The Rekindling Project: Ne'ikaanigaana – In the Spirit of Friendship and Cooperation

The key to safeguarding our environment lies in preserving our communities' stories and teachings that maintained our landscape for centuries. I believe our history can reshape the trajectory of the future. Gathering our stories and identifying where the gaps in our traditional knowledge lie within our Communities is a pathway towards restoring a biodiverse environment within the Williams Treaty territories. This project aims to ensure the understanding of Anishinaabe ways of knowing can be a resource for our Nations. This paper takes a look at the history of Good Fire within our traditional territories, and how the return of wildland burns to the landscape is a crucial aspect of climate change adaptation.

Research and Reflection Paper in Collaboration with Georgina Island Community Members and Youth

Written by Hannah Big Canoe

Removing Fire, Wisdom, and Identity From The Landscape in North America

In the last decade there has been a significant shift towards the return of Good Fire as a tool to support biodiversity across our environment and landscapes. My first introduction to the Indigenous-led movements surrounding this topic was during a gathering in 2024, for the Naming Ceremony of the Thunderbird Collective in Tk'emlúps, "the Nation that brings Nations together", British Columbia (Thunderbird Collective Birthing Ceremony 2024). It was an unforgettable moment to witness the Steering Committee and its supporters in ceremony and to speak to Knowledge Carriers from across Turtle Island. The time spent listening to Indigenous Peoples tell their stories and lived-experiences using fire as a way to create balance on the land left a lasting impact on my personal growth.

Their stories and passion led me to reflect on my own identity and what my relationship to the world around me was rooted in. Being an Indigenous person in what is now known as Canada often becomes a struggle to simultaneously reconnect with your cultural identity, and not feel as though the actions are performative or lack meaningful understanding. This is the result of losing key relationships historically built by sharing knowledge in the form of storytelling and listening to older generations reflect on lived experiences.

The intentional and systematic removal of Indigenous Peoples from their traditional territories by federal and provincial Canadian policies abetted in dismantling the sense of Indigenous identity and connection to the land (Hoffman 2022). These detrimental colonial laws made it illegal to practice Indigenous ways of life and stewardship on the landscape, disrupting "intergenerational knowledge transmission and continuity" and forever altering Indigenous relationships to identity and traditional knowledge (et al). The loss of passed down traditional knowledge has contributed to our current climate crisis, and returning to our reciprocal relationship with fire and the land may be the only way to lessen the harm caused by overdevelopment and lack of care for the bioregions which sustain us.

There are many reasons our Communities have lost their spiritual connection to fire and the land. Every year that passes seems to bring about more intense environmental concerns. On Turtle Island a main cause for growing climate anxiety are the “disastrous wildfires” that are the direct result of removing Good Fire from the land and disrupting Indigenous ways of being in North America (Hoffman 2022). This problem is not only a result of the lack of relationship human societies have with our environmental surroundings in the era of viewing tech and economic development as the highest form of progress – it is also a side effect of the loss of generational wisdom as a guiding principle when moving through the world. “On average, one billion dollars of public money is spent each year suppressing wildfires in Canada (Natural Resources Canada 2020), with indirect costs to livelihoods and health much higher” (Hoffman 2022). David Cooper, an archeologist working with the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa explains; wisdom and intelligence are commonly confused, but an important distinction (Goug’e-Powless, Cooper, Duffy 2025).

“You can have a great deal of intelligence… factual knowledge and data, but that’s very different from wisdom, which in many ways is how you apply and learn from knowledge. We have plenty of examples of short-term thinking that did incredible damage to the environment and we still deal with the consequences of that” (Goug’e-Powless, Cooper, Duffy 2025).

