

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

Indigenous-led Climate Policy

PHASE 2 OF ICA'S DECOLONIZING CLIMATE POLICY PROJECT



**DECEMBER
2022**



**INDIGENOUS
CLIMATE ACTION**



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CLIMATE ACTION

Indigenous Climate Action (ICA) is an Indigenous-led organization guided by a diverse group of Indigenous knowledge keepers, water protectors and land defenders from communities and regions across the country. We believe that Indigenous Peoples' rights and knowledge systems are critical to developing solutions to the climate crisis and achieving climate justice.

ICA works on connecting and supporting Indigenous communities to reinforce our place as leaders driving climate change solutions for today and tomorrow. We model our work and organizational structure on systems of free, prior and informed consent and self-determination. By providing communities with knowledge and resources, we can inspire a new generation of Indigenous climate leaders building solutions centered around our inherent rights and cultures.

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Introduction

As an Executive Summary Report of Phase 2 of Indigenous Climate Action's (ICA) Decolonizing Climate Policy (DCP) project, this serves as an introduction to what the ICA team and friends have been learning over the last year. Through many conversations with Indigenous peoples across so-called Canada, we have heard from folks as they shared their own visions for Indigenous-led climate policy and solutions. From youth to Elders, we heard from First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people about what 'policy' means to them. We also heard about what policy-making means within a variety of Indigenous contexts, grounded in the unique traditions and governance structures of a diversity of Nations. Further, folks spoke about climate solutions already happening in their communities, as well as what they would like to see take root and flourish. We share this summary report with the intention of amplifying these visions, celebrating the solutions already happening, and supporting the work still to be done. Through this summary report, we invite you into the conversations that were had and set the groundwork for the full report.

The conversations that brought this body of work into life build on a powerful legacy of Indigenous climate leadership that has been practiced for millennia. Indigenous Peoples from across the Earth have always led and governed in a way that is rooted in relationship with the lands and waters. Subsequently, it has been Indigenous Peoples who have been leading the struggle for climate justice. We would like

“Indigenous peoples are the original stewards. To that end, we must still be the leaders on climate policy, not a government driven by money.” – Sandi Boucher, Seine River First Nation and Thunder Bay Indigenous community

to thank our Advisory Council (Tiffany Traverse, Pam Beebe, Katherine Whitecloud, Deborah McGregor, Bryanna Brown, and Jesse Mike) for supporting us in this vision.

Within this executive summary report there will be an overview of the research approach and methods that were used to gather the words, knowledge, and experiences of Indigenous people across so-called Canada. There will also be an introduction to Indigenous research methodologies and how they have been applied to this project. Finally there will be a brief overview of the key findings gathered from the research.



Research

Approach and Methods

In Phase 1 of the project, ICA conducted an in-depth critique of Canadian federal climate policy through the lens of Indigenous rights, knowledge, and perspectives. Our analysis focused on the two previous federal climate plans: the *Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change* from 2016 and *A Healthy Environment, A Healthy Economy* from 2020. We released the [Decolonizing Climate Policy \(DCP\)](#) final report in March 2021. Within this report we found that Indigenous peoples were structurally excluded from the process of developing these climate plans, thus violating the rights of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination and free prior and informed consent (FPIC) as affirmed within Canadian and international law. This also conflicts with the federal government's own commitments to Nation-to-Nation, Inuit-Crown, and government-to-government relationships. Furthermore, we found that some of the solutions promoted in these plans ignore the realities faced by Indigenous peoples and overlook the structural inequalities continuously reproduced through colonial relations and

oppressive structures in so-called Canada. To make matters worse, some of the proposed actions and initiatives in these plans risk disproportionate negative impacts on Indigenous peoples and violations of Indigenous rights.

In response to the failure of the federal government to meaningfully include Indigenous people in the process of developing climate policy, and in response to their general failure to develop just and effective climate policy, we launched Phase 2 to begin to explore what *Indigenous-led climate policy* might look like. We acknowledge that the conversations we have been having do not constitute the kind of full participation with all Nations and communities that is required to develop something that can be called 'Indigenous-Led Climate Policy'. But this year of conversations has been an important step in exploring what such a process might look like, where communities are at, what they envision for the future, and what they need to engage further in this important work.

Gathering Ideas

We began this project by designing and circulating an online survey through ICA channels. The survey was translated into French and we sent out the call out to fill the survey in both languages. The survey contained 17 questions. These ranged from demographic questions such as "*What Indigenous Nation(s) or community are you a part of?*" and "*What is your age group?*" to questions about climate impacts being faced and questions exploring people's perspectives on the word "policy". Many of the survey questions focused on what barriers communities may be facing to engaging in climate policies and solutions. We also asked questions

about what climate policy looks like when grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and structures. You can see the full list of survey questions [here](#).

