



# OUR SACRED STRENGTH

Talking Circles  
Among Aboriginal Women

> Facilitation Guide

# Past

## *Why are we negotiating treaties in British Columbia?*

Before Canada was a country Britain recognized that aboriginal people living here had title to land: the Royal Proclamation of 1763 declared that only the British Crown could acquire land from First Nations, and that was typically done through treaties. In most parts of Canada, the British Crown established treaties with First Nations before Confederation. The new Dominion of Canada continued this policy of making treaties before the west was opened for settlement, but in BC this process was never completed.

When BC joined Confederation in 1871, only 14 treaties on Vancouver Island had been signed, and land title to the rest of the province was left unresolved. It wasn't until 1970 that Canada's aboriginal peoples were able to pursue aboriginal rights in the Supreme Court of Canada. With the exception of Treaty 8 in the northeastern corner of the province and negotiations with the Nisga'a Nation, most First Nations had to wait until 1993 to pursue their aboriginal rights through a made-in-BC treaty process.

## **The BC Treaty Process**

The current BC treaty process began in 1990 when Canada, British Columbia and First Nations established the BC Claims Task Force to make recommendations on the scope of treaty negotiations, the organization and processes to be used, interim measures and public education. In its report the task force made 19 recommendations, which were all accepted by the three parties. (*See Appendix I for the list of recommendations.*)

Subsequently, First Nations, Canada and British Columbia signed an agreement in September 1992 to establish the BC Treaty Commission. The BC Treaty Commission Agreement is supported by federal and provincial legislation and by a resolution of the First Nations Summit. In December 1993 the Treaty Commission began receiving Statements of Intent from First Nations wanting to negotiate a treaty with Canada and British Columbia.

The six-stage treaty process is set out in the BC Claims Task Force Report of 1991 and incorporated in the tripartite British Columbia Treaty Commission Agreement of 1992.

The process is voluntary and open to all First Nations in British Columbia. As of March 2007, there are 58 First Nations participating in the BC treaty process, representing approximately two-thirds of all aboriginal people in BC.

> **The Treaty Commission**

*The Treaty Commission is the independent and neutral body responsible for facilitating treaty negotiations among the governments of Canada, BC and First Nations in BC.*

*The Treaty Commission is not an arm of any government – it is an independent body and does not negotiate treaties.*

*That is done by the three parties at negotiating tables:*

*First Nations and Canada and British Columbia.*

## **Women and Treaty**

As keeper of the BC treaty process, the Treaty Commission observed the under representation of aboriginal women at the treaty table. In March 1999, the Treaty Commission brought together 11 aboriginal women from different regions of the province – Alert Bay, Cranbrook, North Vancouver, Terrace, Tsawwassen, Victoria, Waglisla, Williams Lake and Westbank – to identify the information needs of aboriginal women and appropriate delivery systems. The focus group included women of a wide range of ages from both urban and rural areas with both professional and non-professional backgrounds.

The women identified two overriding communication challenges: access to information and lack of interest in the treaty process. Women expressed concern that treaty making is a male-dominated process, and as such, focuses on issues such as land and resources, rather than on issues of prime concern to aboriginal women such as families, health and child welfare. The group also noted that it is difficult for aboriginal women to speak out at male-dominated meetings, and even when women do take the initiative to express their views, their voices are often overpowered.

The focus group suggested that aboriginal women should be involved in developing tools for other aboriginal women. They urged the Treaty Commission to facilitate a series of ‘talking circles’ where women could voice their concerns and dreams for the future of their communities.

## **The video**

Responding to the focus group's suggestion, the Treaty Commission organized talking circles with women in five different communities – an urban First Nation, a remote First Nation, a rural First Nation and a group of women living in an urban area. While the talking circles present very different perspectives, and very different ways of dealing with issues, the women share many of the same challenges and many of the same goals for the future.

## **Goal**

The talking circles that you will see in the film are intended to reflect the many common concerns and challenges aboriginal women share, and the many different journeys each woman – and each nation – has taken in their journey to build a better future for their communities. Through providing this video to First Nation communities across British Columbia, we hope to engage aboriginal women in talking circles of their own and empower women to get involved in their communities.

Page 13 includes a list of questions that you may want to use to convene your own talking circle discussion, along with some guidelines on convening a talking circle.

# Present

## *Background on communities featured in film*

### **Ktunaxa Nation (Cranbrook, BC)**

The talking circles journey began in the winter of 2002 with women of the Ktunaxa Nation<sup>1</sup> at their St. Mary's reserve near Cranbrook, in the St. Eugene Mission Resort. The Ktunaxa are migratory people who traditionally occupied and used the land and waters from BC's Rocky Mountains to Montana and Idaho. The Ktunaxa people lived a nomadic lifestyle, following vegetation and hunting cycles throughout their territory for over 10,000 years.

