

astam, pī-pīkiskwātotān

“Come, let’s talk together”



Photo Credit: Striking Balance

A Reflection Paper for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO
By Ian King, Anthony Blair Dreaver Johnston and John Kindrachuk
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About the Authors

Ian King



Ian King is the current Chair for the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve. This is his first year acting as Chair. He owns and operates a diverse horticultural farm in the northern part of the biosphere.

Anthony Blair Dreaver Johnston



Anthony is a member of Mistawasis Nêhiyawak and acts as Special Projects Coordinator for his Nation. He is also a director on the board of governors of the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve and one of two Elder Advisors for the Indigenous Circle for Biosphere Reserves in Canada.

John Kindrachuk



John is the Executive Director of the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve. He is the power house behind the biosphere, working tirelessly to accomplish its mandate and goals and to improve community wellbeing and connectedness around Redberry Lake.

Introduction

The story of reconciliation in the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve (RLBR) is still being written. This is a reflection, but also a glimpse towards the horizon. How will the future unfold for the RLBR and Indigenous partners as we build relationships based on respect, shared values, growing trust, and ongoing dialogue?

What does the RLBR know about its Indigenous neighbours, and what do they know about the biosphere¹? As freshly appointed Chair to the board of governors of the RLBR and recent migrant to Treaty Six territory, I am a beginner in learning about the Indigenous history and cultures of the region. Recently, I have endeavoured to deepen my understanding by reading and listening, in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of the context of this place in which I live and work. What I have come to see through the writing of this paper is that the journey of reconciliation between Peoples and Nations starts in the heart of every person.

When we talk about reconciliation and the need and wish to reconcile, there is a lot of history that needs to be overcome. A lot has happened over several generations, so with that history comes certain attitudes and it takes time to change attitudes and perceptions. Part of resolving that is finding space and time to sit and share stories and experiences and to try to understand one another as human beings first. That can happen one on one, group to group, or even community to community. We are looking for those chances to share with one another. Reconciliation will then be defined on an individual or community basis. For me, reconciliation begins with the individual. At times we forget that to have relationships with others we must find ways to reconcile within ourselves. Who am I? What are my experiences? How does this limit my relationships with others?

- Anthony Johnston, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak

History here is deep, and it is critical that settlers in Saskatchewan like myself take the time to understand and accept our responsibility in the process of uncovering the truth and reconciling past wrongs. This will help us to begin to make amends and create a shared future that can heal and benefit us all. It is also time to work together, because together we have better chances of making the right choices, especially in the face of an increasingly uncertain future. I am eager and open to meeting new people. I am keen to hear stories about the past and to learn about the visions and plans of the Indigenous Peoples whose traditional territories encompass and host the RLBR. Knowledge about the history of Prairie settlement in Canada is giving me perspective on how we have come to be in the place that we are. At the RLBR we are seeking answers to the questions that reconciliation poses. At a personal level, I want to live a life that can lead me to some of these answers.

¹ Several Canadian biosphere reserves refer to themselves as 'biosphere regions' instead of 'biosphere reserves' to avoid the use of the word 'reserve,' which carries negative connotations for many Indigenous Peoples due to associations with the Indian Act. Furthermore, the word 'reserve' prompts one to think of protection in the sense of a protected area. This creates confusion when speaking about biosphere reserves, which include core protected areas, but whose buffer and transition zones include human residents and a dynamic human-nature interface. The RLBR is omitting use of the word 'reserve' as much as possible, including in this paper.