The survey was live and accepted responses for one month in autumn of 2021. During this time 105 people completed the survey. Of these 78 are First Nation, 14 are Metis, and 4 are Inuit. The 9 remaining respondents were either Indigenous people from outside of so-called Canada or non-Indigenous people.



There were 37 folks from the Boreal Forest Biome, 24 from Mountain Forest, 16 from Temperate Deciduous Forest, 14 from Grasslands, and 5 from the Tundra. Nine people did not specify their biome. As for the ages of folks who filled out the survey, the following graph describes the distribution.

From the beginning of our project we have been advised to center the voices of youth. The first step towards this was to hire Sarah Hanson, the Youth Research Intern to join our

team. We made a concerted effort to contact Indigenous youth for interviews and were able to interview six youth. To increase the presence of youth in this research, we also included in our analysis a virtual workshop on Indigenous-led Climate Policy that our team hosted in June 2021 with 8 youth of the Yukon First Nations Climate Action Fellowship: Autum Skaydu.û Jules, Jennifer Mierau, Dustin McKenzie-Hubbard, Nika Silverfox Young, Jewel Davies, Kadrienne Hummel, Mats'āsāna Mą, and Kadrienne Hummel.

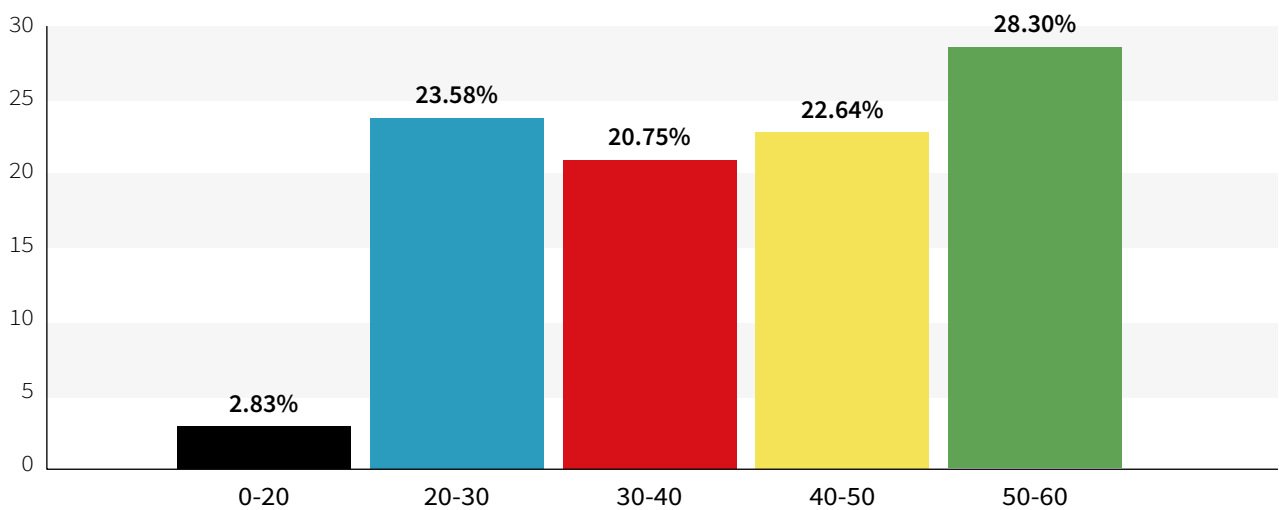
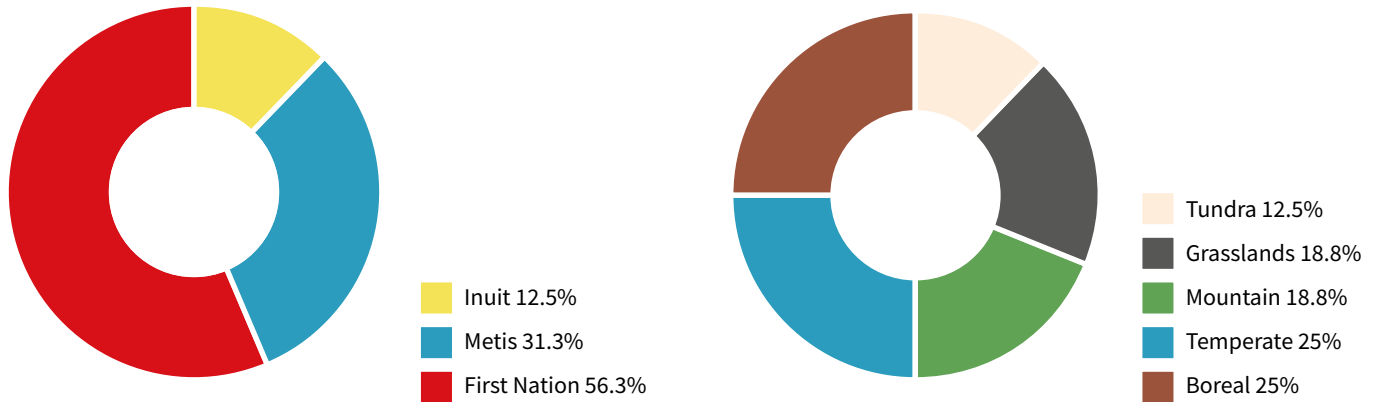