The Ktunaxa/Kinbasket Treaty Council (KKTCC) was initially formed as the Kootenay Indian District Council in 1970 to collectively promote the political and social development of the Ktunaxa Nation. The Ktunaxa/Kinbasket Treaty Council includes the Columbia Lake Band, Lower Kootenay Band, Shuswap Indian Band, St. Mary's Indian Band and Tobacco Plains Band. The majority of the members of the five Canadian Bands originate from the Ktunaxa or Kootenai culture. However, the Shuswap Band contains descendants of the Kinbasket family who moved to the Invermere area in the 19th century from territory of the Shuswap Nation.

There are many women leaders in the Ktunaxa community and they have been a driving force behind the citizen-driven treaty process, which is designed to ensure that treaty negotiations are led by the Ktunaxa people. The Ktunaxa Kinbasket Treaty Council entered the treaty process in December 1993, and is now in stage 4 of the six-stage process, negotiating an agreement in principle.

<sup>1</sup> Vickie Thomas is incorrectly identified in the Ktunaxa Talking Circle as "Vicki Russell". Her name appears correctly in the film credits. Elizabeth 'Grevelle' should be spelled "Gravelle".

### **Gitxsan Nation (Hazelton, BC)**

In the Spring of 2003, we visited the Gitxsan Nation in Hazelton, BC. Gitxsan's traditional territory spans the upper reaches of the Skeena and Nass Rivers.

The Gitxsan follow a traditional, matrilineal system with members of more than 60 House (Wilp) Groups belonging to one of four Clans: Wolf, Frog, Fireweed and Eagle. Each house has a hereditary chief. A hereditary chief may have several wing chiefs who perform particular functions for house members such as planning and administering forestry work, tourism initiatives or commercial fishery undertakings. Gitxsan history and laws are passed on orally. Each Wilp has an *adaawk*, or oral history, which describes important events in the House's existence. The carvings on a totem pole record parts of a House's *adaawk*. The *adaawk* is tied to the territory and events depicted by the crests on totem poles signify jurisdiction over a territory by a Wilp and its hereditary chief.

The Gitxsan Nation and Wet'suwet'en Nation brought the *Delgamuukw* case to the Supreme Court of Canada. In 1997, the Supreme Court ruled that aboriginal title is a right to the land itself – not just the right to hunt, fish and gather. *Delgamuukw* is widely seen as a major turning point in aboriginal rights and title.

The Gitxsan Hereditary Chiefs entered the treaty process in June 1994, and are now in stage 4 of the six-stage process, negotiating an agreement in principle.

### **Kaska Nation (Watson Lake, Yukon)**

In the summer of 2003 we visited women of the Kaska Nation who were gathered in the remote community of Watson Lake, Yukon to attend a vigil on violence against women. The women, spread out across five separate Kaska communities, meet continuously as part of the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS).

LAWS was established in 1998 when a group of interested women from Liard First Nation organized as a society to fulfill a need for community fundraising for social and recreational purposes. In a short time, the society evolved from organizing fundraising and small cultural events to developing and offering a comprehensive community healing program. LAWS has a project underway to promote women's involvement in leadership roles and in building the Kaska Nation constitution.

The Kaska people traditionally lived in what is now northern BC, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Under the BC treaty process, the Kaska Dena Council, Liard First Nation and Ross River Dena Council are negotiating together at the Kaska Nation table. The Kaska Nation must face the challenge of negotiating under the Yukon Umbrella Agreement and the BC treaty process.

The Kaska Nation entered the BC treaty process in January 1994, and is now in stage 4 of the six-stage process, negotiating an agreement in principle.

### **Tsleil-Waututh (North Vancouver, BC)**

In the fall of 2003, we visited women of the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation – a small Coast Salish community of 385 nestled in the middle of the North Vancouver metropolis. Tsleil-Waututh First Nation (TWFN) is one of 55 individual Coast Salish Nations, consisting of five language groups. Today they are located three kilometers east of the Iron Workers Memorial Bridge, in an area that has been a village site for the nation since time out of mind.

Tsleil-Waututh First Nation has worked hard to develop relationships with their neighbours and have several cooperative business ventures underway. This was necessary as the TWFN found that the best way to build a relationship was to begin one. Today the TWFN has agreements with various branches of government, private enterprise as well as non-governmental organizations. These relationships have helped the TWFN advance their vision for their territory.

In the early 1990's, the Tsleil-Waututh Nation began to build market housing, in the form of townhouses and condominiums. With this work, they began to generate revenue. The next step was to look about the territory and see what else the TWFN could do to advance the vision of their community. They entered into the BC treaty process, with an eye toward achieving the changes required to help the community become self-sustaining.

