoe has brought people together to share stories, experiences, and histories. This is something that we have partially lost—as Indigenous communities and as a human race—but are working to regain. As part of our work, Chuck Commanda and Larry McDermott travel with

canoes that we have made to demonstrate the power of the canoe. In all of the places we have gone with a birchbark canoe, it attracts people—there is something about it beyond the level of conscious thought that draws people in. Working on canoes also helps our ability to communicate orally. Around the world, all peoples have communicated orally to pass on traditions, histories, and other forms of information. As a society, through colonial experiences, we have in some respects un-learned this practice of oral communication—of sharing and listening with each other to learn about cultures, histories, peoples, and natural law. When observing a birchbark canoe being built, children, youth, and adults alike, instead of text messaging or focusing on their phones, actually tune in to what is happening, ask questions, and are thoroughly engaged with the canoe that is being created. This happened during Chuck Commanda's building of two canoes for the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, Ontario. The entire build was open to the public in the museum itself, and in addition there were several visits and educational Skype sessions with children from various schools, as well as a great deal of attention from the media. A group of youth from Curve Lake First Nation helped on the build as well. Overall, a large number of people were engaged both in person and virtually on this build, and children and youth showed their interest in and enthusiasm for this work by giving it their full attention.

Spiritually, the canoe represents creation. A birchbark canoe contains roots from the earth, bark from a tree that climbs toward the sky, and cedar as medicine which is a healer of people (see Figure 5.4). The canoe, being made up of all these things, is a connector that engages people through more than each individual material. The materials come together to make a whole that connects us to all of creation, including to one another. When we take down a tree to make a canoe, we ask the spirit of the tree to live on in the canoe. After the canoe has been created, that canoe then has a spirit. That spirit is honoured through ceremonies during the launching of the canoe and should be fed on a regular basis—both through feasting and through being taken on the water. Canoes should not remain in museums all the time—they need to be used. This is something that Indigenous communities could become involved with. Members of different communities could visit museums that house canoes to repair them and take them on the water—to nourish them and keep their spirits alive (see Figure 5.5).



FIGURE 5.4. Spruce root (wadab), peeled and prepared for use in a birchbark canoe build. Photo: Chuck Commanda.

FIGURE 5.5. Chuck Commanda and his apprentice paddling a canoe built at Murphy's Point Provincial Park in the summer of 2018. Photo: Sarah Nelson.

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On the basis of these spiritual connections, the canoe helps Algonquin people to maintain governance structures through community ties and connections to the land. It helps us remember the time before colonial governance structures were imposed on our communities through the Indian Act; a time when we appreciated what we got from the land and used that to inform our governance structures and decisions. The canoe connects us with our traditional government, to what is healthy, and to what worked in a way that was sustainable, based on our relationship with Mother Earth. The canoe helps us connect to our history and our ancestors; it reminds us that we were self-governing people before contact; and it helps us in contemporary times to reconnect with that history and authority, and to connect with other communities on the basis of self-governance.

In helping us to understand governance, the canoe helps us to understand teachings and natural law in a way that is not abstract but tangible. When we use our hands, bodies, minds, and spirits to harvest materials and build a canoe, we are connecting the pieces together that represent our relationships with the natural world, the spirits, and other people. The process of sustainable harvesting reminds us to think about the future and future generations. This helps to re-establish connections with Mother Earth and with the future that we have sometimes forgotten. It also helps to re-establish family ties, as well as pride in our cultural history. When families work together and share our history, it fosters empathy for all of creation, and with that empathy comes respect, hope, confidence, and resilience.

Reconciliation and *Ginawaydaganuc*

Settlers adapted Indigenous canoes for their own purposes. The voyageur canoe, for example, was designed to carry large amounts of furs and other trade goods, people, and supplies—a thirty-six-foot canoe could carry up to six tons of goods as well as six people. Today, a large section of the Canadian population has had some experience with a canoe. The canoe has been appropriated as a symbol of settler Canadian culture, yet because it is a familiar symbol to so many, when we remember where the canoe came from, it can also be used as an important vehicle for reconciliation among communities.