Fig.1 Age distribution of survey respondents

Fig 2. Distribution of folks interviewed by Indigenous group and biome



Data Analysis Process

To bring together and draw collective insight and conclusions from all we had heard in the surveys, interview conversations, workshops, and webinars with youth, we compiled all the survey responses and transcriptions of audio recordings from interviews, workshops, and webinars into an online Qualitative Data Analysis software called Quirkos. Through this Quirkos software the team was able to read through all that we had heard and began to notice emergent themes,

points of alignment, and points of difference between what folks spoke to us about. These themes and points of interest were coded in the software. This coding allows us to select one theme, for example *food sovereignty*, and be able to immediately pull up all instances in the survey where this had been spoken about. This tool also allows us to see the links and relations between different themes and ideas that came up.



Application of Indigenous Research Methodologies

Honoring all that has come before and all that is still to come – and acknowledging ancestors and future generations – we offer this report in the form of a circle. This circle is rooted in teachings rooted in the Medicine Wheel within Anishinaabe, Métis, and Nehiyaw worldviews. The circle is also a strong reminder about the importance of circular reciprocity, which emphasizes Indigenous understandings of balance maintained through reciprocal relationships with the natural world. Climate change is a reflection on an imbalance within our relationships, thus the Medicine Wheel is a helpful framework for understanding and visualizing how to restore this balance.

The Medicine Wheel describes a “state of separateness but interconnectedness.”¹ This is expressed by the four quadrants, or directions: The White in the North, the Yellow in the East, the Red in the South, and the Black in the West. These four directions can be used to describe a variety of experiences, as “the medicine wheel is both a symbol and a tool to understand phenomena.”² As an example, Kim Andersen looks to the Medicine Wheel to understand the life stages of human beings, moving from infancy, youth, adulthood, and old age.³ Andersen’s work also provides a helpful framework for understanding how gender informs life experiences within the Medicine Wheel, which will be referenced throughout the report.



- 1 Lynn Lavallée, “Practical Application of an Indigenous Research Framework and Two Qualitative Indigenous Research Methods: Sharing Circles and Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection” (2009) 8:1 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 at 23 [Lavallée]
- 2 Lavallée, *supra* note 1 at 23.
- 3 Kim Andersen, *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2011).

The Medicine Wheel is able to explain the relationship between the independent and interdependent elements of an experience, making it an appropriate methodological framework to weave together the story of how colonialism causes climate change while also highlighting Indigenous rights and sovereignty as the solution. Based on the analysis conducted, our team applied what we heard from the community to the Medicine Wheel. The quadrants are expressed as follows:

- Colonization in the East, representing the period between 1492 to 2008;
- Truth and Reconciliation in the South, representing 2008 to 2020 and grounded in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Idle No More movement;

- Resurgence in the West, representing 2020 to today and looking to movements like solidarity with Wet'suwet'en and 1492 Land Back Lane; and
- Living in Balance in the North, representing the future that has yet to be built and is rooted within a paradigm shift resulting in a restoration of balance with the natural world.

In each of the four quadrants, we highlight what we have heard from community members and have aimed to create a dialogue across and through the voices and experiences of Indigenous peoples and the lands they come from. As guided by Deb McGregor, member of our Advisory Council, we have kept 'Spirit' at the center of this methodological approach. For us this has meant ensuring that we honor the spiritual component of this work as it is integral to understanding our role as researchers. We are committed to working with the knowledge we have been entrusted with through the values of respect, humility, and courage.

