

2016 August 3 Circle of All Nations Commemorative Note:

Water Stewardship Work of William Commanda, and the Designation of (a portion) of the Ottawa River a Heritage River.



A Special Note to Acknowledge the Passing of Grandfather Commanda, Late Algonquin, Honorary Chair of the Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee, on August 3, 2011, and a Prayer for the Ottawa River and the Continuation of his Legacy Vision for the Sacred Chaudiere Site

We are writing on behalf of Late Algonquin Elder, Dr. William Commanda, OC, Honorary Chair of the Ottawa River Designation Committee. We have received many messages about the designation of the Ottawa River a Heritage River – at least on the Ontario side – by the Hon. Catherine McKenna, and having been involved in the nomination process, commencing a decade ago, we like many others, are happy to see this shift in resistance to honouring this most special river in Canada; but we do also have some reservations that we raise for consideration. And we wonder what William Commanda would be thinking about this – his friends amongst you will know that August 3 marks the fifth year since his passing.

At the offset, we have to say that we are uneasy about the Heritage River Designation of a *portion* of the Ottawa a heritage river: it presents a fragmentation of the integrity of the river, and again reflects and reinforces the segmentation of the Algonquins of the Ottawa River Watershed – this erosion of the identity of the people commenced with the arrival of the first newcomers, was cemented in the creation of the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, and remains visible and tragic in the divisive political and social justice issues that plague the lives of contemporary Algonquin people; this comes to the attention of the public and government daily. We know the Ottawa River already cannot meet one of the conditions for designation as heritage river: pristine quality; one of the other two criteria pertains to cultural heritage: the nomination documentation discusses Algonquin Peoples, and their history and heritage across the watershed. It is of concern that only the Ontario side receives this nomination, and in such a sudden and speedy manner – we wonder why the Minister would not have facilitated further discussions with Quebec before a decision such as this is made; we have waited so long, why not a little longer, so that this can indeed embrace better the criteria for genuine heritage recognition? We are told Quebec will come on board in 2017. Indeed, Canada’s birthday would be the fitting moment for such a hard won recognition.

Still, *Circle of All Nations* too joins colleagues in being pleased to see this positive attention to the Ottawa River; perhaps it will ensure great vigilance against the pattern of sewage overflow characterizing water management – not only in the Ottawa, but the Gatineau, Yamaska, and St. Lawrence ancestral rivers of the Algonquins; perhaps we will all begin to see sacred life in water as William Commanda, his ancestors, and Indigenous Peoples across the world do, and protect this most precious of resources, in a time of global environmental crisis, drought, fire, hail and water shortage.

Today, we commemorate Grandfather Commanda’s passing with a reflection his involvement with water stewardship work during the last decades, and in part with his work with the Ottawa River Heritage Designation process.

When he heard about that Senator Len Hopkins was leading the effort to see the most important river in Canada recognized as a heritage river, he took the long trip from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg/Maniwaki, Quebec, to attend the first meeting of the Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee in Pembroke. He had a passionate interest in this river: the river lay at the heart of the territory of his ancestors; it had contributed most profoundly to the modern development of this country, during the years of the beaver trade, logging, paper and hydro power industries. His ancestors and family knew this was a most special river, one whose path spanned four special rock sites created during each of the Earth’s four lithosphere/crust creation processes, the site near Pembroke, Ouiseau Rock, being one of them and deemed most sacred by the ancient people. This knowledge, he often told me, was registered in the Algonquin language. We encouraged Pikwakangan to attend the historical first meeting – Ron Bernard represented the Algonquin First Nations community in Ontario; William Commanda brought the energy of the Algonquins of Quebec to the table. The local people involve were surprised by the Indigenous

presence, but over the years, came to respect Elder Commanda deeply, and eventually invited him to accept the title of Honorary Chair of the Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee.

