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In Canada, Two-Eyed Seeing ushers in a new, more ethical, era of land conservation

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In Canada, new language and frameworks are evolving, to express values, practices, and policies that promote partnership between Indigenous Peoples, private landowners, and Crown-government conservationists. Two-Eyed Seeing—*Etuaptmumk* in the Mi'kmaw language—is one of several terms appearing in land protection policy and conversation across the country. The concept, drawing from a Mi'kmaw worldview, provides a framework for pairing knowledge systems and promoting universally positive conservation outcomes. *Etuaptmumk* instructs all people to think holistically about how to implement emerging policy tools, such as Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs).



Rivière du Nord Regional Park, Quebec, Canada. Getty: Eric Santin

Two-Eyed Seeing—which was popularized in Western settings by Indigenous leaders, including Elder Albert Marshall of the Mi'kmaw Nation and Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Potawatomi Nation and author of the book “Braiding Sweetgrass”—appeared in the 2018 report and recommendations document, *We Rise Together*. The report was prepared by Canada’s Indigenous Circle of Experts to guide

government action to achieve Canada Target 1—protecting at least 17 percent of terrestrial and inland water and 10 percent of coastal and marine area by 2020.

Marshall, who has spent decades as a leading environmental activist and now works as an Elder advisor for the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources, defined Two-Eyed Seeing in a 2012 article he co-authored for the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*. He calls the concept the “gift of multiple perspectives” and writes that it is the process of:

Learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.

Dr. Leora Gansworth—an Anishinabe researcher whose life responsibilities are connected to the element of water—explained her understanding of the context from which Two-Eyed Seeing emerged. She said that Marshall developed the framework alongside his late wife, Murdena Marshall. The two Elders drew on a lifetime of educational practice, sharing their culture and language in a variety of settings. An important aspect of the Two-Eyed Seeing model comes from recognizing that Western knowledge systems—which are often privileged and connected to ideas of supremacy, state violence, and Indigenous dispossession—do not face the scrutiny, oppression, denial, and erasure that Indigenous knowledge systems did, and still do.

Principles of Two-Eyed Seeing have guided much of Gansworth's work as a researcher. In 2022, she published a dissertation on *Anguilla Rostrata*—commonly known as eels—that implemented Indigenous and Western scientific research methods. Indigenous communities have traced changes in the North American eel population to specific events, such as forced removal of Indigenous communities, damming of rivers, the draining of wetlands, and other waterway alterations. Researching the detailed history of change to the eels' migratory habitats provided the foundation for her work, which then also considered the value of contemporary Western scientific approaches to data collection and classification.

Two-Eyed Seeing also helped Gansworth navigate the relationships she developed with co-researchers. Gansworth's work is shaped by strong ancestral and cultural connections to eels, while her colleagues are often more familiar with laboratory methods and state classification systems.

The process of self-reflection that allows her and her fellow researchers to each understand where their knowledge originates has led Gansworth to unpack her own scientific thinking and interactions with others in the field. Examining concepts of scientific methodology raises questions for her. “What is the bigger picture of how we understand this species?” She asked. “How do we get to know what we know?” Sometimes, she said, examining research methods exposes flaws and draws the integrity of results into question, which is a common critique of Western empiricism put forth by Indigenous scholars and practitioners.

Two-Eyed Seeing has also been adopted by prominent conservation organizations across Canada, such as the Nature Conservancy Canada (NCC). Christie Macdonald, manager of Indigenous-led conservation for the NCC, said that practicing Two-Eyed Seeing requires self-reflection and calls on people to let go of beliefs that any one worldview or system of government is superior to another. “It certainly takes that openness to seeing the strengths of others,” she said, “and the willingness to bring those strengths or weaknesses in together to ... solve the problem in a better new way.”

The NCC is involved in several initiatives that illustrate Two-Eyed Seeing in practice. Macdonald leads an ongoing collaborative project between the NCC and the Cree Nation Government supporting the implementation of the Cree Regional Conservation Strategy, which aims to protect much of the vast Eeyou Istchee territory in northern Quebec. In 2015, the Cree Nation Government released its plan in response to the province's northern development strategy, Plan Nord, aimed at protecting and conserving 50 percent of the region by 2035.

After releasing its plan, the Cree Nation Government partnered with the NCC. Together, the two organizations would leverage Cree knowledge and values alongside the technical capacity of the NCC to enable a long-term conservation strategy.

The initiative should result in positive outcomes for everyone. If successful, it will protect the biodiversity value of the land, maintain connectivity, and contribute to international conservation commitments made by provincial and crown governments. At the same time, it preserves Cree rights by allowing the Nation to continue to hunt, trap, fish, and practice its way of life in designated protected areas. The process includes steps such as delineating territories, drafting conservation plans, and completing impact assessments in line with the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, which will qualify Eeyou Istchee for full, legal protected status.