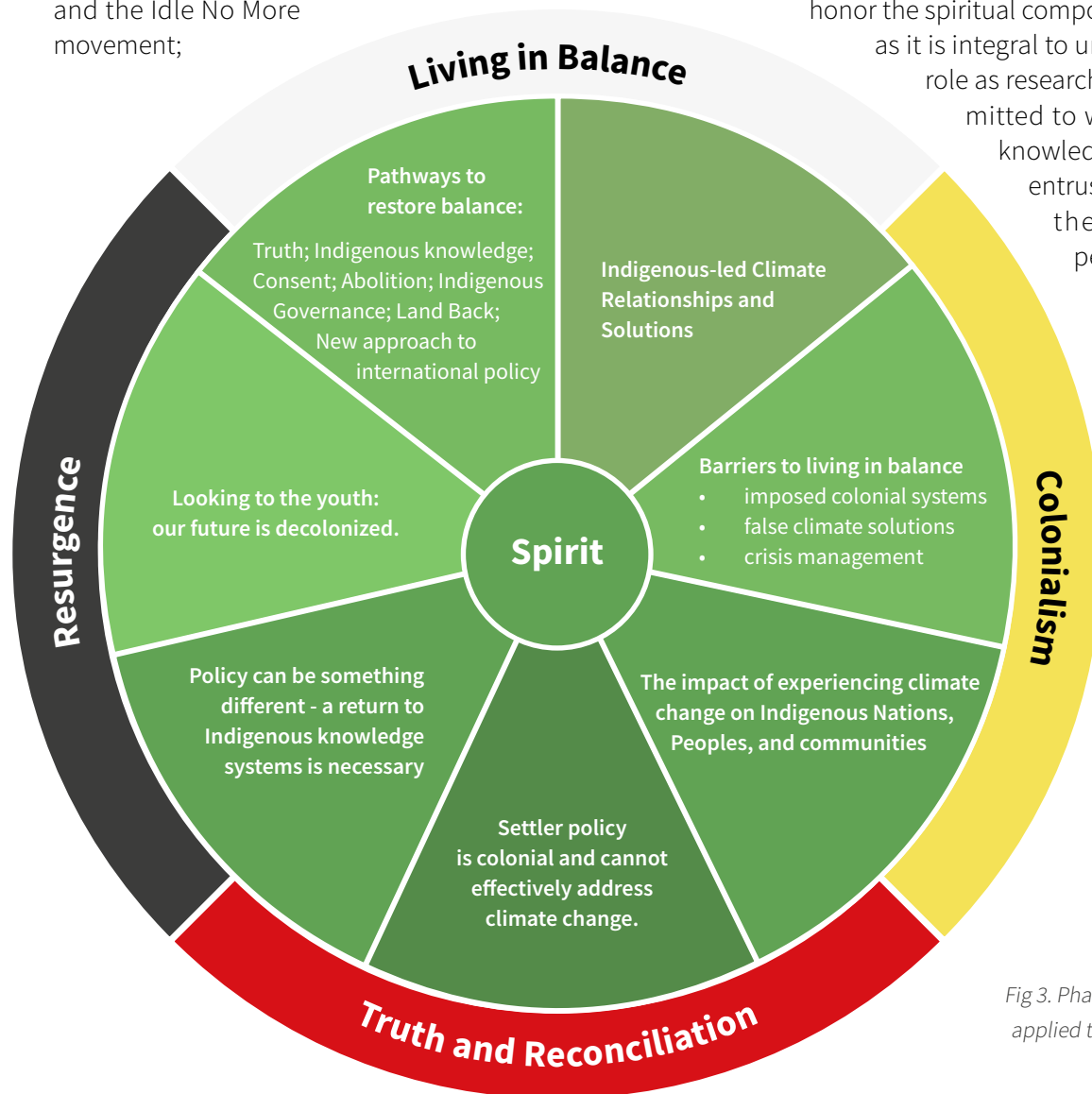


Fig 3. Phase 2 research findings applied to the Medicine Wheel

Overview of Key Findings

Eastern quadrant: Colonization (1492-2008)

