Land Acknowledgement

Introduction

Land acknowledgements to begin meetings have become more common across multiple sectors of Canadian society, including corporations, governments, not-for-profits and universities. Many Rotary clubs acknowledge the land to begin meetings. What does land acknowledgement mean? What is included? How is it developed?

Responding to the increased interest, the Indigenous Speakers Series began in March 2021 with a presentation on Land Acknowledgements by John Currie, the Executive Director of Honouring Indigenous Peoples [HIP] – the national Rotary Indigenous Peoples partnership relationship in March 2021. From this presentation, other webinars and websites, and building on earlier work by this committee, we learn that land acknowledgements:

- Express connection to the land;
- Identify the peoples with whom we share the land, especially the original peoples who preceded us on the land;
- Reflect the agreements applying to the land;
- Note why this is significant to us – as individuals or as organizations.

This means that land acknowledgements are about relationships, which also means that they involve us – our experience, our values, our purpose and our interactions with the land and other peoples. Land acknowledgements are not formulaic, copied from other organizations and delivered by rote. They should be fluid, personal and responsive to context. John Currie advises "to write and speak from the heart".

Land acknowledgement is a small first step in the journey of reconciliation. Acknowledging the land and peoples indicate an openness to learn, to walk with and to build relationship with Indigenous peoples. As our knowledge and relationships grow, our land acknowledgements will also change: they are not fixed, but dynamic.

Connection

Land acknowledgements reflect the Indigenous world view that all things are connected. Land is a very inclusive term. It applies to the land itself but also to water and air; it includes features of the land, such as mountains; it includes all living beings -- animals, birds and fish. land – defined broadly to include all aspects of the land – living and non-living things and the peoples on the land. How do we experience the land? Where do we live, work and play? What connects us to this place?

We have begun all our Speakers Series by acknowledging the land. For example, Jan Fox, co-chair of the District Committee, will reflect on the connection she feels with the land while walking, noting specific features and a refreshed perspective because of Covid constraints.

Sharing the Land

We share the land with other people and peoples. First Nations were the first peoples on the land. What specific First Nations lived, travelled, hunted, celebrated where we live now? We live in part of the Metis homeland. How will we acknowledge the Metis Nation? Since then, others have come to share the land. What do we know about the peoples on the land? How do we reflect the layers of history? What will we say about them? How will we validate those statements?

Agreements Pertaining to the Land

Clubs in Rotary District 5370 are in Treaty Lands. Treaty 6 is in central Alberta and Saskatchewan and includes all clubs from Athabasca south. Treaty 8 is in northern Alberta, northeastern British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories and includes all BC clubs, Yellowknife, Grande Prairie, Peace River, Slave Lake, Fairview and Fort McMurray. While Treaty 11 is in the Northwest Territories and part of Yukon (and Nunavut), there are also modern treaties in effect. The Whitehorse clubs are in the area covered by the Umbrella Agreement.

These are agreements defining the relationships between First Nations and non-Indigenous people and the basis for sharing the land. These are legally recognized agreements that bind Canadian governments and confer rights and responsibilities. How do we reference these agreements? What do they mean for us as Rotarians?

How does this relate to individuals and organizations?

When we acknowledge land and peoples, we speak both as members of organizations and as individuals. We need to make both linkages.

An organizational statement would include the elements discussed above, including recognition of: connection to the land, the Indigenous peoples, and other people sharing the land. But then it becomes specific. What story/aspect of land resonates with the core mission/vision/values of the organization? How are land and relationships part of the brand of the organization? The Rotary Club of Edmonton West, for example, references the Rotary objectives and the core values of the Four-Way Test.

A **personal** statement is a form of introduction – that goes beyond a "western" introduction of name (and often now preferred pronouns). What is my land of origin and family history? Who came to the land and why? Why is this land my home? What is my hope for the future? What is my commitment to realize that future?

For Whom are we acknowledging land?

Understanding land acknowledgement as a small act of reconciliation, we may see our action as a signal of openness, of respect, to Indigenous peoples. Yet, as we have seen, recognizing our connectedness to the land is part of the Indigenous world view. It is non-Indigenous peoples who need reminding of connectedness. We become more aware of history and relationships. We begin to see the world from a different perspective – one that is more connected and less

individualistic. In short, we begin the journey to "two-eyed seeing" to developing a greater understanding of the world by noticing features not prominent in "western" perspectives.

Context also matters. Recognizing the land need not, should not be long formal rituals. They need to be relevant – to the person recognizing the land -- and to the context.

Focus on Process not Product

John Currie advises "Go slowly, go through a process to build knowledge and based on knowledge develop the land acknowledgement". What we say should reflect what we know. As we know more, we our land acknowledgement will change to keep pace. What could your initial recognition look like? What is important to your club, and what can be more flexible? How will you build understanding and revisit the land recognition over time?

Next Steps

If process is the focus, what does that process look like?

- Begin learning about the land and the Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land where you live. As non-Indigenous peoples we have a responsibility to educate ourselves. There are many resources. The University of Alberta's open course **Indigenous Canada** provides a great overview. https://www.ualberta.ca/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada
- Develop your longer-term intentions as a club. How will recognizing the land, Treaties and Indigenous peoples be part of a process of learning and building relationships?
- Who can you work with? John Currie suggests approaching local Elders with a gift of tobacco. Members of the District Committee can share their experiences. (Contact through co-chairs: jan.fox@reachedmonton.ca or john.donner@telus.net).

Wahkohtowin

In one on-going engagement process, the Indigenous co-chair would begin meetings explaining the Cree concept of *Wahkohtowin.* The word shows the importance of different languages because it embodies much more than one English word. It includes "belonging". It draws attention to the interconnectedness of relationships, communities and natural systems. Talking about *wahkohtowin* was a way of drawing us together for our deliberations – to talk and work together from an attitude of respect, a sense of contributing to something bigger than ourselves.

The process of developing land acknowledgment is the process of discovering how we relate to the land and each other. Land acknowledgements become a telling of our story – where we are, where we relate. It is a step toward building better relationships, beginning to understand and perhaps over time to live in the spirit of *wahkohtowin*.