Indigenous food sovereignty means rebuilding relationships with land, panel shares

During a virtual discussion, three environmental leaders talked about why stewardship must be rooted in connection

BY AARON HEMENS, LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER • NEWS • FEBRUARY 8, 2024

A screengrab of the Young Agrarians' Indigenous Food Sovereignty panel discussion. Photo: The Young Agrarians/Zoom

During a virtual discussion on Indigenous food sovereignty, three environmental stewards shared what self-determination, sustainability and landback means to them amid colonial displacement.

Around 130 people tuned into the session that was hosted on Jan. 31 by the Young Agrarians, which is an educational resource network for new and young ecological farmers.

The panelists — Julian Napoleon, Ozaawaa Giizhigo Ikwe (Yellow Sky Woman) Natasha Anderson-Brass, and Leslie Anne St. Amour — spoke about the history of "Canada" and how it continues to impact the relationships that Indigenous communities have with the land.

Anderson-Brass, a farmer from the Key First Nation in Treaty 4, talked about how the Sixties Scoop had separated her dad, aunt and uncle from each other and their homelands. In her late 20s, Anderson-Brass began connecting with her auntie for the first time.

"It's not just about land connection. Although, of course, clearly, that is a huge part of it. But it's also about that disconnect of family and culture," said Anderson-Brass, who is the owner and operator of Minwaadizi Farm in K'ómoks territory.

Access to land is more than just owning a piece of land — it's about being taught and shown how to have a relationship with the land in a good, culturally appropriate way, she said. She ended up moving out west to have a stronger relationship with her aunt.

"That is how we learn; doing these things. It's not like reading it in a book. It's like having that relationship and having that opportunity to actually take action, practice together," she said.

When thinking about Indigenous food sovereignty, Napoleon — a Cree and Dane-zaa farmer and conservationist from the Peace River region — said that it's about being empowered to achieve self-determination on a community scale.

"It's very culturally unique — coastal folks are pretty salmon focused. Here, we're very large-game focused; we're moose and buffalo people," he said.

Napoleon is from the Saulteau First Nation, and operates Amisk Farm and Klinse-za Co. in his home territories. He continued to describe food sovereignty as a sacred relationship with the water and the land, something that often includes land-based harvesting, gardening and farming.

He acknowledged the food sovereignty work being done by Dawn Morrison of the Secwépemc Nation, particularly around her efforts on Bio Cultural Heritage, which he described as "the intersection of land, water, cultural practice and ancestral connection" that is safe from persecution and industrial contamination.

"That really embodies Indigenous food sovereignty — it's not just food. It's the landscape, the territory that supports the preparation of that food," he said.

"It's also the ability to get out there and have that access, where you're not being harassed, where you're not having to deal with industrial traffic."

In terms of what landback looks like to him, Napoleon said that it's the return of lands to Indigenous nations that were held illegally or "obtained through fraudulent means by the Crown."

"It could manifest in many other forms. For me, I want my nation to be able to govern by our own laws what's taking place out on the land in our territory," he said.

On a similar note, St. Amour — who is a member of the Bonnechere Algonquin First Nation — said that the landback movement is enabling Indigenous people to have the decision making authority, governance and jurisdiction over their lands.

"As it is now, Canada has claimed sovereignty over ... lands that they don't have a right to," said St. Amour, who is the campaigns director for Raven Trust.

"The courts have recognized that Canada didn't really have a claim to sovereignty. It just said it did. And we're seeing more and more court cases that are recognizing that Indigenous nations do still have titles to their land."

Raven Trust is an organization that works to support Indigenous nations who are engaged with the colonial legal system for various reasons. This can include reasserting and reestablishing their rights within the legal system; their access to land and title; and environmental protection.

"Indigenous nations have rights to their land no matter what a colonial legal system says. But oftentimes, going through the court system to have them recognized and established is where we help," she said.

“That’s an avenue that a lot of nations choose or are forced to take in order to prevent further colonial damage to their lands and territory.”

A landback system could include governing structures such as co-jurisdiction or co-management, she said. Whatever the case may be, she said the main focus is allowing Indigenous nations to enact their laws and legal orders on their territories.

“Canadian law did not extinguish those rights. Indigenous laws still exist on this land,” she said.

A brave future with a land title system that incorporates landback, she said, could be a system in which Indigenous nations have sovereignty over their land and can make decisions under Indigenous laws and legal orders to determine how that land is used.

“But not every Indigenous governance system is going to look the same,” she said. “There’s a lot of different ways it could look, but at the core of it, to me, is that it’s Indigenous folks making those systems.”

Such a system should include opportunities for Indigenous grassroots groups to participate in governmental structures that impact the management and decision making on the land, Napoleon said.

“We need to be collaboratively working as communities, guided by what we do have, what we’ve managed to hold onto, to kind of revitalize these forms of alternative governance,” he said.

“A lot of that work is up to us to do, but we need to have the space and the time to do it.”

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Aaron Hemens is a photographer, journalist and visitor in unceded syilx territory. He is Filipino on his mom's side, and has both French and British roots on his dad's. As a settler, he is committed to learning and unlearning in his role as Okanagan Storyteller, and to accurately and respectfully tell stories of Indigenous peoples throughout the region. Aaron's work is supported in part with funding from the Local Journalism Initiative in partnership with The Discourse and APTN.

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