Algonquin Elder William Commanda taught that it is both possible and essential in the work of reconciliation to get beyond false notions of separation between “us” and “them.” When we bring our mind and our heart together, we can learn to connect with all of creation. It is not necessary to focus with one’s mind on how to connect with creation; when one starts with the heart, the connection is like holding a baby—it just happens naturally. We are able to get more in touch with our inherent nature as human beings, with the rest of life, and with the loving responsibilities that come with that. Once these connections are made between the heart and mind, reconciliation and community revitalization become an honour, an act of love. At this point it is no longer “work”; it is not a burden to find these connections. Rather, it is a gift of *zaagidowin* to hold this loving responsibility for Mother Earth and all of us who inhabit it.¹⁵

During the summer of 2018, Chuck Commanda was commissioned to build a canoe at Murphy’s Point Provincial Park, as part of the Ontario Parks 125th anniversary celebrations. This build, and the launch of the completed canoe, attracted hundreds of people. The partnership between Commanda and his helpers, together with the staff and management at Murphy’s Point, resembled a mutually respectful form of co-governance. Materials were harvested locally, within the park, and the partners found that many park regulations aligned with Indigenous principles of natural law, or *ginawaydaganuc*. For example, the park enforces the rule that windfallen trees should not be harvested for firewood; instead, the fallen trees remain in the forest so that they can replenish the soil for the next generation of trees and other living creatures. This type of regulation implicitly recognizes the inherent interconnections among all things and honours the fact that even when no longer living, a tree or other organism has a vital role to play in the health and sustainability of the forest surrounding it. Historically, across Canada, conservation practices undertaken by national and provincial parks have frequently meant that colonial rules for conservation superseded Indigenous and natural laws and displaced Indigenous peoples from land. In this case, however, both partners on the project were seeking points where Algonquin law, natural law, and the regulations of the park were in harmony, and at no time did the park staff enforce their own rules at the expense of Commanda’s understandings of good harvesting practices in accordance with natural law.

Reconciliation with the land and water, through living up to our collective responsibilities, is a critical step in the healing of human relationships. Canada is committed by treaty through the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and Climate Change to reverse declines in biodiversity. To this end, targets were set in 2010 in Nagoya, Japan, that included the expansion of protected terrestrial and inland waters to 17 percent. The process established to achieve this goal mandated inclusion of and co-governance by Indigenous peoples, which resulted in relationships of co-governance based on the concept of ethical space.¹⁶ An Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) was established as part of this co-governance system, and in their report from March of 2018, *We Rise Together*, the ICE stated: “As noted throughout this report, ICE believes federal, provincial and territorial governments must take an integrated approach to meeting their domestic biodiversity goals and contributing to the public good. The twenty Aichi Targets and nineteen related Canadian biodiversity targets¹⁷ are intended to work together. This approach aligns with Indigenous worldviews and thinking that have conserved biodiversity effectively for millennia.”¹⁸ Reconciliation with the land and water is also reconciliation with our children and other future generations, by honouring our ancestors, who cared for the land enough to give us a future, and their principles of caring for life with an eye to the well-being of seven generations into the future. Acknowledging our collective relationship with creation, not as a source of money and material wealth but as a relationship where we see the life within all species as interconnected—*ginawaydaganuc*—is at the root of Algonquin law. Within this law is the understanding of natural law and our responsibilities to limit our consumption to no more than Mother Earth can reproduce, to share, and to care for all life.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to describe our understandings of some of the teachings involved with and brought out by building Algonquin-style birchbark canoes. These teachings are connected to the revitalization of Algonquin practices and communities as well as to reconciliation with settler and other non-Indigenous peoples, and as such they are linked to

resurgence and revitalization of family and community, legal traditions, and relationships with land.

