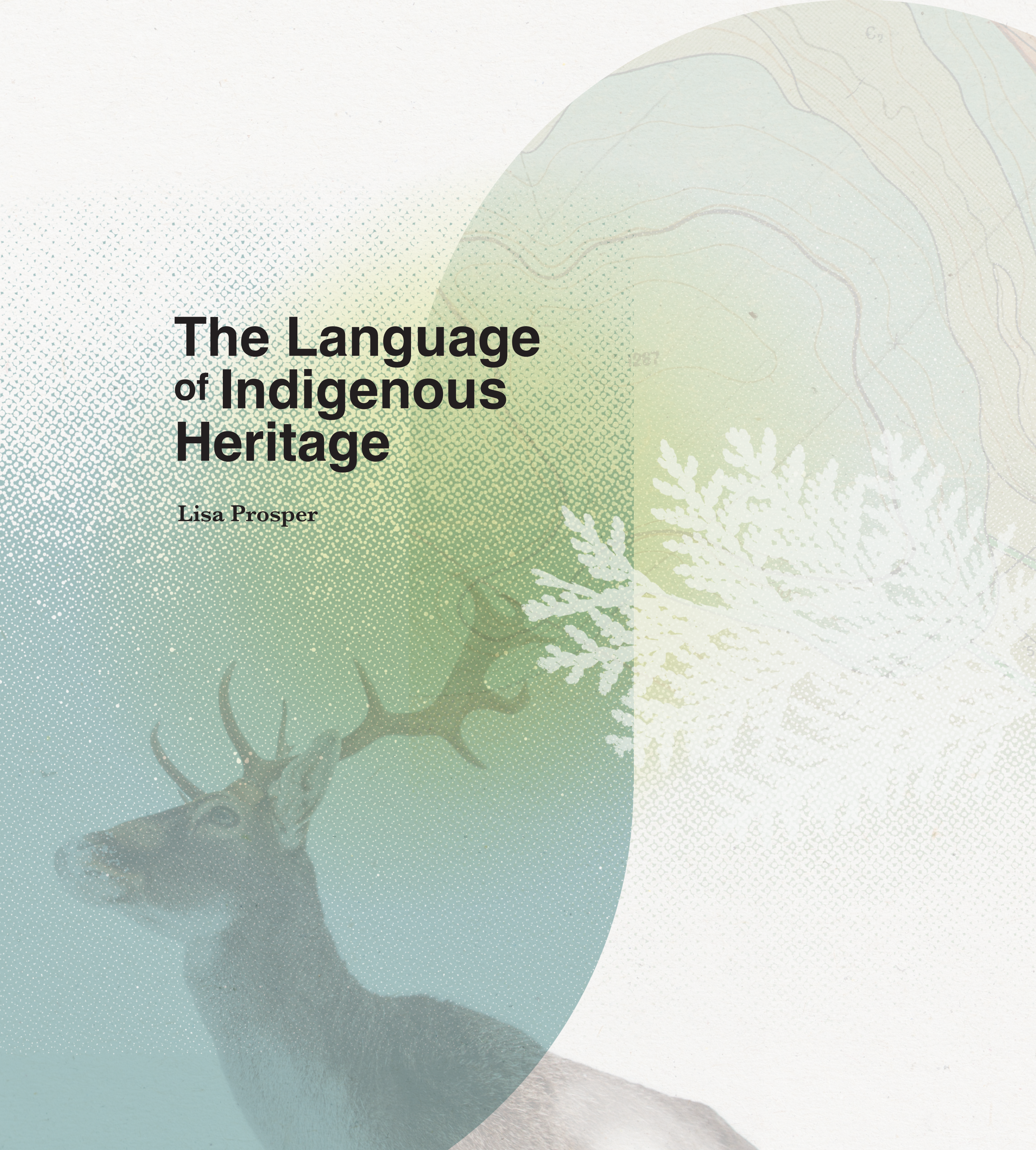

The Language of Indigenous Heritage

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United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Canadian
Commission
for UNESCO

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) supports inhabitants of Turtle Island in sharing knowledge locally and globally in order to create better societies and build peace in the minds of all humans. Supporting, advancing, and promoting efforts to decolonize knowledge and uphold Indigenous knowledge systems is a cross-cutting priority for CCUNESCO. This is one of the ways we contribute to truth and reconciliation and further the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. CCUNESCO is proud to share its platform to further disseminate invaluable perspectives and knowledges of Indigenous peoples.