Despite the challenges of living within a big city, Tsleil-Waututh has a strong and cohesive cultural identity. Tsleil-Waututh

women gathered at their new recreation facility to talk about the challenges they face trying to revive their language and continue their cultural traditions on the doorstep of British Columbia's largest city.

The Tsleil-Waututh Nation entered the treaty process in February 1994, and is now in stage 4 of the six-stage process, negotiating an agreement in principle.

### **Urban Women (Vancouver, BC)**

Over the past 100 years, many aboriginal people have left their communities and moved to cities across the country. Today, 52 per cent of Canada's aboriginal people live in urban centres.

Gitxsan, Nisga'a, Kwakiutl, Namgis, Tlingit and Metis women gathered in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside to explore what a treaty in their home community might mean to themselves and their children. Most of the women in the circle moved to Vancouver for educational opportunities – with their parents, or with their own children. Today, they work in a broad spectrum of areas, including social work, education, employment and business.

They discuss some of the issues that are common to aboriginal women living in cities, including cultural disconnection, education, employment, housing, poverty and the downtown eastside experience. Together, they share what it means to be an urban aboriginal woman, straddling aboriginal and non-aboriginal worlds.

# Future

## *Guidelines to convene a Talking Circle*

An eight-member steering committee made up of aboriginal women from different areas of the province was struck to guide the Talking Circles project. Below is a list of suggestions developed by the steering committee to assist you in convening a talking circle in your community.

**Location** > Safe, private environment where women will feel comfortable sharing their views. > Consider whether to convene the talking circle within your community or at an outside location, depending on where women will feel most comfortable > Choose a place that will have limited interruptions.

**Facilitator – Look for** > Strong facilitation skills > Knowledge of the treaty process > Familiarity with the community in which the talking circle is being convened.

**Participants – Look for** > High and low involvement in the treaty process > Professional and non-professional backgrounds > Diverse age groups (including youth and elders) > Women from various communities within a nation.

**Follow up** > Gather contact information for each participant and plan a follow up meeting; > Have a list of local counseling and support services on hand in case there is a need; and > Consider organizing a women's group if none exists in your community.

## Talking Circle > Discussion Questions

1. *Tell me a bit about yourself.*
2. *What makes your nation unique?*
3. *How have gender roles evolved in your nation? How would you describe women's roles today?*
4. *What do you see as the biggest issues facing your community today? Are there differences in priorities among men and women?*
5. *If you could, is there anything you would change immediately about your community?*
6. *If you could, are there any long-term changes you would like to see in your community?*
7. *What kinds of opportunities would you like to see for the future generation?*
8. *How would you go about attempting to make these immediate and long-term changes in your community?*
9. *What do you know about the BC treaty process?*
10. *What would you like a treaty to do to address your concerns?*
11. *What do you think governance is all about? What is it? Are we ready for it?*
12. *Are there any issues that you would like to see addressed through a treaty that are not currently being negotiated?*

13. *In general terms, do you think a treaty would be a good or bad thing for your community? Why?*
14. *Do you have a treaty team? How involved are women on the treaty team?*
15. *Have women been in leadership roles in your community in the past? If yes, what were their roles and how was their leadership perceived by the community at large?*
16. *What do you see as the biggest challenges to take on a leadership role in your community?*
17. *If more women were in leadership positions in your community, what, if anything, do you think would change?*
18. *Have you ever been involved in a women's organization? How are these types of organizations perceived by other members of your nation?*
19. *What do you see as the priorities that leaders in your nation are focusing on? Are these the priorities you would focus on, given the opportunity?*
20. *What are your hopes and dreams for the future?*



**BC Treaty Commission**

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## Talking Circles > Exit Survey

As a whole, how would you rate the experience of participating in a talking circle discussion? Please check one.

- Very Positive
- Positive
- Somewhat Positive
- Not at all Positive

Did you gain anything, as an individual, by participating in the talking circle?  Yes  No

Explain

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Were you involved in treaty negotiations before you participated in the talking circle?  Yes  No

If yes, how were you involved?

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Did you learn anything new about the treaty process through participating in the talking circle?  Yes  No

If yes, what did you learn?

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Have you become more involved in the treaty process since you participated in the talking circle?  Yes  No

Have any follow up discussions been planned or convened among the women who participated in the talking circle?  
 Yes  No

Do you have any suggestions for convening future talking circles?

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Do you have any suggestions for distributing the video?

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> Upon completion of this survey you can mail it to the Treaty Commission (address below), or fax it to: **604 482 9222**

*If you have any questions about the video, or would like advice or assistance to convene a talking circle in your community please contact:*



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