Another term that is emerging in conservation spaces across Canada is that of ethical space. The term is also defined in the 2018 ICE report, where it is described as a "venue for collaboration and advice, sharing and cross validation." Macdonald shared her understanding of the relationship between Two-Eyed Seeing and ethical space, saying:

Two-Eyed Seeing is a concept that allows you to understand how thinking about the strengths of two different systems can be brought together and ... ethical space is the mutual understanding and respect that allows that to actually happen.

Gansworth described ethical space as a form of legal pluralism that respects the language, culture, and knowledge systems of each represented group or nation. "Ethical space is about creating a way to engage, knowing that we're coming from those multiple legal traditions."

While Two-Eyed Seeing is an increasingly popular framework, it is far from the only system or language that is emerging to guide collaboration between governments and knowledge systems. Other prominent models include those presented in Kimmerer's book "Braiding Sweetgrass" and the work of Joe Copper Jack, who created the Land & Peoples Relationship Model.

Kimmerer's lyrical reflection on intertwining scientific and relational knowledge systems in "Braiding Sweetgrass" earned her immediate acclaim from peers and widespread name recognition later. A year after it was published, in 2013, "Braiding Sweetgrass" won the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award. In 2020, the book's popularity earned it a spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Kimmerer, who is a member of the Potawatomi Nation, has an advanced degree in Biology and teaches natural science at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. In "Braiding Sweetgrass", she presents a way of viewing and interacting with the world that weaves together the strengths of multiple communities. In the preface, she describes the book as:

... a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world. This braid is woven from three strands: Indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most. It is an intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other.

Another well-known framework comes from the Indigenous land planner Joe Copper Jack, who has served in several governing positions for the Yukon First Nations and published work that guides people to work more ethically with land, water, and natural resources. Copper Jack developed the Land & Peoples Relationship Model based on three tenets of Indigenous law: respect, care, and sharing. The framework aims to break down hierarchies in relationships between humans, plants, animals, and ecosystems. It recommends using a collaborative planning approach, in which no knowledge system is dominant over another.

Under the model, decisions are made using two main tools: the No Voice' Perspective and the Knowledge Stream Tree. The "No Voice' Perspective" holds space for the interests of future generations, and non-human relations. The Knowledge Stream Tree can be visualized as a stream, which breaks off into tributaries. On one bank lies western science; on the other is Indigenous knowledge. There are bridges built over the tributaries, as the narrower sections allow for collaboration. The image imparts the message that "knowledge systems regard each other but do not necessarily meet or bridge."

Concepts such as those presented by Marshall, Kimmerer, and Copper Jack, are increasingly important in Canada, as the nation's Crown government begins to create and recognize Indigenous-led conservation mechanisms. Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) are one tool that has emerged from this process. IPCAs were also described in the 2018 ICE report and can refer to a number of protected area types, including Tribal Parks, Indigenous Cultural Landscapes, Indigenous Protected Areas, and Indigenous Conserved Areas. Though forms of IPCAs vary greatly, all share three key elements. First, an IPCA must be Indigenous-led; second, it represents a long-term conservation commitment; and, third, it elevates Indigenous rights and responsibilities.

There is a spectrum of IPCA management systems, which the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership—a network for advancing IPCAs that includes Indigenous leaders—divides into three categories. Indigenous governance is seen in IPCAs where management is tackled fully by Indigenous governments without formal recognition by Crown governments. Under a shared decision-making model, Indigenous and Crown governments and other interested parties collaborate, share equal authority, and identify shared objectives. This management system is overseen by jointly appointed management boards. The third model is that of co-management, or consultation, where Crown governments hold ultimate authority over an area but are advised by Indigenous Nation leaders. Even in the context of co-managed IPCA, an area is stewarded to align with IPCA values and Indigenous Nations consent to using Crown legislation.

The primary goal of IPCAs is to benefit Indigenous communities, according to *We Rise Together*. As such, the legal framework is flexible and promotes self-determination and empowerment through individualized planning. ICE predicted that many of these areas will meet international standards for conserved areas, thus streamlining the nation's progress toward its conservation commitments. Other

IPCAs may not formally count toward these goals but remain valuable both as a reconciliation tool and a method for supporting landscape and biodiversity health.

While formal recognition for Indigenous-led conservation is an important development for Crown government policy, it is not a prerequisite for Indigenous ways of life to benefit land and biodiversity health. Because IPCAs are often self-declared, there is no comprehensive database for measuring their impact. Regardless, any land that is nurtured and healthy contributes to conservation goals. Macdonald summed this up, saying, “wherever Indigenous people are in a reciprocal relationship with the land, it is protected in some sense of the word.”

None of the emerging tools or frameworks for collaborative land protection present an all-encompassing solution to the complex and deep-rooted issues conservationists face. Gansworth reflected on both the power of language and the weakness it can facilitate when it serves as a Band-Aid to deeper issues. “These frameworks ... can be very helpful toward dealing with some of our human issues but the real question that we’re talking about—always—is the health of the land and how to care for the land and a lot of times that gets lost in the translation.”