

FINAL REPORT: ALGONQUIN ELDERS' GATHERING TO DEVELOP A VISION FOR VICTORIA ISLAND March 27 – 28, 2002 Chateau Logue, Maniwaki, Quebec

Background

Victoria Island has been the traditional spiritual meeting grounds of the Algonquin peoples for countless centuries. Over the past few decades, Aboriginal peoples have reclaimed their right to bring ceremony and gatherings back to this land, and many individuals and groups, both Algonquin and non Algonquin, have held meetings and sacred ceremonies on the Island, retrenching the indigenous spirit in its soil.

Algonquin Elder William Commanda notes that the Algonquin peoples have been entrusted with the guardianship of the Sacred Seven Fires Prophecy Wampum Belt for a very long time, and he notes that the world finally stands at the cross roads of time when the final message of the Belt is unfolding. It is time for all to make serious choices about our future on Mother Earth and our relationships with each other. The development of a healing and peace building center at Victoria Island is seen as one concrete manifestation of the choices available to us.

Several years ago, Elder Commanda and Firekeeper Peter Decontie approached Algonquin community leaders regarding the building of such a healing centre on Victoria Island; five communities expressed their support in writing (Timiskaming Band Council, Conseil de Bande D'Odanak, Wolf Lake First Nation, Long Point First Nation and Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg). Aboriginal Architect Douglas Cardinal has developed conceptual designs for such a centre. During the past fall, Elder William Commanda and Douglas Cardinal visited many Algonquin communities (Lac Simon, Pikogan/Amos, Timiskaming, Winneway, Long Point and Golden Lake) to seek input on this matter, and were greatly encouraged by the interest in and support for such a vision, expressed by both old and young people. First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Educational Centres (FNCCEC) Elder Joe Wabie assisted with some of these early community visits. Over a hundred a fifty people have now affirmed this support in writing. The Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation (Abitibiwinni, Eagle Village, Kitcisakik, Kitigan Zibi, Lac Simon and Long Point) passed a resolution endorsing the initiative in November 2001.

It is understood that support for such an initiative is also strengthening at various levels of government. In addition, Elder Commanda's extensive personal network of friends and colleagues both national and international are very much interested in this vision.

Elder William Commanda was afforded the opportunity to do some work on indigenous issues. He determined that the time was ripe to debate, develop and advance this vision, consistent with views of the Elders and peoples of the territory and the sacred prophecy. He believed it was essential for the seed of the vision to take its roots first amongst the people of the land. Hence a meeting was organized under his initiative to bring together Algonquin elders and community representatives involved in healing work to afford them an opportunity to explore options collectively, and build a foundation for further development and expansion.

The Activity

Under the auspices of the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural and Educational Centres (FNCCEC), Elder William Commanda, Circle of All Nations, initiated, organized, facilitated and oversaw a two day gathering of Algonquin elders and community representatives involved in healing work, including several youth.

Invitations were sent to all the Algonquin communities in Quebec and Ontario, primarily through the offices of the Chiefs; community leadership were informed of the scope of the Gathering. The Algonquin Anishnabeg Nation, through the Tribal Council office in Maniwaki, assisted in the process of registration.

The Gathering was held in Maniwaki, Quebec, at the Chateau Logue, the site of ancient burial grounds of the Algonquin peoples of the region. In a significant symbolic manner, the voices and spirits of the ancestors joined the current generations in the exploration of the purpose and future of the traditional meeting grounds of the Algonquin peoples at Victoria Island on the great Ottawa River. The timing of the meeting for March 27 and 28 was also auspicious, coming after the Spring Solstice, at the time of the Full Moon, and even just before Easter, a time of renewal and rebirth.

Approximately a hundred people from all the Algonquin communities in Quebec participated in the meeting (that is, Abitibiwinni, Eagle Village, Kitsisakik, Kitigan Zibi, Lac Simon, Long Point, Rapid Lake/Barrier Lake and Timiscaming). The two Algonquin communities in Ontario, Golden Lake and Wahgoshig had anticipated participation, but a winter storm precluded attendance.

For most participants, the morning of March 27 and the afternoon of March 28 served as travel time.