These teachings can be understood through the principle of *ginawaydaganuc*, or the interrelatedness of all life; a principle at the centre of Algonquin law. The canoe teaches us from the four sources of intelligence—emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual—about *ginawaydaganuc* and connects people to one another and to the Earth through the seven sacred teachings of love, honesty, humility, respect, bravery, wisdom, and truth. It does so in a tangible way, by bringing people together to work toward a common cause, as well as through the spiritual being of the canoe itself, fashioned as it is from living materials from the Earth that come together as a whole and become something altogether new.

During the process of building a birchbark canoe, family and community members are engaged with one other, Algonquin and Anishinaabe languages and traditions of oral communication are renewed, and people connect with and learn from the natural environment. This learning includes the ways in which the Earth is changing, the importance of leaving enough for future generations, and the essential role of patience. All of these teachings lead back to fundamental principles of Algonquin governance; principles grounded in *ginawaydaganuc* that have been disrupted by colonialism, including through the imposition of the Indian Act, but which can be restored through unity—within and among Indigenous communities, among all human beings, and with all life.

The revitalization or resurgence of Algonquin governance can also be achieved through reconciliation—understood as the recognition of our loving responsibilities to one another as people, but perhaps even more importantly, as the recognition and fulfillment of our responsibilities to the land. Just as it is important to recognize that environmental problems cannot be addressed without attention to social problems, reconciliation among peoples can only take place in the context of reconciliation with Mother Earth.

Appendix A

*United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, Aichi Biodiversity Targets (2010)*¹

STRATEGIC GOAL A:

ADDRESS THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF BIODIVERSITY LOSS BY MAINSTREAMING BIODIVERSITY ACROSS GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY

TARGET 1

By 2020, at the latest, people are aware of the values of biodiversity and the steps they can take to conserve and use it sustainably.

TARGET 2

By 2020, at the latest, biodiversity values have been integrated into national and local development and poverty reduction strategies and planning processes and are being incorporated into national accounting, as appropriate, and reporting systems.

TARGET 3

By 2020, at the latest, incentives, including subsidies, harmful to biodiversity are eliminated, phased out or reformed in order to minimize or avoid negative impacts, and positive incentives for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity are developed and applied, consistent and in harmony with the Convention and other relevant international obligations, taking into account national socio-economic conditions.

TARGET 4

By 2020, at the latest, Governments, business and stakeholders at all levels have taken steps to achieve or have implemented plans for sustainable production and consumption and have kept the impacts of use of natural resources well within safe ecological limits.

STRATEGIC GOAL B:

REDUCE THE DIRECT PRESSURES ON BIODIVERSITY AND PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE USE

TARGET 5

By 2020, the rate of loss of all natural habitats, including forests, is at least halved and where feasible brought close to zero, and degradation and fragmentation is significantly reduced.

1 Convention of Biological Diversity, "Aichi Biodiversity Targets," 5 November 2018, <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/> (accessed 8 September 2020).

TARGET 6

By 2020, all fish and invertebrate stocks and aquatic plants are managed and harvested sustainably, legally and applying ecosystem based approaches, so that overfishing is avoided, recovery plans and measures are in place for all depleted species, fisheries have no significant adverse impacts on threatened species and vulnerable ecosystems and the impacts of fisheries on stocks, species and ecosystems are within safe ecological limits.

TARGET 7

By 2020, areas under agriculture, aquaculture and forestry are managed sustainably, ensuring conservation of biodiversity.

TARGET 8

By 2020, pollution, including from excess nutrients, has been brought to levels that are not detrimental to ecosystem function and biodiversity.

TARGET 9

By 2020, invasive alien species and pathways are identified and prioritized, priority species are controlled or eradicated, and measures are in place to manage pathways to prevent their introduction and establishment.

TARGET 10

By 2015, the multiple anthropogenic pressures on coral reefs, and other vulnerable ecosystems impacted by climate change or ocean acidification are minimized, so as to maintain their integrity and functioning.

**STRATEGIC GOAL C:
TO IMPROVE THE STATUS OF BIODIVERSITY BY SAFEGUARDING ECOSYSTEMS,
SPECIES AND GENETIC DIVERSITY**

TARGET 11

By 2020, at least 17 percent of terrestrial and inland water, and 10 percent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes.