Barriers to living in balance

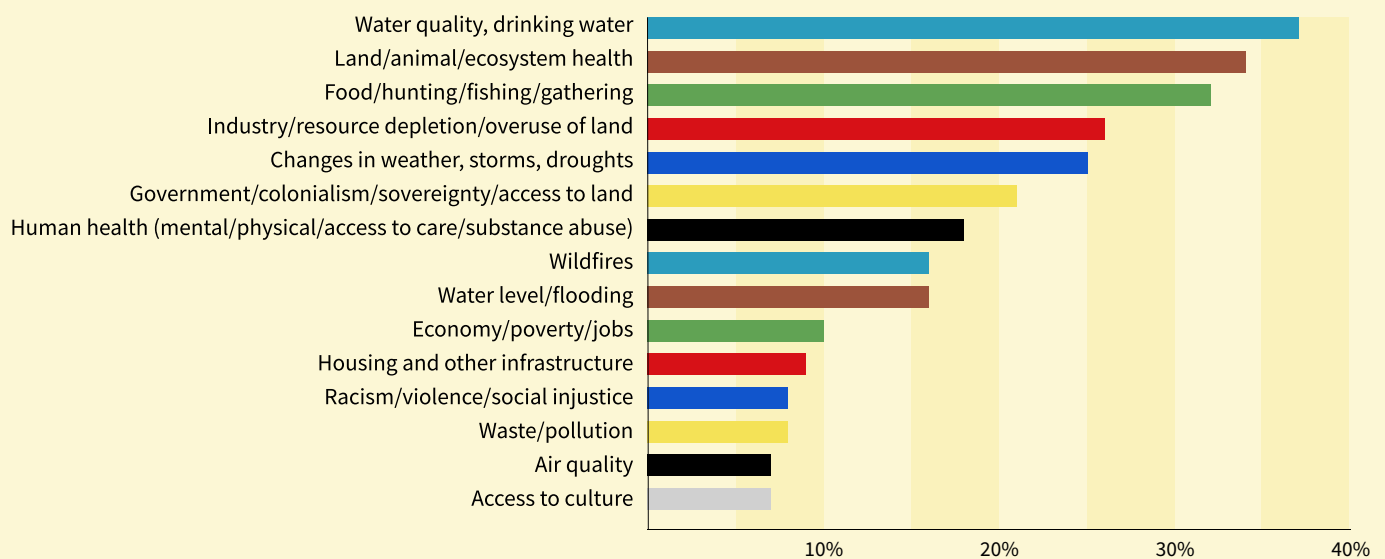
1. The imposition of colonial systems
 - Colonialism is a process of creating and violently maintaining hierarchies in order to optimize the extraction of all resources for the benefit of the colonial power.
 - A key feature of colonial systems is the creation and emphasis on dichotomies. To illustrate, within colonial legal systems property regimes divide the world into two categories: one category for those who *can own* property, another category for those who *are owned as* property. Who belongs in which category has shifted over time, e.g. it was not so long ago that colonial legal systems permitted for human beings to be owned as property.
 - The concept of property and the idea that there are beings who can be owned is a pillar of capitalism. This has enabled the climate crisis by providing a legal framework to justify the exploitation of beings deemed 'ownable' by colonial legal systems.
2. False solutions to climate change
 - Current settler-led climate policies and solutions, centering around market based mechanisms and techno-innovations, are perpetuating the colonial, capitalist systems driving the crisis. This policy myopia and failure to address the root causes of the crisis is a barrier.
3. Crisis management
 - As colonial governments and environmental NGOs push forward unjust policy-making, violating our rights to self-determination, they justify this by citing the urgency of the climate crisis, implying that there is no time to bring everyone to the table. And so the real climate work of restoring balance, listening to the land, reconnecting with our cultures and languages and lands is happening on our own terms across our territories. But many barriers to this work exist, for example being denied access to our lands and ongoing colonial policies and systemic inequalities that render many of our communities in constant state of social and economic crises.



“We have been silenced. Canada’s very existence depends on our subjugation. The Indian problem was supposed to have been solved by 2021 with the intention of removing our claims to the land so they have full, unfettered access to exploit what they call resources for their own material gains. We are being silenced because deep within the cultural psyche of settler colonialism, the knowledge of what was done to Indigenous people is so horrifying they will do whatever they can to avoid it. We are being silenced because our governance structures, knowledge systems and land stewardship are a very viable solution to the climate crisis and the creation of a better world.”

“Climate change affects everything because everything is connected.”
 – Anonymous, Lil’wat Nation

Impacts and experiencing climate change



Bar graph showing the percentage of survey respondents expressing concern about common issues

The people we spoke to also made clear that climate change is putting Indigenous communities in danger. They made clear that all these many impacts of the changing climate are in addition to and exacerbating the other impacts of the colonization of our lives and lands. The impacts of climate on our housing for example, is happening amid an already existing housing crisis. And the impacts of climate change on water are only making worse pre-existing water crises in our communities. Same with food insecurity, same with health crises.

And all these pre-existing crises that our communities are facing are direct results of historical and ongoing relations. Folks mentioned existing challenges of biodiversity loss, settler encroachment, industrialization, and urbanization, mining and other forms of extractivism, unchecked development, clear cutting of forests, invasive species, toxic dumps, urban sprawl, dumps, air pollution, ecosystem destruction, oil and gas and other business, mega projects, factory farming, privately owned lands, lands occupied by settlers, land theft.

All these are manifestations of the “colonial mindsets” described by Aleesha Jones from the Nlaka’pamux Nation, “that don’t consider the land as being a partner and instead an object to be exploited. This perspective is how colonizers have and continue to view Indigenous people.”

“As an Indigenous person I see the first-hand impacts that damaging the land has on not only our day to day lives but also our spirit.”