Participants were presented with a report on the Victoria Island initiative, a brochure on Elder Commanda's Circle of All Nations – Culture of Peace work, a Circle of All Nations tee shirt, and a wooden paddle created by Tommy Dewache, dressed with a tobacco tie, a symbol of the nomadic Algonquin people continuing the journey and prayer through life.

Day One

Elder Commanda opened the Gathering with a traditional smudge ceremony and an opening prayer. At the same time, Kitigan Zibi Fire Keeper, Peter Decontie, lit a sacred fire at Elder Commanda's lodge at his home on the reserve, which he kept burning steadily till the Gathering concluded the following day.

Gilbert Whiteduck, Band Counsellor with the Kitigan Zibi First Nations, and President of the FNCCEC, offered words of welcome to the community. Thereafter, the overall context and objectives for the Gathering were set out.

Next Aboriginal Architect Douglas Cardinal provided a slide presentation on his background and work, outlined his appointment by the National Capital Commission to develop a design concept for Victoria Island, and described his preliminary plans for a healing centre.

He explained the spiritual preparation (traditional sweat ceremonies) he engaged in to find the proper vision for a building to adequately and appropriately house the culture, heritage and history of the Algonquin peoples and the land, honour Mother Earth and the sacred directions, elements and seasons, and serve as a place conducive to both the healing of individuals, families and communities, as well as peace building between nations. The paradoxical image of the intimacy and expansiveness of the design sets a tone for a place of refuge for both personal healing which so many Aboriginal peoples express a dire need of, and a site for global peace building, which the whole world is obviously in desperate need of.

While the actual programs for such a setting are yet to be identified and developed comprehensively, these preliminary ideas for Victoria Island seem eminently suitable for this spiritual meeting place of the Algonquin peoples, traditionally a peaceful people, within the nation's capital region of Canada, and in one of the few countries in the world without a history of having been ravaged by war.

Participants engaged in a question and answer and commentary session, before breaking for a communal dinner.

In the evening, Elder William Commanda conducted a sacred Pipe Ceremony at the Lodge at his home on the Kitigan Zibi Reserve. Several Pipe Carriers were involved, and participants offered many moving testimonies of the desperate need for individual and community healing in a healing session that went well into midnight.

-

Day Two

Following a group buffet breakfast the next morning, Elder Commanda made a presentation on the three sacred Wampum Belts that he has carried for the people over the past thirty years.

The Sacred Wampum Belts

Three wampum belts guide the work of Elder Commanda, and have contributed to his vision for Victoria Island.

The Seven Fires Prophecy Belt

Elder Commanda is believed to be the keeper of this ancient sacred belt at the time of the unfolding of its final message – the message of CHOICE - about our relationships

with each other and with all the creations of Mother Earth. Will we be guided by values of sharing, balance and harmonious co-existence? Elder Commanda asks.

He noted that the Algonquin peoples have been entrusted with the sacred wampum belt of the Seven Fires Prophecy for a long, long time, and that we all we now stand the cross roads of time when the final message of the Belt is unfolding.

"Maybe our ancestral spirits knew we would need to bring this message before the whole world. Maybe this is why our world is now called the global village. And maybe this is why, after five hundred years of silence, the voice of the indigenous peoples is rising again. Mother Earth is telling us, the indigenous peoples who were given the sacred responsibility as her caretakers, that it is time for us to resume our duty to uphold the sacredness of all life. We have been silent too long. Wait much longer; and it will be too late.

It is now time for us all to take a big step forward to advance a vision for healing and peace consistent with the message of the Seven Fires Prophecy.

The vision can take concrete form as we work together to establish a lodge dedicated to personal and interpersonal healing and peace building for all nations, at Victoria Island, and support the land as it reclaims its heritage as the traditional spiritual meeting grounds of the Anicinabe peoples."

This in essence was the message shared by Elder Commanda.

He also shared his teachings about the two other wampum shell belts:

The 1700s Peace Belt

In this three figure belt about equitable SHARING, William Commanda's ancestors commemorated their understanding about sharing the resources of their native land with the newcomers, the French and the English, in the spirit of a confederacy, in sacred wampum shell. The inherent value of sharing remains the elusive quest of our times.

