
Kohkoms' Gathering Report

July 26-28th, 2019 in Grand Rapids, MB

Overview

The Kohkoms' Healing Gathering at Grand Rapids this past summer brought together, for the first time, a group of grandmothers from various hydro-affected communities. It was a time of sharing common issues between us and how Manitoba Hydro development has affected us as people, as communities, and most importantly as Indigenous peoples who had lived off the land since time immemorial. The griefs and the losses we experienced have become more commonly known, so our gathering did not dwell so much on the past.

Instead, our focus was on how we can move forward, to help our youth understand that our communities were very healthy in the past, and we can work together to get back to living by the values of our ancestors. We can help them understand the worth of reconnecting to Indigenous ways of being and knowing.



The purpose of the gathering was to work on strategies to heal our communities and somehow find a path back to that “mino-pimatisiwin” (good life) we knew in the past. This is the past that our youth do not know. All they know is the state our communities were left in by hydro, with the devastation of the environment, our waterways which were our roadways and our playgrounds, and our forests, where our food supply was contained. The effect this had on the animals and plants (berries, roots, medicines) that we had depended on to sustain us is immeasurable. This has all led to community trauma and various forms of illness which can be witnessed in our people to this day. We, the grandmothers, have made a strong commitment to improve the state our communities are in through education, working with youth, and supporting each other in our work within our respective communities.

Event Description & Evaluation

At the invitation of the Interchurch Council on Hydropower (ICH), eleven women from four hydro-affected communities came together on the weekend of July 26-28th, 2019, in Grand Rapids. Although we had hoped for representation from 8 communities, we feel very happy with this turnout. After all, there *was* a manhunt going on that very weekend, and it was focused on the community of some of our intended attendees.

Overall, the weekend was what we had hoped for.

It is our understanding that it is rare for people from different communities to meet together. So this, in itself, was a success. We have long watched MB Hydro divide the communities, silo-ing and isolating them from each other. In response to this, it has been a long-term goal for ICH to find ways to reverse this ill-effect of hydro.

For the most part, the weekend followed the intended schedule, however, we only had one youth in attendance, so she just joined the Grandmothers in the circles.

Friday evening was spent drinking tea around the fire, getting to know each other.

Saturday, after breakfast, the group gathered back around the fire for the first sharing circle. This first circle was focused on how hydro has affected the communities, what has been lost, and what is being grieved.

After lunch, the afternoon's focus was on bringing healing back to the communities. This conversation inspired many ideas of how to in-still hope and bring change (see Appendix). There was a strong desire to gather more often, several suggestions of different ways to be together, and other potential events that could facilitate that. It was clear that to move forward the Kohkoms would need to move forward together.

Saturday evenings' sharing circle was centred on how hydro continues to impact the communities. The results of this conversation were recorded in list form (see Appendix). A large part of the conversation surrounded automation of the dams, as well as the fear of living close to the dams. A few of the key questions were: Is there an emergency evacuation plan for the communities? Shouldn't these plans be communicated to the community? Also on the forefront of the Kohkoms' minds, was the desecration of burial grounds and the destruction of the environment.

On Sunday, the grandmothers gathered one final time to talk about what's next and how to involve the youth. The youth that was present spoke into this, providing several ideas. These were recorded as well (see Appendix). An idea that came from this conversation was to send an elder or two from one community to go to the schools of a neighbouring

community to teach. This could include the use of ICH's curriculum, videos, and photo exhibit. Listening to a new voice could engage the youth in a different way, as well as continue to unify the northern communities and build relationships between them.

Another suggestion was to take youth from different communities (perhaps 2 from each) on a tour similar to the Wa Ni Ska Tan tours for southerners.

This group of Kohkoms also determined that they would like to meet annually and began to think of women from each community that they would invite to join.

There were many other ideas and thoughts both recorded and unrecorded. The Kohkoms' Gathering created a new sense of togetherness and unity among these women, as well as instilled a hope for a different future.



APPENDIX

Event Participants:

Grand Rapids - Stella Neff, Nellie Cook, Agnes Thomas, Maryann Ferland / **Nelson House** - Carol Kibiliski / **Easterville** - Sally Bourrassa / **Split Lake** - Martha Spence, Eunice Beardy, Karlene Keeper (youth) / **ICH** - Ellen Cook (facilitator), Amanda Leighton, Kerry Saner-Harvey / **Event Organizer** - Connie Cook / **Special Thanks to:** Grand Rapids Culture Camp, Brenda Packo, Carol Ballantyne, and Alice Cook for the great location and food.

Notes from the sharing circles:

How do we move forward?

- List names of strong women – water protectors with strong voices from all hydro-affected communities
- we need to have more protests about hydro's unfair treatment of indigenous people
- more media
- annual gatherings
- connect with national organization of water protectors

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- attend Elders' gathering in September in Winnipeg
 - women with strong voices to form committees to travel with Chief and Council to meetings
 - write the values, mission, and vision of a strong grandmothers' group
 - publicize - get the word out

How can we engage youth? How can we encourage and inspire them to help protect our land and water?

- through teachings from Elders
- holding youth camps
- going into classrooms (send Elders into different communities - students will listen to others; also send students to other communities to learn from each other)
- have a display at school conferences (photo display)
- show the videos (ICH)/documentaries
- youth tour (like the Wa Ni Ska Tan hydro tour, but for youth)
- use the media – make commercials/infomercials/vignette style short films showing the real Canadian history
- continued awareness to the south (speaking to high school students, church groups, educators, various organizations (what Ellen has been doing))
- identify school leaders & post-secondary leaders
- engage young artists – billboards at community junctions/logo for ohkomak
- invite national groups, Amnesty International, UN reps to our gathering/communities

How is hydro still impacting our communities today?

- AUTOMATION
- Hydro divides leaders from people
- people's fear – danger when living in such close proximity to such a huge man-made structure
- what emergency plans are in place to protect people (are they do-able? are they effective? siren is not heard by all the people – only those who are near it)
- emergency plans need to be communicated to ALL the people
- hydro continues to make decisions without consultation or communication
- continued environmental damage; killing plants, trees, fish, animals, people
- hydro continues to over-charge northern communities for power
- ongoing disrespect for our ancestors, desecrating burial grounds
- still breaking promises; adverse effects have not been dealt with – still denying that there are any