Carole Monture of Six Nations contrasted Indigenous and Settler worldviews. She said, “Our teachings encourage reciprocity with the land, only taking what you need, and wasting nothing. The current economic system is the opposite and doesn’t just kill life, it depends on killing life. Climate change is a symptom of a broken system.”





Southern quadrant: Truth and Reconciliation (2008-2020)

Settler climate policy is failing

The conversations we had exposed a shared understanding that not only is current climate policy in Canada not working, it's holding up colonial capitalism systems that are driving the crisis.

Folks we spoke to reflected on the concept and process of policy making itself, discussing how in many ways, policy making is inherently colonial. In some responses, people reflected on policy as so formal and bureaucratic that it is inaccessible, hard to influence, and that can create barriers, obstacles and complications. Many spoke of the ways that policy has served to implement and maintain settler colonialism, and continues to do so.

Settler claims to these lands called Canada are based on the Doctrine of Discovery, a profoundly racist policy laid down by some Pope overseas, long ago. The Crown again and again violated Treaties signed with Indigenous Nations, leaving a trail of broken promises showing that policies are only seen as valuable when they support and reproduce settler-colonialism. Policies of assimilation have dominated Canada's approach to Indian Affairs, through the Indian Act and others. Over all, a feeling is shared that more often than not, Canadian "policy" has been detrimental to Indigenous communities. In fact their policies regularly violate our Aboriginal and Treaty rights.

All this teaches us that policy as it has been and is practiced by colonial governments in so-called Canada, is rigid, inaccessible and hard to change. It at its core is about maintaining colonial power, furthering capitalism and controlling Indigenous communities and others who pose a threat or

alternative to the status quo. Policy is rooted in systemic racism and inequality and perpetuates these injustices. For all these reasons and more, most of the people we surveyed have a profound distrust of policy and policy-making in so-called Canada.

Policy can be something different: Indigenous ways of knowing

To explore whether and how climate policy can be removed from these colonial processes and embedded in our own, we asked the people we spoke to: *How do you think Indigenous knowledge can become policy? How do you think we can bring together Indigenous knowledge and policy making? What differences would doing so make in your community?*

Katelynn Herchak (Inuk) told us in an interview that, *“policy is so intimate for us. We’ve had a very abusive relationship with policy. Since we’ve had this lived experience of the abuses we face through the Indian Act and different ways of colonization, that means we’re actual hardcore policy experts that deserve to be in those spaces to actually make them better and less colonial. There are already experts everywhere within the territories that know what needs to be done.”*

Folks told us that good policy must be holistic, recognizing the interconnectedness of all things and inclusive of all our relatives. It must consider the land and water, culture, and healing. Policy must be determined by the people most impacted by an issue. Policy must lead to meaningful action. Policy making requires the passing along values systems and truly reconnecting with land. Policy making must center our own worldviews and our own diverse approaches to governance. Indigenous policy is based on relationship to the land, ancestral knowledge and concern for future generations. Respectful relations, responsibility, reciprocity, and listening to the land is central to

Indigenous policy-making.

To Ginnifer Menominee of Wasauksing First Nation, we have always had our own policy-making. She told us, *“We had policy within our ceremonies. We had policies in our day to day life. They were brought out from watching our natural world and looking at creation. We had original instructions given to us. How do we follow those now? How do we maintain that in a colonial state? I think it’s really going back to listening to land, listening to our youth. Listening to our Elders. Where are they trying to take us? The land is telling us a whole bunch of things. Kids are telling us a whole bunch of things. Our Elders are telling us a whole bunch of things that are happening right now. . . . We have these protocols for everything that we do in our lives, through day to day, work, through ceremony, through birth to death. We have these policies of how we are going to walk through life.”*

“The word policy brings up for me what my Auntie said before - ‘racist colonial policies’ because even though the first policy and laws in Canada were for Indigenous Peoples, they were all trying to manipulate us and stop us from being who we are.” – Veronica Rose Waechter, Gitxsan, Gitanmaax



Western quadrant: Resurgence (2020-ongoing)

Looking to the youth: “our future is decolonized”

According to the Indigenous young people we spoke with, the future must be built on policies that are rooted in relationships. Instead of building a world categorized into silos – as is often the case within colonial systems – Indigenous young people are leading a paradigm shift where governance is measured not by security or economic interests but by the interconnectedness of our relationships with all our relatives.

One of the most pressing relationships young people are looking to restore is their relationships with the land. For many this restoration entails the reclamation of languages, ceremonies, and food

sovereignty practices. Youth also shared ideas for a reimagined education system where curriculums are rooted in the land and purpose-driven to empower young people to respect, honor, and share their gifts rather than exploit them within a capitalist system.