The Jay Treaty Border Crossing Belt

This belt underscores the fundamental spiritual message of indigenous peoples about BORDERLESSNESS: the Elder's people, the Mamuwini, the nomads, belong to North America, and as such they retain a sacred connection and responsibility to the land they are born to. As Elder Commanda puts it, "My territory is as the river flows, as the bird flies and as the wind blows."

Discussion

The overwhelming sentiment was strong support and interest in the vision for Victoria Island. The following is a synopsis of the comments, observations and hopes expressed by the Algonquin Elders:

- We need to support each other as Nations;
- *It is a good idea to build a centre in the Ottawa area, to underline significance in relation to government operations;*
- Need a healing centre for residential school survivors in the city;
- *Important to teach young people the language and culture;*
- We all have gifts; they need to be nurtured;
- *The government has made many promises but there is nothing to show for it; that is why this centre is important, for the contributions of knowledge of traditional persons; we should help each other;*
- It is the Great Spirit that is planning this Centre, because nothing happens without his plan;
- *Support the centre because the future generations will use it;*

- We need to teach our children and grandchildren the Anicinabe language, to continue the language; it is not often we ask our elders for their teaching and knowledge; its happening here;
- *Have used the Elder's teachings – went to court, charged with mischief for protecting Grandmother's land; was acquitted;*

- All must walk together standing by each other, talking about our beliefs and heritage; it's been a long time since I heard this talk; this healing lodge is a place to put our teaching and tools together. Great idea;

- *Very important considering we are at the end of this time; to allow the young ones to maintain their identity; to have this structure;*
- It is important to set this up, to allow the young ones to have a place to refer to for their teachings;
- *Considering all past events imposed on our peoples, all the destruction, we need to stand together to build this facility for the children;*
- It is important that we work together, to have a common vision, to work together for our future;
- *In all places, at all meetings, we must have all nations work together;*
- We must persevere, to achieve our goal;
- *I watched 50 years ago, our nations weakened, our language weakened;*
- 200 years ago when they removed our Anicinabe names and language, the weakening began;
- *Proud to see our people gathering together again;*
- A little apprehensive as to why Ottawa; thought there could be a more beautiful place than there, but have started to understand why Ottawa is right – to show the land is still ours; it was never sold, never given up;
- *My father always said to be proud of who we are, of our language, our culture, our ways;*

- We never left our land to steal the land of others, to crush other cultures;
- *I took a rest from teaching language in schools but I continue to teach my grandchildren and others who wish to learn;*
- Good to have a healing centre in Ottawa;
- *Very happy for William and Douglas – Keep on talking and working for the goal;*
- Happy to be here to get information on the gathering place;
- *Two years ago, we had this same discussion; at that time I gave my commitment, like Philip;*
- In Lac Simon, we discussed as Elders how we can come together, to work together; the words still echo in my mind; they were great words of wisdom; they are not written as I do not write;
- *I am looking for a way to pass on my wisdom so it continues on after me. Now when I speak, I pay attention to what I say; when I was 20, I listened.*
- Often when I am alone, I think about other peoples' pursuits to maintain our identity; I think they thought about it a lot. When I saw out people come together, to put this together, that's when I thought I want to be a part of this;
- *At one time they said it would be hard to rekindle; it would be hard work. We need to work together to ensure it comes to completion;*
- I had to sit to listen – I was told. Now I am proud to have been told, to have the knowledge;
- *It is very difficult for the young ones to absorb what the Elders have told us; I was raised by a speaker; now I believe what he said; now the truth is as he told me. As far back as I can remember, it was tough to maintain; it was tough to keep a grip; I didn't go to school till fifteen years ago; my teacher who raised me did not want me to go; If I too had gone to school, I would have lost many things, my language, my ways; this is what I am grateful for. The young ones now, the thirty year olds, I see them off track; I feel it is my duty to bring them back on track. I see the importance to bring the old ways back. I am now sixty; it is coming to a head. I feel I must be beside them to keep the Anishnabe ways, to keep their minds. It is sad to see our young people facing the other way, to see them lose our ways. These are the things I was thinking about the last time we talked. Who is going to bring this to life? The thing I have a hard time with is the handed down knowledge is not in the lives of the young ones. This saddens me. These are my concerns. I try my best to pass this knowledge to the young ones. Thank you for listening.*
- This knowledge needs to be passed to the youth. We are trying in Grand Lac Victoria; It is hard to pass down the teachings because they don't understand the language any more.
- *Not many live on the land. We must bring the children to live off the land and get the teachings; I am fortunate to have been brought up this way – I never went to school; I don't read or write;*
- We want to establish something to give to the children – a program to re-teach;