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2022-2032 | INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF
Indigenous Languages

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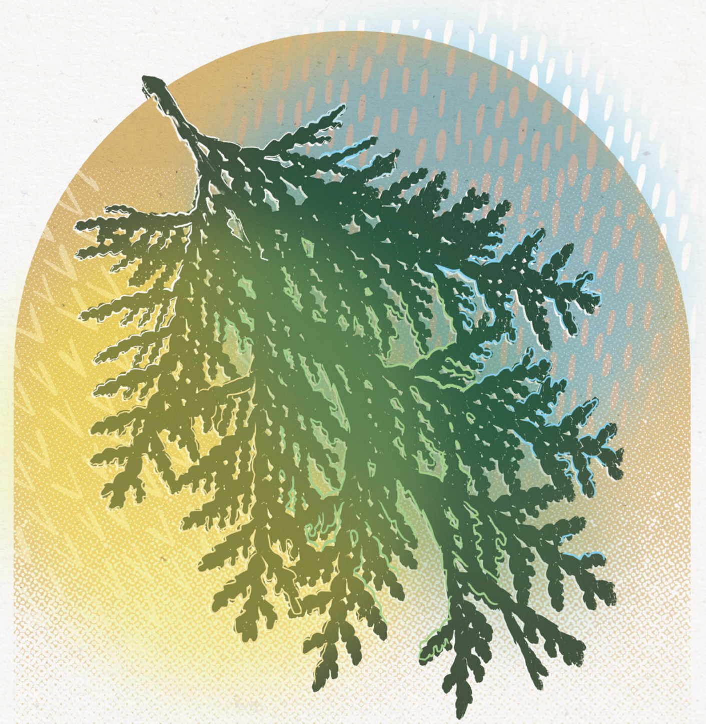
Introduction



The practice of heritage conservation is premised on a set of core concepts and assumptions that guide its implementation across a broad and diverse range of cultures and geographies. For the most part, the origins of these concepts and assumptions can be traced to western European knowledge systems that tend to regard nature and culture as separate spheres[1] and emphasize material heritage, such as buildings and objects, over living heritage, such as traditional practices, skills, knowledge and livelihoods.[2] Over time, however, it is clear that the conventional heritage system cannot adequately accommodate the full range of heritage expressions and systems of all peoples around the world, including those of Indigenous Peoples.

In response, efforts are underway within the heritage field to improve and expand the understanding of its core concepts and assumptions, with a view to increasing their relevance and broadening their application.[3] At present, the underlying basis of the framework is largely Eurocentric, and the need to recognize the cultural specificity of heritage and the knowledge systems that inform them, remains pressing. As Galla argues, "the voice of the bearer of intangible heritage – individual or collective – or those that are the closest as primary stakeholders to a heritage resource, be it intangible or tangible, movable or immovable, natural or cultural […] has a critical position in our endeavours to safeguard the cultural diversity and intangible heritage in sustainable heritage development."[4]

Recognizing and commemorating Indigenous heritage in a meaningful way within the conventional heritage system has proven to be particularly challenging, given the degree to which underlying cultural perspectives and worldviews differ. This being the case, rather than simply trying to amend existing policies, frameworks and criteria to accommodate the particularities of Indigenous heritage, it is often more advantageous to explore the cultural foundations of Indigenous heritage and build from there.