Provincial emergency and environmental health planning often leaves Indigenous Communities unaccounted for, with 60% of Indigenous Communities in Canada being located in remote, forested areas (Hoffman 2022). This form of geographical disenfranchisement causes Indigenous Communities to be 30% more likely to suffer harm and displacement due to catastrophic wildfires and climate emergencies (et al). Such a reality is especially deplorable given that the ancestral relationship between Indigenous people and the land was severed by colonial interference. Today, we face existential threats born of a century of federal and provincial negligence, poor land management, and a systemic abandonment of traditional stewardship.

I strongly believe the only way to protect our families and future generations from a dangerously unbalanced world is to relearn our Traditional Ecological Knowledge and return those practices to the landscape of Turtle Island. The Thunderbird Collective is one of many Good Fire stewardship programs across North America that is integrating traditional knowledge, cultural burning, and land management. The Thunderbird Collective inspired the Rekindling Project and gave us the opportunity to begin recovering historical information and Traditional Knowledge from Elders and Knowledge Carriers. We have intentionally involved the youth as active participants in the process of gathering stories and recording our Community's history. In the two years since my opportunity to observe the Thunderbird Collective and their vision, it has become evident that each Nation has an understanding and deep respect for the spirit of fire. What I hope to see is the restoration of our ancestral relationship with fire as a tool for regeneration, rooted deeply in Anishinaabe knowledge and stewardship.

The Anishinaabe Relationship to Fire in the Great Lakes Region

Since time immemorial, Anishinaabe Nations have lived, and thrived throughout the landscape surrounding the Great Lakes Region, "using fire intentionally to manage the ecosystems they lived in" (Northup, Johnson, Panek 2022). Through the use of frequent, low intensity fires, species diversity and abundance was nurtured and sustained for generations. "This deep, reciprocal relationship with the land is rooted in the culture of Native people. Federal policy regarding the suppression of wildland fire essentially stopped the common practice of cultural burns and ended the cycle of regeneration the environment had grown dependent upon. This created a loop where the harm being inflicted on Indigenous ways of life became detrimental not only to the people, but also to the land that depended on their reciprocal relationship. The imposition of fire prevention laws and restriction of Indigenous Peoples' activities on their traditional land has changed the biodiversity of forests by removing fire's

natural regenerative properties from the environment (Northup, Johnson, Panek 2022). Plants across our territories evolved from those that thrived with fire to those that were fire intolerant and became less wide-ranging in species throughout once diverse bioregions (et al).

The relationship between Indigenous Nations and the landscape in Ontario was ignored by Britain during the series of negotiations that took place between 1781 and 1812, which shaped our current geographical and cultural climate in the province (Wallace 2018). These treaties were called the Upper Canada land surrenders – which transferred land title and ownership to the Crown in exchange for one-time payments and in some cases, deceitful removal of hunting and fishing rights (Wallace 2018). Surrenders that occurred after the initial treaty signing were set in similar fashion of undermining Indigenous ways of living and expanding colonial capital driven development in the region.

Now, our Communities are working to reestablish their inherent right and responsibility to steward the land that historically sustained them. This goal is not without challenges, as the Anishinaabek Nation and its Communities are geographically divided, on reserves and spread across Ontario. This is the legacy of the Williams Treaties, which were signed in October and November of 1923 by the government of Canada and Ontario, and seven First Nations of the Chippewa of Lake Ontario and the Mississauga of the north shore of Lake Ontario (Wallace 2018). These Nations; The Chippewa of Beausoleil, Georgina Island, and Rama, as well as the Mississauga of Alderville, Curve Lake, Hiawatha, and Scugog Island, saw the Williams Treaties as a way to maintain their sovereignty and relationship with the land, while now sharing spaces with the encroaching settler populations (et al). This was not what transpired after signing the treaty. Instead, the document transferred over 20,000km of land in south central Ontario to the Crown, and prohibited Indigenous Peoples from hunting, fishing and performing traditional practices on their territories now legally under crown jurisdiction (et al). These agreements were signed in bad faith and undermined Indigenous rights to live on the land as they had for generations. The Chippewa and Mississauga Nations fought for the right to exist on their

traditional territories and demanded an overruling on the banning of hunting and fishing rights across Williams Treaty territories.