He participated in and facilitated meetings in Quebec; and Senator Hopkins promoted this initiative at William Commanda's own annual Circle of All Nations Gathering in Kitigan Zibi. Over the years, the two men developed a close relationship. I told Larry Graham this story once before, and I share it now with colleagues, because I believe both our friends will want us all to understand the journey of knowledge the esteemed Senator underwent as he grew to understand William Commanda. As many of his friends will know, Senator Hopkins was very ill during the last years of his life – each time his illness flared up, he needed to come to the Ottawa hospital for treatment; ironically, each time this happen, I noted that there was a parallel crises in the Ottawa River itself – a chemical spill, sewage overflow, something of that nature: as the Ottawa River experienced stress, so did his lungs, it seemed. We had many long telephone calls during his stays in Ottawa – and he was now very interested to learn everything he could about Indigenous Peoples. Another tragedy hit his family, with the birth of one of his grandsons; and he asked Elder Commanda to pray for the child who was born to a life of physical challenge. When Senator Hopkins died, his family made great efforts to track Elder Commanda down – Len had wanted William to be his honorary pallbearer. Elder Commanda made the long journey to support his friend's final journey – he knew it was important for the healing and rest of his soul.

You see, we knew, from a photo in Clyde C.Kennedy's remarkable book, *The Upper Ottawa Valley*, in William Commanda's possession since 1970, that in 1924, the young Senator had played a role in the creation of the Atomic Energy Plant in Chalk River, and the armed forces base at Petawawa – both in the vicinity of the Ouiseau Rock and “heavy” waters of the Ottawa, one of the critically important sacred places in the Ottawa River Waterway, the one marked by ancient sacred paintings; on page 201 of his book Kennedy notes that “the hunting grounds bordering on Chalk River are completely deserted by the Indians, on account of a particular Devil which is still to be seen in that region, all the year round, in the shape of a huge ball of fire, with an open hand in the centre; the Indians will not venture on the River will not hunt on the grounds in its vicinity, and have not done so for some years past.” You will recall that eventually Canada had to shut down the nuclear plant, in a fiery battle of its own. Perhaps William Commanda's tobacco in the river commenced this healing. Perhaps you already know that the ancient Algonquin rock art site was desecrated by graffiti over the past decades following the exclusion of the Algonquins from the area, and its utilization for purposes once deemed progressive, but now revealing its darker reality in our collective health; since its recent recognition as a site of note, Ouiseau Rock has been further desecrated by further graffiti, pointing to the racist agenda still to be addressed and healed. Algonquin presence and ceremony was forcibly eradicated from the area a hundred years ago, in part under the Senator's watch – at the end of his life, he was obliged to see the devastation of the contamination of the river play out in his own health and in that of his grandchild – at least that is how he came to see things. That is why it was so important for him to secure the blessing of the Indigenous Elder as part of his final rites. He finally came to understand sacred relationship with water, rock and land, and wanted to affirm his own connection with the forces and spirit of nature.

William Commanda himself was passionately concerned about the plight of the environment. During the historical Constitutional Meetings hosted by Prime Minister Mulroney in 1987, he raised the issues, not of Aboriginal rights, but about the pollution of waters, earth and air. When the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples released its report at Victoria Island in 1996, he asked the federal and provincial leadership whether they would be prepared to drink the waters: he was fully mindful of the contamination of the E.B. Eddy and Domtar plants at the Sacred Chaudiere Site. He hosted two annual *Circle of All Nations* Gatherings where water conservation was the key theme: in 2002 and 2004. In 2006, he hosted the Waterlife Workshop in Ottawa, this one focused primarily on the plight of the Ottawa. Larry Graham, Chair of the Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee after Senator Hopkin's passing, made a presentation at this conference. We know it was a pivotal moment for many – people still talk about the fire alarms that emptied the hotel on Carling Avenue, while Algonquin Elders conducted Pipe Ceremony –



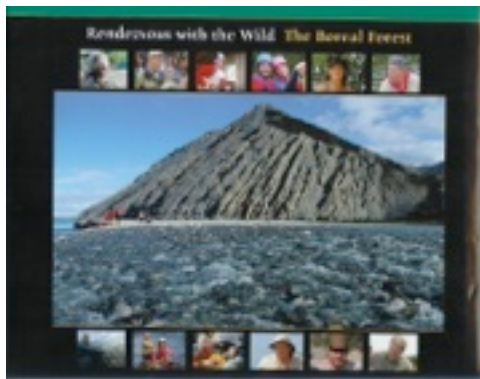
indeed sacred smoke hung in the air. Non-Indigenous Peoples engaged in awe in the Full Moon ceremony at Victoria Island. All were astir with new ideas for water conservation.