This view is consistent with the widely cited Mi'kmaq concept of *Etuaptmumk* (Two-Eyed Seeing). As Jenny L. Rowett explains, "*Etuaptmumk* is an approach based on the teachings of the late spiritual leader, healer and chief, Charles Labrador of Acadia First Nation, and brought forth in 2004 by Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall from the Eskasoni community, in Unama'ki,"[5] whose purpose is to "bring the teachings of different knowledge systems together, to be utilized mindfully alongside each other, for the good of all."[6] Without trying to subsume one knowledge system into the other, *Etuaptmumk* promotes a kind of complementarity where neither is judged by the other, and each is evaluated in relation to its own context.[7]

While diverse, Indigenous knowledge systems can be said to share certain key characteristics, namely, that knowledge generation is an interconnected and relational activity amongst living and non-living beings.[8] More specifically, Indigenous knowledge is understood as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment."[9] It has been described by Deborah McGregor as "situated knowledge" that is "neither separable from the knowledge holders or keepers, nor is it divisible from the environment in which it is embedded."[10]

To adequately address the context of Indigenous knowledge systems, it is important to explore the particularly important role of language in structuring and mediating relationships to land and place, an interconnectivity that forms the basis for cultural knowledge, identity and heritage of Indigenous Peoples.[11] In recognition of the space offered by the upcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), this paper discusses the role of language in sustaining and renewing Indigenous heritage. In doing so, it highlights how land, knowledge and identity are inextricably interwoven in many Indigenous world views, and must therefore be fundamentally recognized as such by the heritage field, both in principle and in practice. Doing so will require developing new conceptual frameworks and tools that are rooted in Indigenous ontologies.

Land-Language: Interconnected, Situated and Dynamic

Critical to understanding the significance of land in many Indigenous ontologies is understanding that land is not simply an ecology of natural elements – an amalgamation of geological and geographical features, flora and fauna. Land is, rather, a wholly cultural and spiritual sphere made up of a network of human, non-human, living and ancestral beings all interconnected and interdependent.[12] In Indigenous cultures, language is born or derived from the land, "from the sounds and rhythms of ecology, nature in action."[13]

As Jeannette Armstrong explains in her piece entitled *Land Speaking*,

> *As I understand it from my Okanagan ancestors, language was given to us by the land we live within […] The Okanagan language, called N'silxchn by us, is one of the Salishan languages […] I have heard elders explain that the language changed as we moved and spread over the land through time. My own father told me that it was the land that changed the language because there is special knowledge in each different place […] It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings – to its language – and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations. It is the land that speaks N'silxchn through the generations of our ancestors to us. It is N'silxchn, the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan People, which surrounds me in its primal wordless state.*[14]
>
> *The land as language surrounds us completely, just like the physical reality of it surrounds us. Within that vast speaking, both externally and internally, we as human beings are an inextricable part – though a minute part – of the land language. In this sense, all indigenous peoples' languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it. Over time and many generations of their people, it is their distinctive interaction with a precise geography which forms the way indigenous language is shaped and subsequently how the world is viewed, approached, and expressed verbally by its speakers.*[15]

In addition to being derived from the land, language is deeply embedded in the concept of land in other important ways. Ferguson and Weaselboy describe how "language reverberates within and through Land, and thus is intrinsically connected to all beings upon that land; it is not a variable easily separated, as it allows and acknowledges both communion with – and understanding of – land."[16] Language is also how reciprocity and relationships are enacted, with the land governing behaviour through ceremony, oral narratives and place names.[17]

Thus, language can be recognized as the cohesive or communicative element by which the relationships in the network of beings described above are sustained. It expresses the interconnections, worldviews and ways of knowing and being of a particular people in a particular place. In this way, language is the holder of Indigenous culture and identity.[18] As Cherokee Elder Hastings Shade expresses it, "As long as we speak to the fire in Cherokee, it will not go out […] when the language is gone, the fire will be gone. And the Cherokee will be gone."[19]

Given the overlapping nature of the land-language relationship, it is not surprising that language can demonstrate a peoples' deep knowledge and connection to a specific place. The specificity of Indigenous languages is connected to the physical characteristics of the land and the behavioural obligations that come with its care. The speakers of Indigenous languages assert their belonging to the land through their speaking, legitimating themselves as stewards and carers of the land.[20] One of the most profound threats to Indigenous languages is the displacement of Indigenous people from their lands.[21] The rupture between language and land not only begins the demise of language, it can also set off a series of cultural and social fractures leading to the loss of cultural identities.

