GATHERING THEME

Meaning of Land for Indigenous peoples

Author: Raymond F. Currie

(Facilitator reads)

Why do Indigenous people stay on reserves when there is often water that has to be boiled, mold in the houses, few educational opportunities and no jobs? For the sake of the children, why don’t they leave and come to the city? This is a real question that was posed by a non-Indigenous person. The answers are somewhat complex. The answer provided to this person constitutes the text of our theme today. It is prepared by a non-Indigenous person.

(Participant 1 reads)

First, reserves are home for many First Nations people. Home is a very important reality for most people. Most refugees, given a choice would not want to come to Canada. It is so far from their beloved homes. In Canada, at the holiday seasons people get in their cars, buses, or planes to go back home, to the farm, to the reserves, to their home cities.

The reserve communities provide a constant experience of belonging. That is why those who come to the city often experience loneliness and a real sense of loss. Those who come to universities or colleges take longer to complete their studies as family responsibilities and financial issues often draw them back to their home communities during their studies. Universities recognize that Indigenous students often endure these additional difficulties and try to ensure student success with special programming and academic assistance, and physical meeting places such as Indigenous learning centres on campuses. In spite of these difficulties, many Indigenous parents and young people embrace higher education because they see it as “the new buffalo,” with its promise of economic benefits. Just like the buffalo provided for so many needs of the community, so also higher education will play the same role.

We cannot discount the significant role that racism plays in making those who come to the city feel lonely, unhappy and unwelcome. No matter how many troubles there might be on some reserves, they are, because of this sense of
belonging, still perceived as a more comfortable place than the cities. Finally, in addition to the individual prejudice and racism Indigenous people often experience in the city, there is the systemic racism that takes away some of the housing benefits of Indigenous people who leave a reserve and come to the city. These are reasons why some of the Indigenous people want to stay on reserves.

(Participant 2 reads)

There are more important reasons. Indigenous people see the land itself in ways non-Indigenous people often do not understand: *An Indigenous person’s sense of self is not separate from the land.* The interconnectedness with the land and the natural world is a lived experience. Indigenous persons have a hard time knowing themselves and being themselves without this relationship to their homeland. The vital knowledge of generations has taught them how to live with nature and be in balance and harmony with the natural world. It is compelling to see how often Indigenous art shows an interconnectedness between animals and people and the land. Just one example: many Indigenous masks are created in the likeness of an animal. Some believe that each clan is descended from a different animal.

So coming to the city can be disorienting, although the intensity of this obviously varies between individuals. The land is sacred. When several Indigenous groups in B.C. were offered over a billion dollars for permission to develop oil projects, they turned it down – because they judged the project would destroy Mother Earth, and they could not allow that to happen. There is a relationship to Mother Earth that is sacred, nourishing and that carries responsibilities. “We do not own Mother Earth to give it away; we must respect it. We are part of it, it is part of us,” they would say.

Related to this is the fact that not all people want to live a Western, urban, lifestyle. For many Indigenous peoples, there is no ‘good life’ that does not include a daily, intimate relationship with land and nature. Of course Indigenous people want access to some of the benefits of a middle-class lifestyle such as education, health care, housing and quality of life which are
the most important drivers of migration, even from small town and villages. But it would be a mistake to go from there to the conclusion that we all want these things in the same way.

(Participant 3 reads)
Land is of course a key factor in the making of treaties. Winnipeg is on Treaty #1 land, signed in 1871 at Lower Fort Garry. It is located on the original lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. We are all treaty people and it is up to both parties to live by the responsibilities agreed to in the Treaties. In fact, as Jamie Wilson, former Treaty Commissioner for Manitoba pointed out, even the right of non-Indigenous peoples in Manitoba to own land and buy a house in Winnipeg is possible because of Treaty 1. Aimée Craft’s book, “Breathing Life into the Stone Fort Treaty: An Anishinabe Understanding of Treaty One” brings a unique approach to the history of this treaty.

Reserves were established by the treaties, and in principle the treaties were supposed to allow Indigenous people to select the areas of land they wanted. They looked for land linked to their traditional fishing, burial and ceremonial customs at the same time ensuring they had steady access to wood, water, shelter and existing transport routes. However, their reserve lands were often badly or not at all surveyed and the federal government in some cases removed people from their original reserve in order to make way for land speculation. That is the story of Peguis Reserve in Manitoba. This gave rise to the current issues of treaty land entitlement and land claims. In brief, after treaties were negotiated, the Crown became the only significant interpreter of their terms. Then, the Indian Act was passed in 1876. It should be noted that it was never part of any treaty and Indigenous people were not asked for their consent. By that date, the Crown had already launched a century or more of assimilation. However, as Aimée Craft has pointed out: “Aboriginal people in Canada did not view the land and its resources as something they owned, so they did not see the treaties as a transfer of ownership. Rather, they saw the treaties as providing a basis upon which the use of the land and its resources could be shared.”
(Participant 4 reads)
Land is important in two respects. First, as has been pointed out, traditional lands are the ‘place’ of the nation and are inseparable from the people, their culture, and their identity as a nation. Second however, land and resources, as well as traditional knowledge, are the foundations upon which Indigenous people intend to rebuild the economies of their nations and so improve the socio-economic circumstance of their people – individuals, families, communities and nations. Capturing this, Fergus MacKay says the following when discussing the World Bank’s approach to Indigenous people: “For Indigenous peoples, secure and effective collective property rights are fundamental to their economic and social development, to their physical and cultural integrity, and to their livelihoods and sustenance.” (MacKay 2004, 16).

Twenty-nine comprehensive land claim and/or self-government agreements, covering over 40 percent of Canada’s land mass, have been ratified and brought into effect since the announcement of the Government of Canada’s Comprehensive Land claims Policy in 1973 and the establishment of the British Columbia Treaty Process (1992). These agreements change the relationship between Aboriginal signatories, the federal government and the provincial / territorial governments concerned. According to Comprehensive Land Claims Agreements and Self-Government Agreements, Aboriginal signatories constitute governments in their own right and, as a result, the Parties to the agreements form ground breaking government-to-government relationships that transform how they relate to and collaborate with one another. Most non-Indigenous people do not realize that these are existing government to government agreements.

(Participant 5 reads)
The reserve system was not created by Indigenous peoples, it was never intended to provide an equal quality of life. Forced relocation has not been uncommon. In 2016 the Canadian government apologized and will provide millions in compensation for the forced relocation of the Sayisi Dene First
Nation 60 years ago in northern Manitoba. “Without proper consultation, without explanation and without adequate planning, the federal government took your people from the land and the waters that sustained you,” Carolyn Bennett, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Minister said in prepared remarks delivered in Tadoule Lake. The Indian Act continues to make Indigenous people wards of the state which affects many aspect of peoples’ lives.

Attachment to home and reserve community has been central to Indigenous life in Canada. It has had a great deal to do not only with family but with resilience and resistance to the attempts, both direct and indirect, to destroy so many aspects of Indigenous life

(Facilitator reads)

For a simple, straight-forward grasp of the history of Indigenous people and their relationship to land, we encourage you to take part in what is called a “Blanket Exercise.” These are one hour stories on the history of Indigenous peoples since the arrival of settlers. These Blanket Ceremonies are offered by KAIROS right across Canada and you can probably easily organize one in your area.

References

