

## **EDUCATING TODAY'S YOUTH IN INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: NEW PATHS FOR TRADITIONAL WAYS**

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I am an elder from an indigenous nation of subarctic Canada, the Eeyou or Cree Indians of the James Bay region. One of our great concerns is what the future will hold for our children and youth. As for many indigenous peoples around the world, our territories and our ways-of-life are undergoing processes of change and renewal. For the Eeyou, education and the transmission of knowledge is a critical issue but a complex one. On the one hand, we understand education in non-indigenous ways may allow our children to live well in a world different from the one we grew up in. At the same time, we also profoundly believe that Eeyou youth must sustain their indigenous knowledge and ways, as it only by knowing from where they come that they will be able to determine to where they wish to go.

But passing on traditional Eeyou knowledge in today's world is not an easy task. There are many barriers to overcome. In the past, Eeyou children of the Chisasibi community were born out on the land. Today the children are born in hospitals and grow up in the town. They are educated differently than their forefathers, receiving formal schooling, and they do not have the connection with the land that past generations had.

Even many parents today find it difficult to pass on Eeyou culture and traditions to their children, for when they were young they were subjected to government programmes of assimilation through residential schools. The residential schools cut the ties between children and their parents and grandparents, by retaining the children in the school and in the community during their formative years. They were not allowed to stay with their families for more than six weeks each year. From the late 1940s to the mid 1970s, Eeyou culture and language were forbidden in the schools. This period of residential schools created a gap in the transmission of Eeyou culture and knowledge.

Since the 1970s, my community has also suffered greatly from major changes brought on by large-scale industrial development on our traditional hunting territories. For example, from the 1970s onwards, the Cree Nations of east James Bay, and in particular that of Chisasibi, have been confronted with major environmental and social transformations due to the construction of a series of hydroelectric megaprojects. For any society, rapid environmental and social change is disorienting and potentially destructive. In my own community of Chisasibi, the human toll has been high, and children and youth have suffered greatly: family violence, juvenile delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, depression and suicide. This is the disturbing legacy for our youth.

For these young people who have dropped out of school and turned their backs to society, Eeyou elders, along with our Cree Hunters and Trappers Association, have set into place a kind of 'bush school'. Young boys and girls, often from families who have not been able to offer necessary guidance and support, are taken out to traditional hunting and trapping territories by an elder hunter and his wife. There, away from town life, they learn to live according to another rhythm and set of values. Through a process of apprenticeship, they begin to appreciate the knowledge that has been passed down to the elders, knowledge that is based on thousands of years of intimate experiences and interaction with the land, the waters, the animals, the plant life and the skies of the subarctic region.

This traditional knowledge cannot be taught in the classroom. For many years now, the Cree School Board has included culture courses in its formal school curriculum. Children are exposed to Eeyou culture through the making of traditional objects such as moccasins, sleds and snow shoes, and through lectures on their use. But in my opinion, young people cannot be taught how to hunt, how to trap, and how to survive on the land, through lectures and diagrams.

To pass on traditional knowledge, there is no better classroom than the bush. Young people, who have been taught Cree culture in school, often come to me and plea to be taken out in the bush. Our innovative 'bush schools' are somewhat of a hybrid between traditional learning and formal education. With a curriculum specially adapted to bush life, they offer an apprenticeship which includes both hunting and fishing knowledge and Eeyou spirituality. The bush school enables Eeyou youth to better understand their heritage by getting them out onto the land and allowing them to discover for themselves what Eeyou culture is and what it means to them as individuals.

Many youth that are sent to the bush schools are not just regular students. They are the ones who are deemed to be misfits or lost. They are labeled incorrigible; they abuse alcohol and drugs, and personal relationships are strained to the limit, including those with their immediate families. They have been rejected by the schools and by the community. Of course, these young people cannot be just taken out on the land and immediately taught traditional knowledge, for often this is one of the things that they are rejecting. The habitual dynamic of teacher-student must be replaced by another relationship.