M'sit No'kmaq et al. describe how, in many Indigenous languages, knowledge is "an active and ongoing process of knowing or coming to know" that is deepened through experiences on the land.[22] Knowledge of harvesting areas, or ways of navigating the land is learned through being, hunting and travelling on the land. These activities are deeply informed by beliefs and traditional values that are also learned through experiences on the land.[23] Language helps to carry these relationships and ways of knowing, learned from the land, across generations. Like knowledge, language is responsive to new experiences and adapts to accommodate new information. Its ongoing use is thus imperative for continued knowledge about the land.

Land-Language: Toponymy and the Nature of Naming

Language and land are also profoundly interconnected through the act of naming. Landscape features influence the evolution of Indigenous languages by begetting the creation of words or place-names to describe and distinguish them.[24] Place-names weave a cultural understanding of the land into the land itself. They can describe large landscape features, such as mountains, lakes, hills and rivers, or micro-environments such as rocks, individual trees, or distinct water features to identify specific places, not unlike GPS coordinates.[25] Rowan describes how the displacement of over 100,000 Nubians to arid desert locations away from their homeland on the Nile threatened Nubian language and knowledge connected to the riverine ecology and environment, and all of the intangible heritage associated with it.[26]

More than mere identifiers, Indigenous place-names "are forged into specific ontologies and express the Indigenous ways of interacting with the landscape."[27] They are often connected to narratives that explain a landscape feature, or recall myths and stories associated with the feature, acting as a kind of mnemonic prompt for their retelling. Similarly, they carry memory of events or sacred sites and, when strung together, provide mental maps for navigation across the land. According to one woman from the Jåhkågasska community in northern Sweden, "In the past, the name *was* the map."[28] Nigel Crawhall describes how San elders navigated their desert landscape using a topographic and toponymic system distinct from English or Afrikaans speakers that described sizes, heights and shapes of landscape features. He describes this as a type of literacy. "Just as we read maps, place names and books, [the San elders] were reading the land. The marks in the sand, the shape of the terrain, the vegetation, and the stories attached to all of these created texts that could only be read by one who was highly literate in this cultural and natural language."[29]

Place names, then, map the landscape according to the worldview of its inhabitants. Citing the non-interchangeability of Navajo and English toponyms, Ferguson and Weaselboy describe how "culturally-situated narratives and histories are embedded in those names" suggesting that "…Land must be experienced through Indigenous language in order to fully appreciate those layers of meaning…."[30]

Place names are also windows into culturally specific concepts that govern relationships to land. We see this in the recently designated UNESCO World Heritage Site of Pimachiowin Aki ('the land that gives life') that celebrates the relationship between the Anishinaabe people and the land through a variety of culturally embedded concepts or principles.[31] These include *ji-ganawendamang gidakiiminaan* (keeping the land) and *gibimi-giiwewatoon* (giving something back to the land). Recognizing Pimachiowin Aki as an exceptional testimony to the continuing cultural tradition of *ji-ganawendamang gidakiiminaan* (keeping the land), invites the heritage field to better understand how Indigenous languages and expressions associated with Indigenous Peoples' relationships to the land hold deep cultural knowledge fundamental to cultural identity, and how they constitute the cornerstones of an interrelated and reciprocal system of care for the well-being of the land and people.