Ninety-five years later, in 2018, the Williams Treaties First Nations along with the Governments of Ontario and Canada came to an agreement, settling litigation about land surrenders, Indigenous harvesting rights and reestablishing our rights to practice traditional ways of living across Anishinaabe territory, on and off reserve in southern Ontario. This monumental achievement opened the door for our Communities to begin intertribal conversations and bring youth into the spaces where traditional knowledge is shared and practiced. Only then can younger generations truly understand what was once taken and fought for over decades when our access to the land and each other was lost. The result of removing Good Fire from the land is a neglected relationship with the environment, and loss of cultural identity. Wildland Firefighter, Damon Panek from the Red Cliff Band Chippewa of Lake Superior, speaks to this notion of human connection to the land in a short interview,

"I think a lot about connection, our human connection to landscape, and how disconnected we are today. I think that is part of this story too. There's this narrative about native people, that they were clueless just wandering around the wilderness looking for food… but they are so advanced in their understanding of this world around us. Beyond anything that we know today, and fire was a big part of that… this was the scientific method in process, testing hypotheses, and then over time perfecting that to the point where we knew how the fire was going to behave and what the fire was going to give you in return… it wasn't wishful thinking, it was a deliberate application of fire for specific reasons" (Northup, Johnson, Panek 2022).

Federal fire suppression policies came into place, starting in the 1910s, 20s and 30s, halting people's ability to go out and set fire in order to maintain the pattern of regeneration, or teach younger generations how to do so (et al). Today, "modern society has forgotten our historical relationship with fire," but Indigenous Communities in many cases have valuable context for understanding how we should be interacting and stewarding our environment moving forward into the future (et al).

An unbalanced environment is a neglected environment. Fire suppression and loss of connection to the landscape is related to the increasingly intense behaviors and reactions on the ground to wildland fire (et al). Climate and environmental journalist Molly Segal states,

> "It is becoming evident… that prescribed fire burning is one of many tools needed across the landscape… And for many, many years agencies moved away from it and were very suppression based… So they really need to start getting to [it and] using a lot of different tools. Which includes thinning, includes prescribed fire, which includes Indigenous cultural burning" (Lynch 2024).

We get in the way of ourselves, but ultimately Turtle Island will embrace prescribed burns across our landscapes, or we're going to keep fighting fires that intensify each year (Northup, Johnson, Panek 2022). The question then becomes how do we advance conservation and sustainability conversations beyond fire prevention, toward a model that addresses dangerous fires, while restoring and supporting Indigenous-led, intentional fire stewardship on landscapes that desperately need it.

Knowledge Carriers, Elders, and Youth from Georgina Island First Nation in Conversation

I cannot speak for all First Nations, or for the Williams Treaties as a whole, but what I believe is the key to rebuilding our relationship with the land as Ojibwe People, is by talking to each other and listening. Every generation should know the one before and after their own. It is the way of the Ojibwe to consider seven generations before, and the seven to come next. We must begin living on this Earth as if it is not ours, but a gift we must keep safe for those yet to come.

When thinking about how to restore Traditional Ecological Knowledge to our territories, the first step is establishing a dialogue between older and younger generations. It is vital to provide opportunities for the youth to take the time to sit and listen to the stories of their elders. Rekindling our relationships with each other, and opening conversations about what the past

looked like, and how it has shaped our present will help future generations better understand the consequences of environmental degradation and the climate crisis.

In a series of interviews done by Ojibwe students at Sutton District High School, we asked the students to interview a select group of Knowledge Carriers from Georgina Island First Nation, as well as two family members they chose personally (Big Canoe, Charles, Hoeg 2026). The selected interviewees were Elder Susan Hoeg, Traditional Knowledge Keeper Jake Charles, and Fire Chief Ian Big Canoe. We wanted to hear about the lived experiences of those who have grown up in the Williams Treaty territories and their thoughts on both the past, present, and future of the landscape (et al). The students interviewed each participant, asking the same questions, and recording each response.