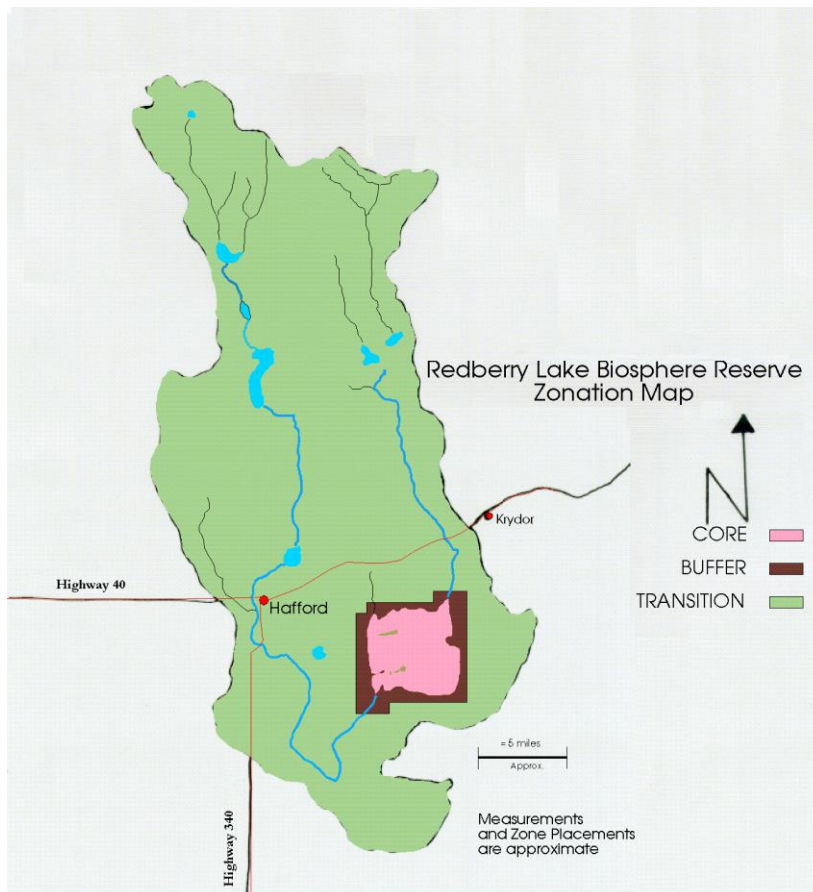


Figure 1 - Photo credit: Striking Balance

Part of the story of where we are today relates back to what life was like when we followed the buffalo, and what life was like when newcomers first came to western Canada. They changed and adapted to living life here on the Prairies and for a few generations we worked to get along and support one another and share the territories. Recently, and for several reasons, there have been generations that have not had a good working relationship, but more recently we have again been working to find ways to come together and organize and share the lands.

- Anthony Johnston, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak

THE LAY OF THE LAND



The RLBR is located within Treaty Six territory, home to Cree, Ojibwa and Assiniboine Nations. The physical boundary that is used to define the RLBR is the watershed that flows into Redberry Lake. Paper maps, satellite imagery, drones, computer software, and other modern technologies have helped provide a modern picture of the land. The RLBR has been working and collaborating on several projects that use this kind of technology to assist with land stewardship, regional planning, and flood mitigation. As we develop relationships with Indigenous Peoples, we are learning about how to approach projects in other ways, putting modern technologies aside, and beginning with Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. We are asking many questions, including: In what ways can Indigenous knowledge and culture influence positive and sustainable decision-making for conservation and help achieve more beneficial outcomes for projects and collaborations? What does the framework look like to begin these sorts of projects from an Indigenous point of view? In what ways do Indigenous relationships to the land differ from those of settlers, and how can we make equal space for valuing and considering both? In what ways can we adapt the language and words we use to better understand traditional ways of connecting to and conserving the land and waters? Indigenous knowledge, language, ceremony and culture can bring greater meaning and a new approach to the broad areas of work that the RLBR is engaged in. Now that relationships are being built and strengthened, specific actions and projects need to highlight where we can work together as partners. All initiatives could begin with the insights, skillsets and worldviews of the Indigenous Peoples whose traditional territories are home to the RLBR.

TREATY SIX AND LAND "OWNERSHIP"

Following the signing of Treaty Six in 1876, the First Nations of Moosimin, Saulteaux, Little Pine, Sweet Grass, Beardsy's and Okamawsis, and Mosquito purchased, or were awarded, what amounts to approximately 22,806 hectares of land through a Treaty Land Entitlement process, which covers approximately twenty percent of the UNESCO-designated biosphere region. Many bands were not allocated the agreed-upon amount of land promised at the signing of Treaty Six. In the case of Lucky Man Cree Nation, it was originally denied a physical piece of land despite treaty promises and was amalgamated with Little Pine First Nation until 1989 when they were finally designated an independent reserve.

Two other First Nations—Mistawasis Nêhiyawak and Muskeg Lake Cree Nation—both consider the RLBR to be part of their traditional territory. Chief Mistawasis, along with his close ally Chief Ahtahkakoop, were notable in helping to negotiate, and being the first signatories to, Treaty 6 at Fort Carlton in 1876. The 150 years that followed these treaties failed to uphold promises of land, medicine, agricultural development and support, market access, and education; furthermore, policies of cultural extirpation brought on a very dark period for Canada.