Case Study: Netukulimk

In Mi’kmaw, the concept of *netukulimk* sets out the principle of balancing the needs of the community in relation to the natural world. As described by the Unama’ki Institute of Natural Resources, *netukulimk*, is “the use of the natural bounty provided by the Creator for the self-support and well-being of the individual and the community. *Netukulimk* is achieving adequate standards of community nutrition and economic well-being without jeopardizing the integrity, diversity, or productivity of our environment.”[32] It describes a type of spiritual and ethical relationship between people and the natural world that recognizes the interdependence and balance of all living and non-living beings. The word means, “To avoid not having enough and not so much as having plenty.”[33]

Traditional laws that govern Indigenous Peoples’ relationships with the environment are developed over long periods of close interaction with the natural world.[34] Prosper et al. describe the development of the relationship between the Mi’kmaq and the land as follows:

> *“The Mi’kmaq people have inhabited the Eastern Coast of what is now Canada for at least 12,000 years (Davis, 1997). During this time, a relationship to the land, water and all wildlife developed. This relationship laid the foundation for how the Mi’kmaq interacted with and respected all life within their circle. The relationship was expressed in various ceremonies and rituals that conveyed Mi’kmaq respect and gratitude for animals, fish, and all other earthly life forms, which today are called ‘resources’ (Martin, 1978).”*[35]

The cyclical nature of the natural world and the place of people within it are key concepts of the interrelationship of all living and non-living beings with the land. “Mi’kmaq believe that their ancestors are situated within the circle of life. In the Mi’kmaq worldview, consumption of all life forms, such as plants, trees or mammals, is considered as a celebration of their ancestors, as all deceased are integrated into and with the land, water and air.”[36] The interconnected and cyclical nature of being means that humans and all other living beings, non-living beings, and ancestors are bound together in a deeply interdependent way. The land is understood as the amalgam of all living things, including ancestors.[37]

Netukulimk sets out a series of rules and obligations expressed through rituals and customary practices to guide respectful behaviour in relation to how the Mi’kmaq conduct themselves on the land. It informs how to hunt and gather from the land in a way that promotes sustainability of the land for future generations.[38] The closely related concept of m’sɨt no’kmaq, meaning ‘all my relations’ includes not only kin, but the whole of the natural world. Caring for m’sɨt no’kmaq thus means caring for both community and the land according to *netukulimk*.[39]

Netukulimk is informing the revitalization of the Mi’kmaq relationship with Unama’ki and conservation work.[40] “The revitalization by the Mi’kmaq of *netukulimk* is intended to reconnect their severed spiritual relations with land, plants, water and animals and to restore respect for the responsibilities inherent in their rights.”[41]

Conclusion

The concept of *Etuaptmumk* or ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’ reminds us that it is important for the heritage field to consider different starting points and ways of knowing to inform heritage theory and practice. As the above discussion seeks to illustrate, language plays a central role in shaping and reflecting Indigenous relationships to land that form the basis for heritage values. Focussing on language reveals that in an Indigenous context, heritage values are often connected to the meanings, practices, and knowledge embedded in places and landscapes over time. As Thomas Johnson reflects following his description of the geographical underpinnings of the legend of Kluskap’s Journey through Mi’kma’ki (the Mi’kmaq homeland that overlaps with present day Nova Scotia): “When we are disconnected from the land, we lose our language and many of our animate words, which are essential in maintaining that relationship and interconnectedness with the land. Reciprocally, losing our language has resulted in the costs associated with a breakdown in our relationship with the land.”

A key challenge for the heritage field is to work with Indigenous communities to ensure that the tools and frameworks are in place to recognize and protect relationships to land that are expressed through language and form the cornerstone for cultural identities. This requires heritage practitioners to reflect on the limitations of existing heritage typologies and embrace the opportunity to commemorate and conserve heritage using approaches adapted to the cultural context at hand. Groundbreaking designations like the World Heritage Site of Pimachiowin Aki help pave the way for using Indigenous languages and culturally rooted concepts and ideas as a starting point for heritage practices that celebrate and protect places. This is a way of commemorating the past and perpetuating culture into the future. They also highlight the importance of safeguarding Indigenous languages as the vehicle through which heritage value is expressed and transmitted to future generations.

Notes

[1] See Denis Byrne, Sally Brockwell, and Sue O'Connor, "Introduction: Engaging Culture and Nature," in *Transcending the Culture-Nature Divide in Cultural Heritage: Views from the Asia-Pacific Region, Terra Australis* 36, eds. Sally Brockwell, Sue O'Connor and Denis Byrne (Canberra: ANU Press, 2013): 1-12.