It was at the time of the conference that the water protection activists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, decided to challenge the expansion of the hydro electric dam at the Sacred Chaudiere Site, and they mounted a passionate campaign, and terminated the Domtar project; sadly, the sacred rocks at Chaudiere Falls are being blasted as we write. This conference also gave rise to the formal consolidation of the Ottawa Riverkeeper; many riverkeepers attended the *Circle of All Nations/ICE* Waterlife Workshop; Elder Commanda and others raised concern about the sewage dumping into the river; the City of Ottawa was fined \$50,000 – and the funds were assigned to Ottawa Riverkeeper for river stewardship work.

William Commanda also joined the protest against test drilling for uranium in the Sharbot/Ardoch area – former City of Ottawa Mayor Marian Dewar chaired this hearing. This venture was terminated. William Commanda hosted annual Paddle for Peace events, to raise awareness of the fact that environmental stewardship and peace building were both inseparably interconnected. (In fact, William Commanda was so determined that I, as his assistant, truly understand the spirit of water, that he insisted on buying me a kayak – Wally Shaber himself outfitted me – and indeed, I began to understand what his ancestors had learned about the spirit of water, during my apprenticeship on the lake; in part, the water taught healing, and I created a photo journal to explore this theme from an Indigenous perspective). William Commanda's *Circle of All Nations* colleagues participated in a National Capital Commission (NCC) planning meeting, and 'alerted' the capital region to the fact that sewage spilled into the same river from both sides of its banks – it was after this that NCC hosted a water stewardship workshop on this topic for officials from Ottawa and Gatineau, chaired by Ottawa Riverkeeper, and some effort to coordinate water management was then initiated. William Commanda also supported efforts to prevent the creation of a megadump at Danford Lake in Quebec, and to protect the migratory route of the Loons at Moira Lake from devastating road construction.

We remember when the Ottawa River Designation Committee team itself brought three specially painted canoes to one of these Circle of All Nations events to advocate for its efforts – and they included a painting of the American Eel.



That then brings me to the other thing William Commanda was passionately concerned about – the plight of the American Eel. He was a key voice in the challenge to see this magical ancient fish placed on the Endangered Species List - of sacred and material importance to his ancestors. Elder Commanda himself blessed the launch of the Species at Risk Act in 2004, and the Roundtable of 2006; and his colleagues continue to advocate on behalf of the American Eel. We are deeply concerned with the damming initiatives underway at not only the Sacred Chaudiere Site (this despite the valiant efforts of hundreds of people a decade ago) but also in Almonte, a special part of the Ottawa River Watershed, in the vicinity of which he once also prayed for the subterranean water.

6

William Commanda served as Honorary Elder for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Association/David Suzuki Foundation Boreal Rendezvous – and blessed its canoe launch from Victoria Island to the Canadian Museum of Civilization; His Excellency, John Ralston Saul, paddled across the river, serving as Patron of the initiative; William Commanda also made the trip to Toronto to support the Suzuki canoe launch into Lake Ontario (with Donald Marshall Junior!); his prayers at the beginning and end of the coffee table book produced on the Boreal Rendezvous embrace the prayers countless others deeply concerned with environmental stewardship.

We reflect also on William Commanda's 2009 remarks to the Navigable Waters Consultation:

When my ancestors first met Philomen Wright at the Sacred Chaudière Site on the Ottawa River in 1800, and asked by what right he cut down the trees and took the land, the stranger drew a paper from his pocket and read "*The Indians have consented to relinquish all claim to the land, in compensation for which they receive annual grants from the Government, which shall be withheld if they molest settlers.*" This paper, my ancestors saw as a big "*loup garou*", an indescribable monster supposed to have supernatural powers, and in my own lifetime, I have experienced the deep fear this reference brings to native peoples. Ironically, on his deathbed, Philomon Wright himself said, "*When I look back over the past achievements of my life they are of no profit when viewed in the light of eternity. The sun that has lighted our way is going down in a cloud – a dark, dark cloud!*" Indeed an ominous statement, and we are all now beginning to fear its implications, as perhaps Senator Len Hopkins did too. (ref. *The White Chief of the Ottawa* by Bertha Wright Carr-Harris.)