Out on the land, young people are given a fresh start. Their past problems or crimes are not mentioned so as not to embarrass them. They are received like a member of the family, and the teaching and

learning process evolves quickly in an atmosphere of caring and sharing. I have to get to know them, know how their minds work, learn how their feelings and emotions help or prevent them from learning or accepting themselves. Everyone is included in the teaching and learning process, for the Eeyou believe that even children have something to teach or share with elders. In many instances, I become the student and they the teachers.

I will start out teaching them about respect, not just for the land and others, but also for themselves. They must learn to be proud of themselves. The knowledge of the Eeyou Nation is based on a solid foundation of respect. We believe that humans are not separate from anything, not from the land, not from the animals, not from the seas and the skies, and certainly not from each other. We are all one family, children of the Creator, even if we live, pray, and understand in different ways. We are linked by common dreams of peace, compassion, harmony, truth, integrity, wisdom, knowledge, and, most of all, love. Traditional Eeyou knowledge teaches that the Creator made all humans equal, and it was not in the Creator's plan that one colour of man should oppress another, whether through slavery, economic, or any other form of domination. Traditional teaching extends this belief to the animal kingdom. For example, it is believed that humans were not put on this Earth to destroy the land or the animals but to protect and ensure their survival for future generations.

I use several different methods to pass on knowledge to the young people when we are out on the land. One method which has been used for countless generations is legend and storytelling. The youth will ask questions about the meaning of the legend and I will tell them the meaning so that they may understand for themselves what is meant by Eeyou culture.

Another way of passing on traditional knowledge is to take the youth out on the land and to familiarise them with the landscape. When young people come into the camp, they must be taught how to talk about the land. They learn new words in their own language so that they can describe the shape of the lake, a line of trees crossing a landscape, or a passage between hills. In town, part of the Eeyou vocabulary is lost because it is no longer used or applicable and English words infiltrate Eeyou vocabulary. For example, the vocabulary used inland differs from the vocabulary used on the coast (the village of Chisasibi is located on the coast). For example, they must know that the word for bay on a lake *yadowagane* is different from the word for a bay on the ocean, *awasach*. The same distinction is made for a point of land. If it is along the sea coast, it is called *amid stawayach*, but on a lake it is named *minawadem*.

The young people must learn this special vocabulary in order to understand when an Elder gives directions. They are taught how to get to and recognise places, even though they have never seen them before. Once they have developed their survival capacities, they are sent out to navigate the land on their own. In this way, they learn about the land, the words they need, the basic skills to survive ... by actively doing and learning through doing.

The youth are taught how to live off the land, how to choose the right kind of fire wood, how to set up camp if they are caught outside for a night and so on. They stay with me and my wife in our tepee and learn how to take care of themselves. The girls learn how to clean a tepee and how to keep the tepee stocked with water and how to handle an axe for chopping firewood. The girls will also learn how to skin and clean different animals. My wife will also teach the young girls how to look after themselves and their bodies. The boys will learn the different traditional techniques for hunting such as how to set a rabbit-snare. First they are shown how and then they must act on their own.

These traditional methods of teaching and the long stay out in the bush seem to have an effect on the Eeyou youth. Sometimes a parent will call me to ask what happened out on the land. They will comment that their child now enjoys sharing the workload or that he or she has begun to enjoy different activities. While the programme in the bush lasts only for a period of three to four months, I keep contact with the child afterwards. Often I will check up on an individual at school and the news is mostly good. The child has a renewed interest in learning.

In the changing world in which we live today; one knowledge system should not be favoured over another. It is essential for traditional knowledge to be passed on, but it is wrong to think that this transmission can be done in the same way as scientific knowledge. Our youth require both scientific knowledge from outside, as well as their own traditional knowledge. But each of these sets of knowledge are passed on in different ways and have their own places for teaching. Formal education can happen in the classroom, but traditional knowledge must be passed on to our youth out on the land where our people have always hunted, fished and trapped. To ensure the continuing survival of our traditional knowledge, we must develop pathways which are parallel and complementary to formal education.

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