[2] See Erica Avrami, Susan MacDonald, Randall Mason, and David Myers, eds., *Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions* (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2019).

[3] See Letícia Leitão, Leanna Wigboldus, Gwenaëlle Bourdin, Tim Badman, Zsuzsa Tolnay, and Oscar Mthimkhulu, "Connecting Practice: Defining New Methods and Strategies to Further Integrate Natural and Cultural Heritage under the World Heritage Convention," in *Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Nature in Protected Areas: Governance, Management and Policy*, eds. Bas Verschuuren and Steve Brown (London: Routledge, 2018), Chp. 10.; Giovanni Boccardi, "Authenticity in the Heritage Context: A Reflection beyond the Nara Document," *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 10, no. 1 (2019): 4-18.

[4] Amareswar Galla, "The First Voice in Heritage Conservation," *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 03, (2008): 12.

[5] Jenny L. Rowett, "Etuaptmumk: A Research Approach and a Way of Being," *Antistasis* 8, no. 1 (2018): 54. Unama'ki is Mi'kmaq for Cape Breton Island and is home to five communities: Eskasoni, Membertou, Potlotek, Wagmatcook and We'koqma'q.

[6] Rowett, "Etuaptmumk," 60.

[7] Maria Tengö, Eduardo S. Brondizio, Thomas Elmqvist, Pernilla Malmer, and Marja Spierenburg, "Connecting Diverse Knowledge Systems for Enhanced Ecosystem Governance: The Multiple Evidence Base Approach," *Ambio* 43 (2014): 580.

[8] Deborah McGregor, "Coming Full Circle: Indigenous Knowledge, Environment, and Our Future," *The American Indian Quarterly* 28, nos. 3&4 (Summer/Fall 2004): 385-410; Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2008) both cited in Andrea J. Reid, Lauren E. Eckert, John-Francis Lane, Nathan Young, Scott G. Hinch, Chris T. Darimont, Steven J. Cooke, Natalie C. Ban, and Albert Marshall, ""Two-Eyed Seeing": An Indigenous Framework to Transform Fisheries Research and Management," Fish and Fisheries 00 (October 2020): 5-6.

[9] Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology 4th ed.* (London: Routledge, 2018) cited in Reid et al., "Two-Eyed Seeing," 3.

[10] McGregor, "Coming Full Circle," cited in Reid et al., "Two-Eyed Seeing," 3.

[11] Marc Fonda, "Introductory Essay: Traditional Knowledge, Spirituality and Lands," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 2, no. 4 (October 2011): Art. 1.

[12] Jenanne Kirsten Ferguson and Marissa Weaselboy, "Indigenous Sustainable Relations: Considering Land in Language and Language in Land," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 43, Suppl. 3 (April 2020): 1-7.

[13] Tuma Young, "L'nuwita'simk: A Foundational Worldview for a L'nuwey Justice System," *Indigenous Law Journal* 13, no. 1 (2016): 93 cited in M'sit No'kmaq, Albert Marshall, Karen F. Beazley, Jessica Hum, shalan joudry, Anastasia Papadopoulos, Sherry Pictou, Janet Rabesca, Lisa Young, and Melanie Zurba, ""Awakening the Sleeping Giant": Re-Indigenization Principles for Transforming Biodiversity Conservation in Canada and Beyond," *FACETS* 6 (May 2021): 850.

[14] Jeannette Armstrong, "Land Speaking," in *Introduction to Indigenous Literary Criticism in Canada*, eds. Heather Macfarlane and Armand Garnet Russo (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2016), 146.

[15] Armstrong, "Land Speaking," 148.

[16] Ferguson and Weaselboy, "Indigenous Sustainable Relations," 1.

[17] Ferguson and Weaselboy, "Indigenous Sustainable Relations," 4.

[18] M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., "Awakening the Sleeping Giant," 845-47.