The questions focused on daily interactions with the environment, observations about the changes that have occurred on Georgina Island in their lifetime, moments of personal connection to the land, extreme weather patterns and concerns related to fire, floods, ice storms, fog and drought. As well, the youth asked about the changes that may occur in the future because of environmental decisions made over the past century.

Across the many interviews conducted, common themes and shared concerns emerged from the information collected. One prominent concern was the anxiety surrounding the Community's reduced capacity for self-sufficiency compared to the past. Older Community members often pointed out the lack of intergenerational knowledge being shared and practiced. Another significant issue brought forward by multiple people was the amount of invasive species choking out native plants and medicines that grow on the Island. There were also comments about how the growing number of non-member developments being allowed has increased amounts of garbage on the roads and public spaces.

These conversations between youth and their older family and Community members brought out new perspectives, drawing connections between our traditional ways of interacting with the land, and new ways we can begin rebuilding a respectful relationship with fire and the

landscape after an era of forced detachment. Jake Charles, an Anishinaabe Knowledge Carrier from Georgina Island First Nation explained during his interview that the spirit of the land and the people is reflected in the strength of the Community (Big Canoe, Charles, Hoeg 2026). When we forget to see the animals and forest as living beings, we lose our ability to move forward in a good way. Non-human beings are a part of the spiritual relationship required to be strong as a Nation; learning ceremony and relearning the language that connects us to this territory is a pathway to reconnecting us to each other and the rest of the world (et al). During conversations between interviewees, there was an agreement on the Communities interest in learning how to reconnect to fire, but an absence of opportunities available to begin doing so (et al). When there is willingness to participate in and support community-wide fire awareness and danger prevention training, it can help build the knowledge and trust needed to reestablish Good Fire as a tool for land management practice.

Traditional fire teachings and being a good fire fighter/fire conscious person go hand in hand. Both teach you to respect fire, and not use it for harm, or as a plaything. To use fire in a good way, such as traditional burns, or practicing ceremonies that teach respectful relationships to fire is an ecologically sound way to combat harmful fire such as out-of-control forest fires caused by human negligence or overgrown dead forests. The way we treat water and fire is reflective of our society– our values and empathy for each other and Mother Earth. You don't need to fight fire if you respect it.

Returning Fire to the Williams Treaty First Nations

The Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) name for prescribed, traditional burns is Biinaakzigewok Anishnaabeg (City of Toronto 2026). Fire restoration can be both an ecological and cultural act (Northup, Johnson, Panek 2022). Williams Treaty First Nations and their territories have historical and personal connections to fire-dependent landscapes and

understanding traditional practices and values can offer insights on how to collectively return to a reciprocal relationship with fire (Northup, Johnson, Panek 2022). In Wisconsin a member of Red Cliff Reservation compared the state's species list associated with fire dependent ecosystems, to a list of Ojibwe traditional medicines, finding every single species listed in the state's reference document was also named in the Ojibwe medicine document (et al). Traditional medicines are fire-dependent (et al). This understanding ties our identity as Anishinaabe Peoples to the reciprocal nature of fire, which creates abundance, new growth, and biodiversity.

The Williams Treaties First Nations have the unique opportunity to become leaders in actionable climate adaptation. Using our Traditional Ecological Knowledge and working in tandem across the territory, we can begin reintroducing fire, and stewardship to the landscape.

Chief Dave Mowat of Alderville First Nation notes that if we continue to neglect our environment in favour of short-sighted rapid development, it will only extend the suppression and extinction, "of traditional practices like burning, language and other customs that are appropriate to harmonize with living on the land, loving the land and acknowledging the connection between all things."