Mistawasis as a First Nation community is particularly trying to reach out and make connections with the greater community. In recent years, Mistawasis has been exploring and imagining our way of life and the values of our ancestors and what made them strong. In the 21st century we are looking to define ourselves as a self-determining and self-governing people and part of that is defining ourselves. We can do that by looking back at our ancestors and what made them strong. We quickly realized that it was the friendships, the partnerships and alliances that made our ancestors strong. Now, in this 21st century reality, there are many other people, communities, organizations within our traditional territories than there were in the times of our ancestors. We are reaching out to find ways to work with those people and organizations.

- Anthony Johnston, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak

However small my contribution may be, in the context of the larger picture, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in trying to reconcile those wrongs. John Kindrachuk, Executive Director of the RLBR, has been working to build good relationships with both Muskeg Lake Cree Nation and Mistawasis Nêhiyawak. A few notable projects with Muskeg Lake and Mistawasis include working with an IT company to build databases on the use of the RLBR and Muskeg Lake, working with Muskeg Lake First Nation and 16 to 43 Waste Management Corporation to meet their waste handling and recycling needs, and developing a flood mitigation project (LIRA) with both Nations. The RLBR is also working with Mistawasis on a project called 'Honor the Water' and collaborating with both communities to promote joint economic development projects. A new relationship between the RLBR and Muskeg Lake is focusing on an opportunity to work together on a land management project wherein the RLBR would hire an intern from Muskeg Lake First Nation to lead the initiative.

The story of the relationship between the RLBR and Mistawasis Nêhiyawak is the one I will narrate in detail, accompanied by the voices of Anthony Johnston from Mistawasis and John Kindrachuk. It begins with a story of chance acquaintanceship that led to friendship and more.

FRIENDSHIP AND KNOWLEDGE-SHARING

I was first introduced to [the RLBR] by John Kindrachuk. Between 2010 and 2015, flooding had become an issue in Mistawasis. We worked with the North Saskatchewan River Basin Council (NSRBC) and I first met John through his work with the NSRBC in 2013/2014. As we began to discuss our shared concerns in regard to flooding, I began to learn bit by bit more about Redberry Lake and the work of the biosphere. We had always known that Redberry Lake was within our traditional territory. We have stories of that being a gathering place for people, when we journeyed in the spring to follow the buffalo and returning from seasons following the buffalo, Redberry Lake was a place we would gather. Redberry is a unique place in that it is a saline lake and has a unique ecosystem of plants and animals. It may have healing properties as well, not only for humans but for animals too.

- Anthony Johnston, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak



Figure 2 - Redberry Lake. Photo Credit: John Kindrachuk

Anthony taught us that the area where the Mistawasis reserve is located, roughly 50 km northeast of Redberry Lake, was where the Nation would travel to spend the winters. Originating in the woodlands of Eastern Manitoba and the great lakes region of Ontario, the ancestors of Mistawasis Nêhiyawak migrated to the prairie parkland region of Saskatchewan in the 17th and 18th centuries.

COLLABORATIONS BECOME MORE FORMAL

As an organization, the biosphere is an entity that is made up of many different groups: There are people who sit on the board and people and businesses who live and work in the biosphere, representing many different interests. Anthony is a member of the RLBR board of governors, and his Nation, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak, collaborates and partners with the RLBR on various projects. The biosphere provides opportunities to meet and collaborate with many people and provides a positive space for cross-cultural sharing.

My position as Special Projects Coordinator for Mistawasis Nêhiyawak is relatively unique amongst First Nations communities. I have relative freedom to explore different opportunities for my community. Very few, if any other First Nations communities have a position like mine. This gives me a better chance to participate in organizations that I feel could benefit my community. Within and surrounding Redberry Lake, there are other First Nations communities and it may at times be difficult to connect with them. Perhaps an opportunity in the future as we work more together would be for Mistawasis to assist the RLBR in connecting with other Indigenous communities around Redberry Lake or those who may consider this their traditional territory.

- Anthony Johnston, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak

The RLBR board of governors recently amended its bylaws to recognize members of Indigenous Nations with historical, traditional or land-based ties to the RLBR as formal participants in the biosphere's governance. The association's membership bylaws now read "Members of the Association and of the Board of Governors will be: ... 3. An officially-appointed community member of a First Nation within whose traditional territory the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve is located, and which has signed a nomination document to UNESCO endorsing the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve." Previously the RLBR bylaws were constrained by being specific to land owners in the RLBR and did not consider treaty obligations, including properly acknowledging the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Anthony, Special Projects Coordinator at Mistawasis Nêhiyawak, has represented the RLBR as a First Nations partner at biosphere events and has recently accepted an appointment to sit on the RLBR board of governors. Anthony is bringing creative talent and a special gift for creating partnerships to help accomplish goals. He currently sits as our Science Committee Chair. All board members are looking forward to his participation.