- *Fortunately, I got lucky; I had three children go to university; my wife worked here in the schools, with the language and the culture; you need to find out who you are, to find your work in life; we need to share together, learn together;*
- I came yesterday; I didn't attend school; I learned from Elders, teachers. It is up to us to come together to achieve our goals. In the olden days, we were independent. Today, we work for money, we teach our children to work for money; I am willing to offer my services, to teach at our building in Ottawa;
- *We need to think about the Lord with this building; He is always there to help us, to guide us; over these past two days, He has been with us, to help us get this building. It is through Him that we can make this happen. It is a great gift He wants to give us, this project; that's why He gave us intelligence. He gave us all the gifts we need to make this building. As we build this building, we need to remember the Lord. He is always there to give us strength. He is the one gathering us here. We should each thank him. So once the meeting is over, we will return home to think about it and to share the information with our community. This is the first time I have heard of this project. We want to fight to keep our language and our land. I also thank the white man for giving us tools to work with. So we all, native and non-native need to work together to achieve this building; thank you;*
- One more thing – yesterday, on the way here, something strange happened, something I have never seen before. My ancestors used to speak about this – rabbits falling down on the road; a white rabbit fell over, blown by the wind – it looked like a plastic bag running away; then it came back after us. We wonder what it had to tell us – a return of the old ways?
- *All our young people need to participate at Victoria Island;*
- I was thinking about this building for our future generations, not for me;
- *We need to speak about forgiveness;*
- We need to forgive what has happened;
- *We are all equal, all nations;*
- All our young are caught into drugs and alcohol;
- *I see our Indian people looking to find our roots;*
- This building needs to be built for our future generations;
- *I was speaking to my daughter, who had my grandson; I insisted my grandson learn our language; she said, who will he speak to, not many know the language – I insisted;*
- This idea of William's – I am proud of being involved;
- *I can feel the love of this idea;*
- Now is the time we ask our grandfathers to teach us our heritage;
- *The Elders need to be the ones to guide the young ones not to just get signatures;*
- The Elders need to be the ones to push, to send out this message;
- *My grandson will be the one to learn the language, to get that knowledge;*
- I encourage the Grandfathers to go out and get this to continue;

- *We walk powerfully into the future; it works, I have been doing this since 1964;*
- *We call to people for their ideas and knowledge on paper; Send them to William, in order to communicate with government; Messages must be shared with those who control resources; they need to know how to support this;*
- Commitment is the key; we need to make all understand that this is important for all nations;
- *We need to move to the concrete, so things go forward, - to women's circles and community gatherings;*
- We need a Circle of Elders;
- *We see a light at the end of the tunnel, it is a gift for the world, a gift of knowledge, balance and peace.*

It is eminently apparent from this itemization of the comments offered during the discussion period that there was an overwhelming outpouring of support, interest, enthusiasm and hope for the Victoria Island Healing Centre vision.

In addition to the positive comments, participants also signed a petition in support of the vision.

Conclusion

The March 27/28 2002 Gathering was very well attended, and support for the development of a healing and peace building centre at Victoria Island was very strong and enthusiastic.

Preliminary ideas for the focus of such a centre include individual and community healing, spirituality, healing of Mother Earth and environment and sustainable development issues, substance abuse treatment, language retention, arts and crafts, cultural revival and retention, indigenous education, youth empowerment, healing programs for offenders, anti-racism, nation to nation peace building; that is, programs and processes that can lead to individual and group healing, development and peace.

Further work must now be undertaken to advance this vision; the urgency of the need cannot be stressed strongly enough.

There is strong hope that this vision will take material form prior to the conclusion of the International Decade for Indigenous Peoples in 2004. Great collective energy and commitment is now needed to advance this great work.