Alderville First Nations is a neighboring Anishinaabe Community already taking charge of their environment's health and future (McMann 2026). The Alderville Black Oak Savanna has become "a hub of conservation and restoration" where individuals from both within and outside of Alderville First Nation are welcome to learn about land stewardship (et al). There is a deep history of fire being used to cultivate biodiversity across the region where the Black Oak Savanna is located, for centuries it was taken care of by the Haudenosaunee, and then the Anishinaabe who both practiced traditional burning (et al). The practice was only stopped due to restriction of Indigenous Peoples movements and access to their territories that came after colonial expansion, infrastructure development and legislation such as the Indian Act (et al).

"According to one estimate, only one per cent of the tallgrass prairie ecosystems remain intact around the world and preserving them is critical to ensuring the survival of rare traditional medicines and rare species at risk" (McMann 2026).

The Black Oak Savanna site supports two types of endangered grasslands: tallgrass prairie and oak savanna (Alderville First Nation 2020). These ecosystems are incredibly important to protect because "just like forests and wetlands, grasslands have decreased dramatically," with less than 3% of these habitats surviving in Ontario and throughout North America (et al). Alderville's reintroduction to fire to the savanna is just one of many ways the Williams Treaties First Nations can support conservation efforts and restore abundance to the landscape that older generations remember.

This project is our attempt to ensure the understanding of Anishinaabe ways of knowing can be a resource for our Nations. Preserving the stories and teachings that maintained our landscape for centuries can reshape the trajectory of the future. Gathering our stories and identifying where the gaps in our traditional knowledge lie within our Communities is a pathway towards restoring a biodiverse environment within the Williams Treaty territories (City of Toronto 2026) (McMann 2026).

Works Cited

Alderville black oak savanna (2020) *Alderville First Nation*. Available at: https://alderville.ca/our-offices-services/alderville-black-oak-savanna/ (Accessed: 19 March 2026).

Big Canoe, I., Charles, J. and Hoeg, S. (2026) ‘Rekindling Project Interviews: Our Stories Shape the Future’, *The Rekindling Project*.

City of Toronto (2026) *Traditional & Prescribed burn*, *City of Toronto*. Available at: https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/water-environment/trees/forest-management/urban-forest-management/prescribed-burn/ (Accessed: 16 March 2026).

Goug’e-Powless, C., Cooper, D. and Duffy, M. (2025) *Wisdom Of Fire: How Anishinaabe Values Shape the Apostle Islands*, *YouTube*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGZz0upzHl8 (Accessed: 17 March 2026).

Hoffman, K.M. (2022) *The right to burn: barriers and opportunities for Indigenous-led fire stewardship in Canada*, *Facetsjournal*. Available at: https://www.facetsjournal.com/doi/pdf/10.1139/facets-2021-0062 (Accessed: 18 March 2026).

Lynch, L. (2024, March 4). So long, winter. hello, wildfires. | what on Earth with Laura Lynch | live radio | CBC listen. CBCnews. https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-429-what-on-earth/clip/16046400-so-long-winter.-hello-wildfires.

McMann, G. *et al.* (2026) *A First Nation’s prairie grows in Ontario, then Burns*, *The Narwhal*. Available at: https://thenarwhal.ca/alderville-black-oak-savanna-conservation/ (Accessed: 19 March 2026).

Northup, V., Johnson, L. and Panek, D. (2022) *Oshkigin Spirit of Fire - Story told by Ojibwe Firefighters, Found du Lac elder Vern Northup and Damon Panek* , *YouTube*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uBuxbdr5Qs (Accessed: 17 March 2026).

Sandman Signature Hotel, Chief Louis Centre, meeting and ceremony . (2024, February). Agenda and notes. CIPS - NRCan: Thunderbird Collective Birthing Ceremony Tk’emlúps (BC). Tk’emlupsemc (Kamloops).

Wallace, S.I. (2018) *Williams treaties | the Canadian encyclopedia*, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Available at: https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/williams-treaties (Accessed: 16 March 2026).