- John Kindrachuk, RLBR Executive Director



Figure 3 - Photo credit: Canadian Commission for UNESCO

The RLBR will continue to reach out to all Indigenous Nations that are connected historically, culturally, or financially to the RLBR. The RLBR board of governors also plans to invite the Chief and Council of Mistawasis Nêhiyawak to sign a Letter of Recognition endorsing the work and designation of the RLBR.

We want to respectfully and responsibly include Indigenous Peoples and knowledge in the biosphere's management and governance. We want our biosphere to have the spirit of a working document. Core values and mission are important in deciding our direction, but new information, partnerships, technology, and the outcomes of projects and collaborations may change our goals.

- John Kindrachuk, RLBR Executive Director

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Resources and capacity are limited for both Mistawasis and the RLBR. Also challenges around finding the time to be a volunteer board member. Helping and finding time when it's needed, and to participate and set the direction for RLBR is a challenge when these things are an addition to the everyday life of work and family and community.

- Anthony Johnston, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak

Another challenge is the long-term fixed mindset of the community. Helping our community see past preconceived ideas, break out of old boxes, and let go of false stereotypes should be one of the goals of the biosphere. I believe that we can use education, empathy and compassion as the antithesis to



Figure 4 - Photo credit: Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve

ignorance. Most times a lack of understanding of our shared history is the seed of prejudice. We all come from our own unique backgrounds of culture, heritage and family, but modern-day life is shared by all, no matter where you come from.

Every year we love the opportunity to host students from the School of Environment and Sustainability (SENS) at the University of Saskatchewan. SENS students bring youth, interest, and fresh eyes to our landscape. Dr. Maureen Reed, Assistant Director at SENS and UNESCO Co-Chair in biocultural diversity, sustainability, reconciliation and renewal, also has a partnership and strong working relationship with Mistawasis Nêhiyawak. This trilateral partnership between Indigenous knowledge, academia, and biosphere values will undoubtedly provide some fantastic opportunities for us to build our community relationships and strengthen the ties we have with our urban and international counterparts. Sustainable rural economic development, positive impacts for Indigenous Nations and communities, and environmental farm practices will all come out of these partnerships.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CEREMONY

In 2017, RLBR Executive Director John Kindrachuk, Director Diane Hawrysh and Vice Chair Larry Hawrysh were invited to attend the annual pow wow held at Mistawasis Nêhiyawak. There they received a star blanket, a symbol of honor, generosity and blessing. To receive a star blanket shows that the giver holds you in high esteem for your accomplishments and generosity. To accept that honour is to take on the responsibility to uphold the symbols that that gift represents. John, Diane and Larry were deeply honoured to receive such a special gift on behalf of the RLBR. This blanket symbolizes the shared vision

and hopes that the RLBR and Mistawasis Nêhiyawak have for the future of this region. It is our intention to embody the spirit of this blanket going forward, and to build a strong foundation for our friendship. I am looking forward to how our relationship continues to develop.

MOVING FORWARD IN A SPIRIT OF RECONCILIATION

This reflection paper has made me proud of the steps we have taken, yet acutely aware of how many more steps are left to take on this journey of reconciliation. I am committed to continuing to spend time learning from Indigenous friends and neighbours and to finding ways to work together on biosphere-related initiatives. I am keen to learn more about Indigenous cultures, traditions, and connection to the land and how we can deepen relationships in a respectful and meaningful way. I am new to this position, but I am excited about the opportunities ahead.

In many ways, I think we are just at the beginning. The windows and doors of opportunity are open. Although the RLBR and Mistawasis Nêhiyawak are autonomous, we are finding ways to work together and aren't set on the goals of where we want to end up. We are open to where things lead us. Today at Mistawasis we are still defining ourselves as a Nation in the 21st century and that, to some degree, is still defined by our [geographical] boundaries. In terms of working with the RLBR and others who are now part of our broader traditional territories, we don't know where we will end up, but we are trying to build things in the right way. By sitting, talking, and sharing, we are finding out how we can better work together and share this territory and these lands.

- Anthony Johnston, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak

General References

1. <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/archive/bands/blucky1.html> (Unknown, n.d.)
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