

Towards Reconciliation: WCS Canada and Indigenous Peoples

The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\) of Canada](#) defines reconciliation as the “establishment of a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples”. Accordingly, the TRC provided a path forward that included “an awareness of the past, an acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.” The Commission stated that “virtually all aspects of Canadian society needed to be reconsidered” to work towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and developed a number of principles of reconciliation including understanding Indigenous history and the ongoing impacts of colonialism, racial injustice and systemic racism. Among other topics, the Commission highlighted the role of science, research, and conservation in that history.

As a Canadian conservation organization focused on scientific research, policy engagement, and communications, WCS Canada has an important role to play in understanding the relationships between humans and nature, and uses science to understand these relationships and provide advice and recommendations for addressing human impacts on wildlife and their habitats.

As scientists and individuals living and working on Indigenous lands, alongside Indigenous Peoples, we also have a responsibility to understand the historical context and the current socio-political implications of our research and conservation work on Indigenous Peoples and their relationships with nature and their homelands. For example, protected areas and parks are one of the key tools for conserving nature, but have historically resulted in relocation, removal, and persecution of Indigenous Peoples with losses to biocultural diversity in many parts of Canada. At the same time, Indigenous Knowledge has either been ignored and marginalized or extracted as observations and singular practices in conservation and management. Indigenous Peoples are the stewards of these lands and today scientists and governments have begun to recognize the value and importance of this stewardship. Indigenous Peoples have also made it increasingly clear that scientific research about lands, waters, and wildlife needs to be meaningful to communities, and conducted in ways that are more equitable, empowering, and inclusive of Indigenous knowledge systems¹.

We recognize that reconciliation requires us to understand and address the past and ongoing negative impacts from scientific research and conservation practices on Indigenous Peoples and communities, and to develop, in dialogue with our Indigenous partners, equitable processes moving forward. In the past, our work with Indigenous communities was largely ad-hoc. Moving forward, WCS Canada will consider how it equitably and respectfully works to establish partnerships and relationships with Indigenous Peoples in conservation. This includes enabling knowledge sharing and knowledge co-creation that supports community needs and visions for the future. Individual staff, regional and species programs, administration, and the institution are working to support reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples through conservation and research processes and outcomes.

¹ Indigenous Knowledge Systems refer to the practices embedded within an Indigenous worldview in which Indigenous knowledge is inseparable from the largely place-based relations and obligations across socio-cultural, political, and legal contexts.

What WCS Canada is doing

We are deeply concerned about the current condition of our world and the relationship between people and nature, shaping why we work in conservation and how we work. This concern is shared with many Indigenous communities. WCS Canada staff and our institution is also part of a broader societal dialogue and shift in reconciliation with Indigenous People. As such, WCS Canada is working to advance reconciliation in conservation practice and scientific research as it affects Indigenous Peoples and has developed the following goal as part of our 2021-2025 strategic plan: WCS Canada's conservation practice is transformed through reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples by implementing culturally appropriate ethical practices that lead to equitable and respectful knowledge sharing and knowledge co-production.

The primary ways in which WCS Canada is advancing reconciliation with Indigenous communities in the places where we live and work are:

- Work with Indigenous experts and partners to develop ethical guidance, training, and resources for WCS Canada scientists and all staff so that they have the training and capacity to engage in a culturally safe² and meaningful way with Indigenous Peoples, communities, and groups.
- Develop skills and support practices that enable the co-creation of conservation research with Indigenous Knowledge holders, experts, and communities.
- Develop opportunities for WCS Canada scientists and staff to exchange knowledge with Indigenous Peoples.
- Design, apply, and evaluate community-based approaches and tools that reflect Indigenous and environmental priorities and values, while creating as much cultural safety within WCS Canada and across our programs to support engagement with youth, Elders, and Indigenous Knowledge holders.
- Increase opportunities for Indigenous Peoples to pursue conservation and science careers with WCS Canada as well as supporting the next generation of Indigenous experts and Guardians.
- Work with Indigenous leadership to identify community priorities and opportunities to pursue shared goals in conservation.

² Cultural safety while first established in the delivery of healthcare among Indigenous Peoples means that when cultural differences exist between providers and Indigenous Peoples, communities, and groups, that the community determines if the processes being delivered or applied are respectful and inclusive of their cultures and protocols. Cultural safety is the culmination of skills, attitudes, and practices that recognize power imbalances, racism, and colonial relationships in our work and builds on cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence. <https://wabano.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Creating-Cultural-Safety.pdf>