TARGET 12

By 2020, the extinction of known threatened species has been prevented and their conservation status, particularly of those most in decline, has been improved and sustained.

TARGET I3

By 2020, the genetic diversity of cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and of wild relatives, including other socio-economically as well as culturally valuable species, is maintained, and strategies have been developed and implemented for minimizing genetic erosion and safeguarding their genetic diversity.

**STRATEGIC GOAL D:
ENHANCE THE BENEFITS TO ALL FROM BIODIVERSITY AND
ECOSYSTEM SERVICES**

TARGET I4

By 2020, ecosystems that provide essential services, including services related to water, and contribute to health, livelihoods and well-being, are restored and safeguarded, taking into account the needs of women, indigenous and local communities, and the poor and vulnerable.

TARGET I5

By 2020, ecosystem resilience and the contribution of biodiversity to carbon stocks has been enhanced, through conservation and restoration, including restoration of at least 15 percent of degraded ecosystems, thereby contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation and to combating desertification.

TARGET I6

By 2015, the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization is in force and operational, consistent with national legislation.

**STRATEGIC GOAL E:
ENHANCE IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY PLANNING,
KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING**

TARGET I7

By 2015 each Party has developed, adopted as a policy instrument, and has commenced implementing an effective, participatory and updated national biodiversity strategy and action plan.

TARGET I8

By 2020, the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and their customary use of biological resources, are respected, subject to national legislation and relevant international obligations, and fully integrated and reflected in the

implementation of the Convention [on Biological Diversity] with the full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities, at all relevant levels.

TARGET 19

By 2020, knowledge, the science base and technologies relating to biodiversity, its values, functioning, status and trends, and the consequences of its loss, are improved, widely shared and transferred, and applied.

TARGET 20

By 2020, at the latest, the mobilization of financial resources for effectively implementing the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 from all sources, and in accordance with the consolidated and agreed process in the Strategy for Resource Mobilization, should increase substantially from the current levels. This target will be subject to changes contingent to resource needs assessments to be developed and reported by Parties.

Appendix B

*United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity; National Targets specific to Canada (2010)*¹

REFERENCE	TARGET	RELATED STRATEGIC GOALS/AICHI TARGETS
Goal A	By 2020, Canada's lands and waters are planned and managed using an ecosystem approach to support biodiversity conservation outcomes at local, regional and national scales.	18
Target 1	By 2020, at least 17 percent of terrestrial areas and inland water, and 10 percent of coastal and marine areas, are conserved through networks of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures.	11
Target 2	By 2020, species that are secure remain secure, and populations of species at risk listed under federal law exhibit trends that are consistent with recovery strategies and management plans.	12
Target 3	By 2020, Canada's wetlands are conserved or enhanced to sustain their ecosystem services through retention, restoration and management activities.	4, 5, 14, 15
Target 4	By 2020, biodiversity considerations are integrated into municipal planning and activities of major municipalities across Canada.	2

1 Convention of Biological Diversity, "Find National Targets: Canada," <https://www.cbd.int/nbsap/targets/> (accessed 8 September 2020).

Target 5	By 2020, the ability of Canadian ecological systems to adapt to climate change is better understood, and priority adaptation measures are underway.	19
Goal B	By 2020, direct and indirect pressures as well as cumulative effects on biodiversity are reduced, and production and consumption of Canada's biological resources are more sustainable.	
Target 6	By 2020, continued progress is made on the sustainable management of Canada's forests.	4, 5, 7
Target 7	By 2020, agricultural working landscapes provide a stable or improved level of biodiversity and habitat capacity.	5, 7
Target 8	By 2020, all aquaculture in Canada is managed under a science-based regime that promotes the sustainable use of aquatic resources (including marine, freshwater and land based) in ways that conserve biodiversity.	4, 7
Target 9	By 2020, all fish and invertebrate stocks and aquatic plants are managed and harvested sustainably, legally and applying ecosystem-based approaches.	8
Target 10	By 2020, pollution levels in Canadian waters, including pollution from excess nutrients, are reduced or maintained at levels that support healthy aquatic ecosystems.	8
Target 11	By 2020, pathways of invasive alien species introductions are identified, and risk-based intervention or management plans are in place for priority pathways and species.	9
Target 12	By 2020, customary use by Aboriginal peoples of biological resources is maintained, compatible with their conservation and sustainable use.	18