Mentorship and learning from knowledge keepers and Elders was also emphasized for intergenerational knowledge and cultural continuity. Several of the young people we spoke with noted the importance of including children in this work. As we learn from Muskrat in the Anishinaabe creation story, even the smallest among us have a role and purpose.

Pathways to restoring balance

Throughout the conversations we had, the following 7 pathways have been identified as avenues for restoring balance. The urgency to restore balance cannot be understated and the following pathways must be acted upon.

1. Truth and transparency

- Looking at the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is critical for everyone to understand the truth of the nature of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and Nations and the Government of Canada. There must be a commitment to transparency and recognition that what has occurred and what continues to occur on these lands constitutes genocide.
- For Indigenous peoples, folks we spoke with stated that we must recognize that we are all hurting – the trauma of colonialism lives in the land, the water, the animals, the plants. We have to acknowledge their hurt if we want to move forward in a way that brings respect for all our relations.

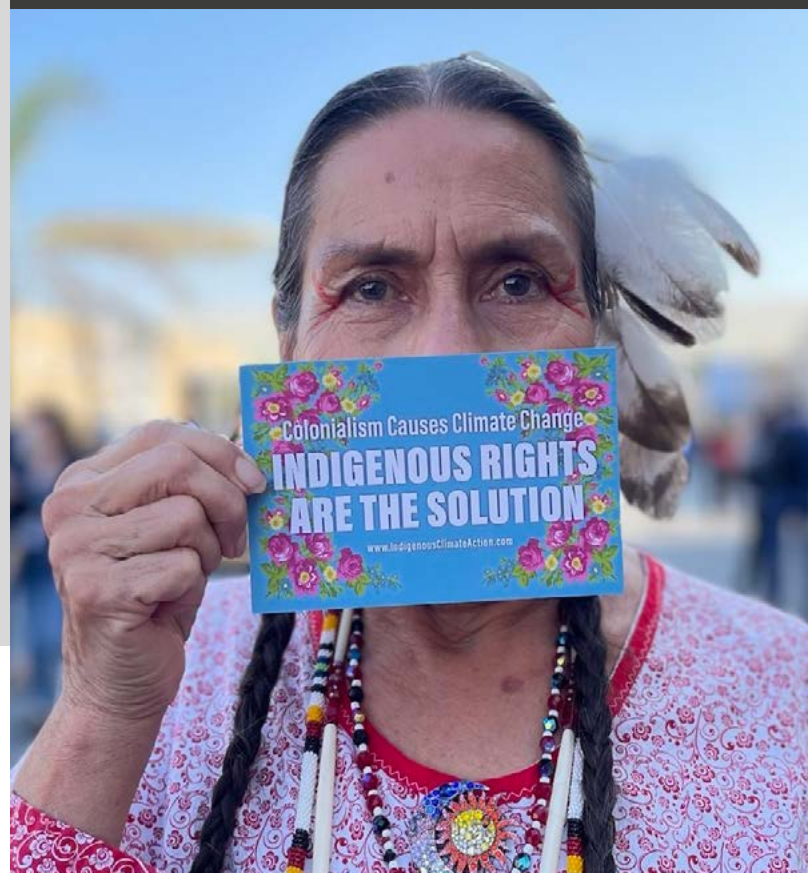
2. Centering Indigenous knowledge systems

- Indigenous knowledge systems are embedded within the land and include everything from land management to language and spiritual practices. In comparison, Western knowledge systems are not embedded within the land and tend to emphasize abstractions of perceived power, e.g. the British Crown, the Roman fasces.
- Reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems that are premised upon the living realities of the land will be critical for successful climate mitigation and adaptation.

3. Practice of consent

- Honoring consent is a pillar of a fair and equitable society. That consent is not actively sought and respected by Canadian governments and industry actors is a reflection of the lack of respect for consent within Canadian law and values.
- Consent opens the conversation for an important gendered analysis, as the lack of respect for consent has manifested not only on our lands but on the bodies of our relatives. There is much wisdom to be learned from the myriad of ways in which Indigenous peoples experience, embody, and express gender.

“I want that for future generations. I want them to be able to have Elders, to have those stories, to have all that stuff.”



4. Abolition of carceral system

- Western states perceive themselves as having a monopoly on violence, which is embodied through the practices of law enforcement. In so-called Canada this includes the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and local and provincial police forces. Several of the folks interviewed discussed the violence imposed on them by Canadian law enforcement, particularly in circumstances of frontline land defense.
- The carceral state is inseparable from colonialism and capitalism. To achieve transformative change Indigenous sovereignty must be in tandem with Black liberation movements, which have long called for the abolition of carceral systems.

