

## Reconciliation and the Islands Trust

*“We live in an unreconciled state. We all know that for sure. Aboriginal-Canadian relations are broken. This is the time to make things right...We have no option but to reconcile. We are all here to stay.”*

That quote by Chief Dr. Robert Joseph (a Hereditary Chief of the Gwawaenuk First Nation, residential school survivor, public speaker, winner of multiple awards and honours for his peace-making activities, and Ambassador for Reconciliation Canada) comes from his keynote speech at the Association of Vancouver Island Coastal Communities’ annual convention in Nanaimo last month. His talk was one of three First Nations-themed events at the convention, a clear sign that BC’s local and regional governments want to take up the challenge of reconciliation. This is not just a passing trend, nor is it limited to BC. Throughout Canada, people and institutions are waking up to the need and the desire to “make things right.”

“I’m so excited about this time,” said Chief Joseph. “We can build a country of reconciliation because the will is there on all sides and is growing every day.”

I was attending the convention in my role as an Islands Trustee and Islands Trust Vice-Chair, and was listening through that filter. But everything Joseph said also spoke to me as an engaged individual, and will speak to anyone who is even remotely interested in justice, culture, history, politics, and the land, water and people of BC and Canada. So I will share some of it here:

“Where do we start? That’s always the question,” acknowledged Chief Joseph. “We start by educating ourselves. Read everything we can. Familiarize ourselves with Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Report, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other documents so we can enlighten ourselves about our shared history.

“It’s always important to reference the past. You can’t dismiss the past by saying you weren’t there at the time. Our past comes with the citizenship. We are all Canadians. Our history is the basis and foundation upon which we develop the future we all desire. We start by acknowledging the colonial history and the current conditions on the ground that aboriginal people find themselves in. We acknowledge policies that were intended to marginalized aboriginal people.

“Where do we start? We start by sharing our truth. We start by sharing our histories. We create space where we can have a dialogue. Out of those deep conversations we will find commonalities and shared values that will reshape our country.

“When and how do we start? We start right now. Reflect deeply on ideas of reconciliation. Think about what it means to you. Commit to an ongoing process of reconciliation, not just once a year. Establish new and respectful relationships. Repair what must be repaired, restore what needs to be restored, return what needs to be return. Agree to decide on some overarching principals that will guide us on the pathway.

“Everyone is watching this work here in Canada. If we succeed in transforming our relationships and society, the world will be watching us and will emulate us. If we can do that we might have a chance to save this divine place.”

As Chief Joseph spoke to several hundred delegates at AVICC, It felt like all ears, minds and hearts were open to receiving his message. I and the three other Islands Trust representatives were listening intently, because reconciliation and First Nations relationship-building is a big theme for us these days. Many local trust committees, Denman included, have been reaching out to neighbouring Nations to initiate and/or deepen relationships. At the Trust-wide level, we recently established a new staff position to support our work on First Nations relationship-building (along with marine environmental issues).

Also, because it is important to start with educating ourselves, as Chief Joseph says, Trust Council recently invited John Rampanen, an educator from the Nuu'Chah'nulth Nation on the west coast, to spend a morning with Trustees from across the Trust area sharing his knowledge and stories, talking about indigenous governance systems, and giving us suggestions on building cultural bridges. Rampanen, like Joseph, was a fascinating and moving speaker, and I plan to report on his presentation in a future Trustee Notebook. Stay tuned.