It is not without reason that we have been fearful about the powers wielded over our lands, and since the nineteen forties, we have raised our voices in protest against the many abuses to Mother Earth, and raised the alarm against unbridled and unregulated exploitation of the natural world. In the 1600s the land transformation began with none of the resource management strategies my ancestors had developed and employed over centuries: *with the fur trade, logging, dams, hydro, and nuclear energy, the resources of my peoples of the Ottawa River Watershed gave birth to Canada, and they are now dangerously polluted and depleted.* I have said elsewhere that "*I believe Mother Earth is a living creature. She has a body and spirit and veins. The rivers are her veins. If they are blocked and contaminated everywhere, cancers and poisons build up; eventually they kill. Dams, motorized vehicles, foreign animals, fertilizers, pesticides and raw sewage attack the lifeblood of Mother Earth. She has to fight back. It is Nature's Law.*" And what happens to her, happens to us because we are inextricably connected.

It was William Commanda's direct ancestors of the Petit Nations who challenged Philomen Wright for cutting down their sugar bushes at the Sacred Chaudière Site. On his deathbed, he, like Senator Hopkins, did some deep reflection and saw that there was something profound about Indigenous ideology that newcomers needed to understand and integrate.

It is likely for reasons like these that William Commanda was presented with the third Bill Mason River Conservation Award. But these were not the only matters William Commanda was passionately concerned about – he was also determined that Indigenous Peoples take their rightful place in the land of their ancestors; as keeper of the Sacred Three Figure Welcoming and Sharing Wampum Belt of 1700, he knew that the values of his people had to be integrated within the spirit and intent of the constitution to safeguard a sustainable future for all. He worked hard

nationally and internationally, to promote environmental stewardship, peace, racial harmony, social justice, and physical and mental wellness – all critically important matters of national and global relevance and survival.

In the photos you see Roberta Jameson with William Commanda - she offered the congratulatory speech; Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Kirk Wipper, Founder of the Canadian Canoe Museum were the two earlier recipients of the award; Max Finkelstein came next. In the last photo, you see Elmer Savoie, who organized the first Heritage River Festival in Ottawa (blessed by Grandfather) and the Late Len Hopkins and William's nephew-in-law, Bob Dowling. He himself was presented with two honorary doctorate degrees, on each side of the Ottawa River, and was appointed Officer of the Order of Canada. In this manner, the Algonquin spirit, wisdom and knowledge was finally acknowledged with respect, and during his lifetime.

William Commanda developed a Legacy Vision for a Healing and Peace Building Centre at the Sacred Chaudiere Site; it was supported initially by the federal government in 2004, and then fully endorsed by the City of Ottawa in November 2010, just before Elder Commanda's death. The vision advocates for the undamming of the Sacred Chaudiere Falls to the fullest extent



possible, for an Indigenous Centre for First Nations, Inuit and Metis, for an eco-peace think tank research centre/conference hotel complex, and for an urban park on Chaudiere Island. This vision

was developed with and endorsed by literally thousands of people, nationally and internationally, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

We believe that the Sacred Chaudiere Site holds huge potential as a World Heritage Site, and we have commenced research in this regard. We have also undertaken research that indicates that it aligns with other notable temple sites of the world – Giza Pyramid of Egypt, Mayan Sun Pyramid and Ankara Wat in Cambodia.

Perhaps the designation of a part of the central river in Canada's history a heritage river will commence a new momentum to advance William Commanda's Legacy vision for the sacred heart of the Ottawa.

We continue to be in awe of the breath of vision of Grandfather Commanda, and remain daily grateful for his passion, wisdom and tireless hard work. He entrusted the continuation of his work to the many friends he inspired over the course of his long life. Here's to him remaining "Encore Vivant!"