[19] Jeff Corntassel and Tiffanie Hardbarger, "Educate to Perpetuate: Land-based Pedagogies and Community Resurgence," *International Review of Education* 65 (2019): 101 cited in Ferguson and Weaselboy, "Indigenous Sustainable Relations," 4.

[20] Christine Schreyer, "Taku River Tlingit Genres of Places as Performatives of Stewardship," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 26, no. 1 (May 2016): 4-25 cited in Ferguson and Weaselboy, "Indigenous Sustainable Relations," 5.

[21] Kirsty Rowan, "Flooded Lands, Forgotten Voices: Safeguarding the Indigenous Languages and Intangible Heritage of the Nubian Nile Valley, "*International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 12 (2017): 178.

[22] M'sɨt No'kmaq et al., "Awakening the Sleeping Giant," 850.

[23] Nicholas J. Reo, "The Importance of Belief Systems in Traditional Ecological Knowledge Initiatives," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 2, no. 4 (2011): Art. 8.

[24] Trudy Sable and Bernie Francis, *The Language of This Land, Mi'kma'ki* (Sydney: Cape Breton University Press, 2013).

[25] Sarah Cogos, Marie Roué, and Samuel Roturier, "Sami Place Names and Maps: Transmitting Knowledge of a Cultural Landscape in Contemporary Contexts," *Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research* 49, no. 1 (February 2017): 45.

[26] Rowan, "Flooded Lands, Forgotten Voices," 179.

[27] Cogos, Roué, and Roturier, "Sami Place Names and Maps," 43.

[28] Quoted in Cogos, Roué, and Roturier, "Sami Place Names and Maps," 45. Emphasis added.

[29] Nigel Crawhall, "Giving New Voice to Endangered Cultures," *Participatory Avenues: Integrated Approaches to Participatory Development (IAPAD)* (2015): 8. Accessed 06 14, 2021. http://www.iapad.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/crawhall_nigel.pdf.

[30] Ferguson and Weaselboy, "Indigenous Sustainable Relations," 4.

[31] Iain J. Davidson-Hunt, Nathan Deutsch, and Andrew M. Miller, *Pimachiowin Aki Cultural Landscape Atlas: Land that Gives Life* (Winnipeg: Pimachiowin Aki Corporation, 2012).

[32] Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources (UINR), *Tan Telolti'k: How We Are Doing Now*, (2020), 9.

[33] Kerry Prosper, L. Jane McMillan, Anthony A. Davis, and Morgan Moffitt, "Returning to Netukulimk: Mi'kmaq Cultural and Spiritual Connections with Resource Stewardship and Self-governance," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal 2*, no. 4 (October 2011): Art. 7, 12.

[34] M'sit No'kmaq et al., "Awakening the Sleeping Giant," 851.

[35] Stephen A. Davis, *Mi'kmaq: Peoples of the Maritimes* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Ltd., 1997); Calvin Martin, Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978) cited in Prosper et al., "Returning to Netukulimk," 5.

[36] Prosper et al., "Returning to Netukulimk," 6.

[37] Kerry Prosper, *Netukulimk: A Circular Relationship in Shifting Ideologies: An Investigation into the Altered and Realigned Spiritual and Cultural Connection Shared by Moose and Mi'kmaq*, Honours Anthropology Thesis, St. Francis Xavier University (2009) cited in Prosper et al., "Returning to Netukulimk," 5-6.

[38] Prosper, *Netukulimk*, cited in Prosper et al., "Returning to Netukulimk," 5.

[39] Albert Marshall, interview by J. Hum, "Resilience with Albert Marshall," *Story-telling/Story-listening* (Episode 1.3) (2020) cited in M'sit No'kmaq et al., "Awakening the Sleeping Giant," 848.

[40] Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources (UINR), *Tan Telolti'k*, 9.

[41] Prosper, *Netukulimk*, cited in Prosper et al., "Returning to Netukulimk," 13.

[42] Thomas Johnson, The Geography of Stories: *When the Link between Culture, Territory and Language is Lost*, Reflection Paper (Ottawa: Canadian Commission for UNESCO's Idealab, 2020), 12.