

Islands Trust Creates First-ever Policy for First Nations Relationships

Early in December last year, the Islands Trust Council took a big step in reshaping its approach to First Nations: the 26 elected trustees from across the Trust Area agreed on overarching principles to guide the Trust's journey towards establishing respectful, mutually-supportive relationships with First Nations.

There are 35+ different First Nations with interests in the Trust Area, making it one of the most complex places in Canada in terms of First Nations competing interests. However, until the December decision, the Trust had never articulated a position or set of goals for how it engages with First Nations.

It is high time to do so. In the last two decades the Canadian legal, political and social context has been moving with ever-increasing momentum towards a new reality for the role of First Nations in our country. A series of landmark court decisions, the Federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the current Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women – all these and more are fuelling a remarkable time of transition. All our governing bodies need to embrace real and substantive change. In the words of Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin, who handed down the game-changing *Tsilhqot'in* Supreme Court Decision in 2014, which definitively proved aboriginal title over a large tract of land: "What is at stake is nothing less than justice for the aboriginal group and its descendants, and the reconciliation between the group and wider society."

The new policy, passed unanimously, sets out three main principles:

"1. Islands Trust is committed to becoming aware of what it does not know or understand about First Nations.

"2. Islands Trust is committed to proving sincere desire for reconciliation.

"3. Islands Trust is committed to integrating, where possible, activities that support First Nations reconnecting with the Trust Area lands and waters."

It goes on to assert that these principles...

"a. underpin every activity of Islands Trust in order to have an enduring relationship with First Nations based on trust, honour and goodwill; and

"b. are sequential and they speak of a way forward to acknowledge how profoundly First Nations have been ignored and disrespected, but these principles also point to a path forward that is genuine and sincere."

The policy calls for the following commitments:

- “listening and learning” about the history of First Nations’ connection to the land and waters;
- “listening and learning” about First Nations’ perspective on treaties, rights and title; and
- acknowledging that history, to ensure First Nations and ourselves that the history has been heard and understood correctly.
- acknowledging the historical biases in the organization, which come from Canadian culture and assumptions, and have often resulted in non-Natives citizens ignoring and minimizing their relationship with First Nations; and
- undertaking actions that reflect an effort to change societal attitudes and systems.
- supporting, where possible, traditional gathering and harvesting activities;
- supporting, where possible, the integration of Traditional Knowledge into stewardship practices and policies; and
- supporting the development of a Reconciliation Action Plan.

We all know **words are so much more powerful when supported with action**, so I’m happy to report that after voting to adopt the new policy, Trust Council also voted in favour of an ambitious 18-month program of events and activities to bring these intentions to life. This plan includes cultural events, workshops, meetings, organizational changes within the Trust, and more.

This is a richly complicated endeavour. Change needs to happen on the cultural, political, community and individual levels – and the land and waters of this area need to be central to the discussion. The Islands Trust is a 42-year-old regional governance organization authorized to carry out land use planning on territory which is either unceded, or bound by treaties that we need to learn about. Across the Trust Area, these lands and waters we “plan” were stewarded for millennia by aboriginal people, who are still here. The new policy and the planned events are initial steps towards fully acknowledging this, and responding appropriately.