5. Decentralized and non-hierarchical governance systems

- New ways of organizing ourselves will be necessary to adequately respond to the diverse needs that will arise from changing environmental realities. For example, empowering communities to respond to crises in our own ways rather than relying on interventions by the state.

6. Indigenous sovereignty and solidarity through Land Back

- While Indigenous sovereignties have been interrupted by colonialism, they have not been extinguished. Indigenous sovereignty is exercised every day by Indigenous peoples, whether that looks like harvesting, language reclamation, or revitalizing birthing practices.
- Indigenous Peoples and Nations across so-called Canada must stand in solidarity on our own terms, rooted in our own sovereignties and relationships, in order to create a political context where Land Back is not only possible, but inevitable.

7. Moving beyond the UN: A new future for international climate policy

- Climate change does not recognize borders. Corporate and industry actors are likewise unimpacted by colonial boundaries, whether that's building pipelines across territories or seeking the cheapest labor costs by exploiting those in the Global South.
- In so-called Canada this means first restoring our sovereignties across the Medicine Line and working towards the liberation of our relatives in the Global South.

“I think we’ve run out of time... the only thing we have right now is to adapt. So it’s helping the young people and future generations to adapt. So that there’s some sort of balance that they can live in, there’s some sort of restoration of those cycles and life forces that continue to give back. And to understand it’s a relationship.” – Ellen Gabriel, Mohawk from Kanehsatà:ke

Northern quadrant: Restoration of balance (future)

Indigenous-led climate solutions and relationships

Returning to Indigenous sovereignties is the solution to achieving balance with the natural world. We must remember that as Indigenous Peoples and Nations our sovereignties are interconnected with the sovereignty of the lands and waters. Without the land and the water we would not be who we are, and respecting their sovereignties is critical for moving forward in a way that is rooted in balance and reciprocity.

Practicing our sovereignties also means learning from legal principles that are embedded within our Nations, like the Nehiyaw concept of *wahkohtowin* and the Anishinaabe concept of *mino-bimaadiziwing*. Not only do these ancestral teachings inform our ways of being and relating, but they also provide us with tools for imagining and building a new world together. For many of us, this means learning how to listen, not just to each other as human beings but to non-humans, including the lands and waters.

As noted by Brett Huson (Caribou Creek Git'xan Nation), “no amount of human policy, no amount of human anything is going to create new air or water.”

Indigenous-led climate relationships remind us of the importance of the collective and offer a renewed understanding for what it means to live in reciprocity with the Earth. Rather than conceiving of this reciprocity as something onerous or burdensome, this should be thought of as an immense opportunity to give and receive gifts with all of the natural world. As we give our care and attention to our Earth, we receive the ancestral gifts of our lands. Whether it's through the syrup from the maple trees or the *manoomin* from the waterways, there is so much love embedded within our lands.

“We come from the viewpoint of working for everybody, working for the village so that everyone can prosper, not just one person.” –
Daniel Green, Gitxan



Conclusion

This whole project has been deeply collaborative, with different team members contributing to the conversations, analysis, and writing. This summary report has been created by a diversity of team members, each striving in their own way to amplify the voices of the people we spoke with and do justice to the depth and breadth of brilliance that the people we spoke to offered.

To build on the vast number of contributors to this project, once our team completes the first draft, we will send

it around to be peer reviewed by our Advisory Council and other Indigenous experts. Through their feedback these conversations will continue, the findings will be refined, and our analysis deepened.

The full report of Phase 2 of Indigenous Climate Action's Decolonizing Climate Policy project will be available by April 2023.

A Note to Settler Policy-makers:

If you seek to include Indigenous participation in your climate policy development, policy-making needs to be transformed so that it is no longer serving colonial interests at the expense of Indigenous and other marginalized communities. It needs to become not about maintaining colonial control, but about relinquishing that very thing. You need to step aside and make space and then stand up and actively support Indigenous communities who are cultivating, reinvigorating, and practicing our own community-based protocols.

It makes no sense to ask us to participate in your system, a system that has long sought to control us and has harmed us generation after generation. If you really want to help foster agreements and forge pathways towards a just climate future, it is long past time for you to take a hard look at the ways policy-making in Canada actively works against that. Change your system, and maybe then our communities and Nations may be more willing to collaborate with you.

And while you're at it, stop considering yourself a climate expert. Humble yourself, knowing that your worldview, your ways of knowing, and your assumptions of what is possible are rooted in and likely perpetuating colonial capitalism which is driving the climate crisis. We invite you to think about how your life and your work would be different if you really understood this and opened yourself up to being transformed by learning from other ways: other ways of relating to the Earth, other ways of making decisions, other ways of learning and hearing. This is where your real work on climate action can begin.