

Finding common ground: Cross-cultural collaboration and urban forest management in Kenora, Ontario

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Background

The 'Common Land, Common Ground' initiative consists of a partnership between the City of Kenora, Grand Council Treaty #3 and three local First Nation communities; Wauzhushk Onigum, Obashkaandagaang and Ochiichagwe'babigo'ining. In 2005, the joint entity, later named the Rat Portage Common Ground Conservation Organization (RPCGCO), was gifted 400 acres of forested land on Tunnel Island and Old Fort Island, located within Kenora's municipal boundaries. For Aboriginal and settler groups in the wider Kenora region, this example of 'Common Ground' land comprises several culturally significant sites and continues to serve diverse interests. Currently, there is no formal urban forest management plan (UFMP) or land use strategy for the forest within the RPCGCO lands area (Robson et al. 2013).

Urban forests like in Kenora are generally defined as the aggregate of public and private trees and they are distinguished from hinterland forests by their patchy distribution, variable species composition and proximity to human activity and infrastructure (Steenberg et al. 2013:135; Peckham et al. 2013:155). In keeping with the initiatives in many other cities, an UFMP was produced in 2004 by the City of Kenora to guide the management and care of public trees located predominantly in parks, playgrounds, the cemetery and on downtown boulevards. The Common Ground forest, which was excluded from this report, possesses characteristics that distinguish it from the rest of Kenora's urban forest, such as its density and naturalness, location, and historical and cultural significance.

UFMP have typically been drafted to enhance and protect the services potentially offered by urban forests, which characteristically include ecological benefits such as wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration, economic development through tourism, recreation and property value enhancement, and social values such as psychological and physical well-being, sense of place, and spiritual benefits (Steenberg 2013; Ordonez & Duinker 2010). Previous studies of the Tunnel Island portion of the RPCGCO land carried out by researchers at the Natural Resources Institute have explored values demonstrated through sense of place (Wheeler Wiens 2012), perceptions

(Robson et al. 2013) and current use (Robson et al. 2014). Together, these studies demonstrate the importance of the RPCGCO lands and its forests for different individuals and groups in the region, and they also underline the diversity of social values attributed to the territory.

Ordonez and Duinker (2010) suggest that a management plan directed at achieving sustainability in the urban forest must be driven by social values in addition to the more conventionally considered economic and ecological drivers. UFMP are key to the successful management of urban forests from strategic and operational standpoints (Steenberg 2013) but Peckham et al. (2013) have demonstrated that UMFP often do not align with residents' non-material values and priorities for their urban forests. Best practice in urban forest planning is for the process to be participatory and inclusive of the diversity of values present in the urban region (Sipila & Tyrvaïnen 2005; Ordonez and Duinker 2010; Peckham et al. 2013; Steenberg et al. 2013).

The process of developing an UFMP for the RPCGCO forest constitutes a significant opportunity to involve area governments, interested local organizations and the public in collaborative, cross-cultural environmental planning. It is also a potential setting in which social learning can emerge that can reveal how individuals and groups are impacted through engagement and collaboration as well as appropriate management approaches. For example, such community-based approaches allow historically marginalized participants to become involved in and lead resource management. The resulting social learning outcomes can be significant for the community (Sinclair *et al.* 2008) and underscore how such participation can bring social changes (Cundill and Rodela 2012; Reed *et al.* 2010). In this context, there is a need for management approaches that facilitate and reflect learning at and across multiple levels of social organization (e.g., Diduck 2010).

Research Purpose and Objectives

I propose to work collaboratively with Common Ground partners and local interested local organizations and individuals to develop a community-based, grounded approach to developing a future urban forest management plan for the RPCGCO forest.

My research will be guided by the following objectives:

- i. Identify the interests and values of various interested local organizations and individuals with regards to the RPCGCO forest heritage land;
- ii. Test deliberative processes that can be used to gather, consider, and prioritize different interests related to the forest in a cross-cultural, participatory context;
- iii. Describe the appropriate learning approaches and potential outcomes resulting from participation in such a cross-cultural collaborative resource management initiative; and,
- iv. Develop recommendations to guide the continuation of an urban forest management plan.

Methods

The proposed methods will follow a qualitative approach and a case study strategy in order to satisfy the purpose and objectives (Creswell 2009). Field research will involve collaborative sessions and participant interviews with willing participants who are RPCGCO partners, partners of the Common Ground Research Forum and other interested local organizations and individuals. Previous cross-cultural research in Kenora underscores the effectiveness of community sharing circles as established by Lavallee (2009) and Rothe *et al.* (2009). I will use this approach to bring people together to gather and consider multiple interests. Following Merriam (1998) I will rely on pre-tested, semi-structured interviews to investigate participant perspectives on the urban forest as well as their what encouraged individual learning experiences through local participatory processes.

Contribution to the Advancement of Knowledge

The proposed research aims to be consistent with the objectives of the Common Ground initiative, which include building cross-collaborative capacity, strengthening working relationships between First Nations and Settler communities, providing opportunities to learn for sustainability and developing a management plan for the Common Ground heritage lands.

Traditionally, Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian communities have perceived and utilized natural resources very differently (Davidson-Hunt 2003). Social learning can provide the appropriate framework for understanding the individual and social changes that foster better working relationships (Reed *et al.* 2010). This research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the

triggers, processes and outcomes of social learning in a cross-cultural, collaborative initiative. It will also consider the links among individual learning and social action, a gap in the literature that continues to challenge researchers (Sinclair et al. 2008; Taylor 2007).

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