

The Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle calls for an immediate ban on pesticides in Toronto's High Park

By: The Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle

Since the Fall of 2018, the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle has been organizing to protect a number of sacred sites in and around what is now the City of Toronto. Among their campaigns is the effort to manage High Park responsibly. This is an expression of Indigenous self-determination in the city. As part of their campaign, they have issued this Call to Action. It is republished here

DEAR MEMBERS OF COUNCIL AT THE CITY OF TORONTO, MEMBERS OF THE ONTARIO LEGISLATURE, AND MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT,

It is time for the City of Toronto to take leadership on two urgent issues: reconciliation with Indigenous people and climate action. This letter is a call to action.

It offers the City a powerful path towards both healing its relationships with Indigenous peoples and taking meaningful action in response to the dire challenges of climate change and ecological degradation.

The Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle is a collective of Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers, community members and leaders from diverse nations, including the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Wendat, Wyandot, and Métis Nations. We write to affirm the historical role of Indigenous Peoples in stewarding these Lands, and to affirm our continuing obligations under Indigenous law to protect these lands today (for more information see the attached document, *"Restoring Indigenous Stewardship to Toronto's Oak Savannahs"*).

We write to call for an immediate ban on the use of pesticides in High Park. The ancient oak savannahs and water ways of High Park have been under intensive ecological restoration for over twenty years. In that time, pesticides have been a primary tool for managing non-native species. This practice is of grave concern to the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle.

We are particularly concerned about the recent addition of Garlon RTU, a triclopyr-based herbicide, to the toxic mix of pesticides already in use by the City to control non-native plants throughout the park.

High Park, with its rare oak savannahs and ancestral mounds, is sacred land. Toronto's Indigenous people have an inherent responsibility to steward these lands well. It is our responsibility to conduct ceremony on these lands; to be in Right Relation; and to teach our children and grandchildren how to grow medicines and care for the plants, animals, waters,

soils, and air. We also have treaty responsibilities: The Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant commits the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabe people to work together in the stewardship of these very lands. Even though it has been neglected and broken under the conditions of ongoing colonization, we remain subjects of this Wampum agreement.

The oak savannahs that our people tended with fire for thousands of years used to stretch out across Tkaronto. These lands provided nourishing foods and healing medicines whose harvests our ancestors were committed to sharing. These were our hunting grounds, where we built our villages and grew our corn and tobacco. These are the lands that continue to be sites of ceremony for us today, as we come together to heal from the ongoing traumas of colonization.

The final report on the [Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#) emphasizes that healing from these traumas requires that Indigenous people have access to lands for ceremony. Land stewardship gives our people the opportunity to heal in ceremony and in community, and it allows us to [pass on our land-based teachings to future generations](#).

Pesticides have no place in Indigenous stewardship. They disrupt our sacred relationship to Land and to our Relatives.

These toxins destroy plants, they impact the lives of insects, birds, and other animals, and poison the soils, waters, and air; not to mention city workers, and members of the public, their dogs and children.

Non-native plants thrive here only because of ongoing processes of colonization. Chemical management cannot erase the damage done by colonization; it only compounds it, adding to the destructive forces of over a hundred and fifty years of colonial land management that has led to ecological destruction and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in this region.

We call on the City of Toronto to make good on its commitments to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations by creating space for Indigenous leadership in land restoration, and to work in partnership with Indigenous people in the care of these sacred lands.

The City has already formally adopted significant commitments to reconciliation. These commitments make it clear that the City must meaningfully consult with Indigenous people, and in so doing heed our call for an immediate ban on pesticides in High Park.

INDIGENOUS STEWARDSHIP IS CLIMATE ACTION AND HARM REDUCTION

Pesticides are toxic, and they are accelerators of climate change. The UN, WHO, the [International Agency for Research on Cancer](#), and recent [studies](#) have affirmed a link between glyphosate, one of the most widely used chemicals in the park, and [cancer](#); and recently Monsanto (now owned by Bayer) was found to have [knowingly repressed research that indicates that glyphosate is not safe](#). And now the City is using Garlon RTU in addition to glyphosate. [Triclopyr based pesticides are known to be even more toxic](#), with notably higher toxicity for birds, dogs, and other small animals; and these pesticides are known to linger longer in the soil and leech into the water.