Target 13	By 2020, innovative mechanisms for fostering the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity are developed and applied.	3, 4
Goal C	By 2020, Canadians have adequate and relevant information about biodiversity and ecosystem services to support conservation planning and decision-making.	
Target 14	By 2020, the science base for biodiversity is enhanced and knowledge of biodiversity is better integrated and more accessible.	19
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.	18
Target 16	By 2020, Canada has a comprehensive inventory of protected spaces that includes private conservation areas.	11, 19
Target 17	By 2020, measures of natural capital related to biodiversity and ecosystem services are developed on a national scale, and progress is made in integrating them into Canada's national statistical system.	1
Goal D	By 2020, Canadians are informed about the value of nature and more actively engaged in its stewardship.	
Target 18	By 2020, biodiversity is integrated into the elementary and secondary school curricula.	1
Target 19	By 2020, more Canadians get out into nature and participate in biodiversity conservation activities.	1, 4

Notes

- 1 Brenda Kennett, "Living by the Seashore, Watching a Lake Emerge": Indigenous Settlement around Big Rideau Lake" (Portland, ON: Big Rideau Lake Association, June 2017), <https://www.bigrideaulakeassociation.com/htlw7>; Lloyd B. Jones, *Living by the Chase* (Belleville, ON: Essence Publishing, 2002).
- 2 The medicine wheel or sacred hoop forms a part of many Indigenous philosophies; see, for example, Annie Wenger-Nabigon, "The Cree Medicine Wheel as an Organizing Paradigm of Theories of Human Development," *Native Social Work Journal* 7 (2011): 139–61.
- 3 Larry McDermott and Peigi Wilson, "Ginawaydaganuk: Algonquin Law on Access and Benefit Sharing," *Policy Matters* 17 (2010): 205–41. McDermott and Wilson prefer to spell Ginawaydaganuk with a "k" but the authors prefer to use the spelling with a "c."
- 4 *Ibid.*, 206.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 214.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 206.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 8 Government of Canada, Indian Act, 1985, <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/I-5/page-1.html>.
- 9 This process was documented by a television crew from Germany for a promotional documentary about the Thousand Islands area.
- 10 Deborah McGregor, "Indigenous Women, Water Justice and *Zaagidowin* (Love)," *Canadian Woman Studies* 30, no. 2–3 (2015–2016): 71–78, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780080449104003308%5Cnhttp://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780080449104003308/pdfft?md5=c6d30af98554a4a65d3777fcb39ec74&pid=3-s2.0-B9780080449104003308-main.pdf>.
- 11 R. Hoffman, "Perspectives on Health within the Teachings of a Gifted Cree Elder," *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 8, no. 1 (2010): 19–31; Ruth Couture and Virginia McGowan, eds., *A Metaphoric Mind: Selected Writings of Joseph Couture* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013).
- 12 McGregor, "Indigenous Women, Water Justice and *Zaagidowin* (Love)."
- 13 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 14 John McDonald, *Emigration to Canada: Narrative of a Voyage to Quebec, and Journey from Thence to New Lanark*, in *Upper Canada* (Edinburgh: Andrew Jack, 1825).
- 15 McGregor, "Indigenous Women, Water Justice and *Zaagidowin* (Love)."
- 16 Indigenous Circle of Experts, *We Rise Together: Achieving Pathway to Canada Target 1 through the Creation of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas in the Spirit and Practice of Reconciliation* (Ottawa, 2018).
- 17 These targets are included in Appendix A at the end of this chapter.
- 18 Indigenous Circle of Experts, *We Rise Together*, 19.

