

Restoring Indigenous Stewardship to Toronto's Oak Savannahs

The Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle

In response to concerns about the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the restoration of High Park's oak savannahs, the [Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle](#) convened for the first time in the Spring of 2019. We have been working closely with the Indigenous Affairs Office in the process of building a relationship with directors and staff at Urban Forestry and the TRCA, the departments charged with managing Toronto's forests, waterways, and ravines. In September we resourced and hosted a Blanket Exercise – an experiential history of settler colonization on Turtle Island – for 45 city staff and members of the public whose work intersects with High Park, to support them in the transformative work required to engage meaningfully with Indigenous people and the Land. On Thanksgiving we hosted our first public ceremony on Grenadier Pond, a Silent Action that drew 200 people. In late October we hosted our first meeting with staff at Urban Forestry and the TRCA. We introduced them to the historical and contemporary significance of oak savannah restoration for Indigenous peoples and opened a dialogue with them about our concerns about chemical management.

We have hopes that this meeting is the first step in a long journey towards developing a new plan for High Park that would see Indigenous stewards take leadership in oak savannah restoration. With this letter we share our concerns about pesticide use in ecological restoration more widely with officials in the City of Toronto, the Province of Ontario, and the Canadian government, as we seek broader recognition and support for our work.

Indigenous Land Stewardship vs Chemical Management

Indigenous peoples recognize High Park as an interconnected web of life, and as a refuge for our Relatives: the animals, birds, insects, plants, fungi and trees. Our Relatives are increasingly facing serious threats from pollution and the destruction of habitat that come with encroaching urban development and climate change. The Tkaronto region is already heavily impacted by industrialization and urban sprawl which are contaminating this City's air, waters, and soils. Salt and petrochemicals from roadways that flow into High Park through stormwater reservoirs are impacting the park's plant and animal communities. It is widely known that bird and insect populations are declining at alarming rates here in Tkaronto and around the world. And on top of this, they face further threat by the very protocols the City of Toronto has adopted in its efforts to restore the lands.

The last thing we need is repeated and increasing contamination of these rare refuges. Yes, this is a crucial time to be caring for these lands; good land stewardship is a powerful way to mitigate the forces of urban development and climate change. However, the City's chemical-dependent restoration protocols will only cause further harm, not only to the land and to the climate, but also to the very people whose ancestors gave this lands its contours and significance.

Indigenous people approach non-native species very differently than conventional ecologists. Non-native plants are not our enemies. It is important to our people to stay in Right Relation, to be of Good Mind, and take care of the spiritual health of the Land. This means that we do not demonize plants such as Buckthorn, Norway Maple or Phragmites, or advocate for their extermination. Stigmatizing our Relatives in this way would make it impossible to learn what it

is that they are here to teach us. Indigenous ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us that these plants are “volunteers” that help to heal the land in the wake of human disturbances. These Relatives deserve to be honoured just as any other, and in our spiritual beliefs, ecological problems are only aggravated by attempts at eradication. We want to see our native plants flourish, but not by destroying our other relations.

It is clear that chemical management is promoted by the City because it promises a “low cost solution,” reducing the amount of labour required for ecological restoration. However, this calculation does not account for the full cost of these protocols, including long term ecological harms of repeated exposures to toxic chemicals. And it is also important to note that chemical management does not work: members of our Circle have been tracking chemically treated areas in the park for years and have noted that Buckthorn and Dog Strangling Vine, two of the main targets of chemical management, are thriving in spite of chemical treatment.

Indigenous stewardship does not seek to reduce the labour of earthwork; it is by tending the lands that we come into Right Relation. Indigenous stewardship requires getting more people out on the land. And for us this is a good thing. Earthwork gives our people the opportunity to heal from the traumas of colonialism by engaging the land in ceremony and in community; this is how we pass on our land-based teachings to future generations. In this sense, chemical-dependent restoration disproportionately affects Indigenous peoples because it disrupts our sacred relationship to Land and makes this important intergenerational work impossible.

Chemical management destroys Sacred lands

Health Canada’s approval of many of the pesticides that the chemical industry claims are safe indicates just how limited these tests for safety are, and the ways that industries have shaped government policy to their own ends. Rather than looking to Health Canada’s controversial classifications of these chemicals (see [Environmental Defense](#) and [EcoJustice’s](#) ongoing campaigns to challenge Health Canada’s decision to re-classify glyphosate as safe), we look instead to the many independent researchers who work closely on the ecological, social, political, and economic dimensions of pesticides, and to the lived experience of members of our communities who increasingly report the harmful impacts of chemical use. University of Toronto based Métis science and technology studies scholar and Canada Research Chair Michelle Murphy points to the “infrastructures of not knowing” that [leave publics vulnerable to chemical exposures and in the dark about the harms of industrial chemicals](#). York Research Chair in Environmental Law & Justice in the Green Economy Dayna Scott helps us see how Health Canada can’t protect our safety because their tests can’t account for the [complex contexts in which plants, animals, people and chemicals converge in urban spaces like High Park](#). Moreover, the vast proportion of pesticide studies focus on single chemicals at high or lethal doses, rather than the effects of low-dose chronic exposures, complex mixtures of chemicals, or the byproducts of these chemicals that accumulate and break down in the soil. Just because it is legal to apply these pesticides does not make them safe or acceptable.

It is time to get Toronto’s lands, waters, and forests off this chemical dependency: Indigenous stewardship is a form of harm reduction.