Furthermore, the City's ongoing contracts with pesticide manufacturers prop up the fossil-fuel intensive industries that are accelerating the extraction of oil, gas, and minerals. From the devastating impacts of [mining the core materials of pesticides](#), to the emissions generated at the industrial plants where pesticides are produced, to the contamination of the sites where they are applied, it is clear that growth in these industries compounds the environmental injustices that leave Indigenous people and other racialized communities carrying the burden of pollution, ecological destruction, and climate change.

The UN recognizes that Indigenous peoples are the leaders in climate action: Indigenous peoples around the world have been on the frontlines, both in facing the impacts of climate change and in climate action movements.

Effective climate action is increasingly focused on transforming how we manage land, especially in forests and cities. Research shows that **biodiversity is highest on Indigenous-managed lands**, and the **protection of Indigenous stewardship** and knowledge is a critical part of maintaining biodiversity and mitigating against the effects of climate change.

In short:

- Indigenous people have the knowledge and the knowhow to restore these lands: our ancestors have had 500 years of experience managing the non-native plants that colonizers brought here;
- We have the sacred responsibility to heal the land, to tend it and to grow our medicines here. Access to land for ceremony and for healing from the trauma of colonization and cultural genocide is essential for our people;
- Working to reconcile our relationships to the land, and to all our relations is our path towards both cultural resurgence and healing the land.

Ultimately, the City's climate leadership hinges on its ability to meaningfully partner with Indigenous leaders in climate action, including the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle. We invite you to step into this leadership and respond to our calls to action for:

- An urgent meeting with local MPs, MPPs, Members of Council at the City of Toronto, and Parks, Forestry, and Recreation to begin the process of reconciliation;
- Recognition of, and support for, Indigenous peoples to take leadership in protecting the environment through cultural resurgence;
- Recognition of the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle as a body the City of Toronto can consult on the restoration of the lands of High Park;
- A ban on all pesticide use in High Park;
- A full disclosure of all prior, current, and planned pesticide uses in the city: How much pesticide has been applied to High Park over twenty years of restoration? Where are pesticides being used today in the City, in what volumes, and in which combinations?;
- And we call on the City of Toronto follow in the footsteps of other cities by declaring Tkaronto parks chemical free.

In the [document attached to this letter](#), we offer a further elaboration of these issues. Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

THE INDIGENOUS LAND STEWARDSHIP CIRCLE
(indigenoulandstewardshipTO@gmail.com)

Elder Vivian Recollet (Anishinaabe, Wikwemikong), Elder Donna Powless (Haudenosaunee, Six Nations), Elder Catherine Tammara (Wyandot), Elder Henry Pitawanakwat (Anishinaabe), Joce Two Crows (Mohawk, Pottawatomi), Andrea Bastien (Blackfoot, Cree, Anishinaabe), Carolynne Crawley (Mi'kmaq), Alan Colley, Doug Anderson (Métis), Samuel Charal (Wendat), Shawna Moore (Temagami First Nation), Crystal Sinclair (Fisher River Cree Nation), & Dr. Karyn Recollet (Cree), UofT. Allies: Kim Jackson, Ayelen Liberona, Dr. Jon Johnson, UofT, and Dr. Natasha Myers, YorkU

CO-SIGNATORIES

[Indigenous Climate Action](#); [Taiaiaiko'n Historical Preservation Society](#); [Idle No More](#); [Technoscience Research Unit](#); [Politics of Evidence Working Group](#); [Plant Studies Collaboratory](#); Dr. Dayna Scott, York Research Chair, Osgoode Hall/York; Dr. Michelle Murphy (Métis), Canada Research Chair, UofT; and Dr. Ian Mosby, Ryerson.

cc: Mayor John Tory, MPP Bhutla Karphoche, MP Arif Virani, Councillor Gord Perks, Councillor Mike Layton, Councillor Joe Cressy, Councillor Nancy Chater, Beth Mcewan (Parks, Forestry & Recreation), Moranne McDonnell (TRCA) and Selina Young (Indigenous Affairs Office)