

Creating Ethical Spaces: Opportunities to Connect with Land for Life and Learning in the NWT

Chloe Dragon Smith interviewed by Hayden King

The Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship is a policy and leadership development program recognizing leadership potential among young northern Canadians eager to address policy challenges facing the North. This interview is part of a series Yellowhead is publishing, featuring discussions with 2018-2019 Fellows on their fellowship policy papers.

*Here, Hayden King, Executive Director of Yellowhead Institute, speaks to 2018-2019 Glassco Fellow, Chloe Dragon Smith. Chloe's policy paper, *Creating Ethical Spaces: Opportunities to Connect with Land for Life and Learning in the NWT*, presents opportunities to expand and integrate on-the-Land learning into daily life in the NWT.*

HAYDEN: So maybe we could start at the beginning. Can you share what your paper is about and why you decided to write on this topic?

CHLOE: My paper is about getting kids, families, and community on the Land, and considering how public institutions (especially schools and the territorial government) can support this. Land is a major part of our collective identity in the North. How can we better support this foundational piece of who we are? Indigenous peoples have always been learning, working, and living our lives connected to land and natural laws; it's where our cultures and worldviews come from. The fact that our education systems and institutions don't align with this causes discordance between who we are and the institutions that are supposed to represent and serve us.

After university, I started working in conservation, and immediately what I came to realize was that we can't conserve anything if we don't have people out on the Land: people understanding, first of all, what's going on in terms of ecosystem health (which would be the western definition of conservation), but also maintaining relationships and love – ultimately fulfilling our responsibilities to care for Land.

To me, I see this as foundational to health in so many areas, of course biodiversity and climate, but also the health of people, cultures, languages, education, economies, and more.

To act on this, I co-founded a small business called Bushkids in Yellowknife where we work to advance the goal that I write about in the paper: working with the public schools so that all kids have the opportunity to be learning on the Land regularly and as an integrated part of life and the curriculum. This means it's not just an add-on like a camp or excursion — not, “Okay, we do our work and then we get to go play outside” — but rather recognizing that “playing outside” is an integral part of who we are and part of the learning that we need to thrive. Bushkids began three years ago, so when I joined the fellowship, I already knew what I wanted to do and was excited to tackle the policy challenges that were affecting me on that journey.

HAYDEN: Your paper doesn't just talk about integrating land-based education in education policy — you're talking about adapting this model to other areas as well. How does the land-based component inform policy development or analysis and integrate work that we would traditionally expect from governments?

CHLOE: I think it's essential that we consider other areas. As I said before, our connection with Land is so foundational that if we start with it as a priority, it will follow that our communities are healthier overall, in many ways.

I understand my own worldview as holistic and interconnected, and governance is absolutely no exception. Each department silo within government is not really so separate, and connection with Land can tangibly connect them all. Instead, we often see the responsibility is divided and no one seems to be accountable. It was really important to me that the way I went about the policy recommendations reflected the result that I wanted to see, which is why I implicated multiple large departments. I understand that is not normally how policy papers are written, and that they are meant to be as specific as possible; however, to write my recommendations authentically from an Indigenous and northern perspective, I chose to imbue the holistic nature of Land from my own worldview.

Our responsibilities to future generations include every department, not just Education.

In the end, the recommendations in my paper went out to Health, Environment, and Education — the three biggest departments in the government of the Northwest Territories.

HAYDEN: Interestingly, this has come up in a handful of conversations with some of your peers so far. There's this fear, I think, of trying to distill Indigenous knowledge or Indigenous values into an institution: that without integrating the worldview holistically, there is a risk of tokenization.

CHLOE: Absolutely there is. I guess to me it's about trying to find a balance where we can work with institutions with integrity and self-determination. I see an important difference between bringing Indigenous content into a structure and process that's created in a western system (which I often hear called “Indigenizing”), and creating the space to self-determine for ourselves, which is the concept of ethical space.

In ethical space, we bring our northern Indigenous worldviews together to meet the current institutions and their practices, and negotiate ways forward with respect and boundaries. I don't know how we could separate ourselves completely from Canadian institutions and still affect change because our lives and even our thinking is so entwined into them at this point. The vast majority of Indigenous children attend public school today; the public schools operate on our lands. We have a responsibility to Land and peoples — and institutions are tied to both right now. I think change has to happen both inside and outside of those constructs.

The question then becomes, “How can we create ethical space in institutions to ensure self-determination in what our Indigenous practices and process will look like?”

That's why I see so much hope in learning on the Land because all of a sudden, we've changed the setting and maybe we can work together in a new way.

HAYDEN: Can you elaborate on what you conceptualize as an "ethical space"?

CHLOE: Well, first of all, I learned about ethical space from Piikani Blackfoot Elder Reg Crowshoe in a national process called "Pathway to Canada Target 1," which was about land conservation in Canada. This concept comes from the work of Dr. Willie Ermine and a paper he wrote called "The Ethical Space of Engagement." Broadly, what "ethical space" means is creating space for different worldviews to come together where both are respected and honoured in parallel. It has become a formative concept for me in all the work I do.

In terms of my paper, I think the biggest factor for any outdoor learning space is that it has to be self-determined by the Lands, peoples, cultures, knowledge systems, and languages where you are. Meaning, it is dynamic, adaptive, and it will look different depending on where you are in space and time. That's what I love most about it: it must be founded on relationships – people coming together in a good way.

Part of it is about physical space, which is what my paper focuses on. At Bushkids, we use a wall tent — a place to go outside that's warm and sheltering in all weather. To truly embody ethical space, I think it must also be open and shared to some extent with the community. Shouldn't we all be responsible for our future generations? School being so cut off from the rest of the community and family is a relic of residential schools. The Land tells us that we are meant to be integrated and rely on each other.

In practice, community members could possibly use the shelters that are set up near the schools in times when they are not being used by educators. Families could come that maybe don't have the capacity — whether it's financial or skill-based — to get their families out on the Land. The same thing can be true for governments and businesses where they could be having meetings out on the Land as well. Naturally, healthy overlap can start to occur as others take shared ownership of the space. Educators could invite regular guests. There are lots of options.

Perhaps in sharing the same space, we will understand how we are tied together. And again, this goes back to our connection to Land. In my vision, physical ethical spaces are inclusive of everyone and anyone that wants to be there. If they aren't, we aren't following the laws of the Land anymore.

HAYDEN: I think that that's an interesting point. You talk about relational accountability and how critical that is to ethical spaces. I think that for a variety of reasons, ethical spaces probably wouldn't succeed unless relational accountability is central to space construction – this notion that everybody has to be involved in creating the space.

CHLOE: No one can dictate it. Again, it has to come from the Land, peoples, and the set of relationships that will remain accountable to each other. My paper, being a policy paper, looks specifically at what piece(s) the government can bring to this vision. In those terms, the recommendation is for those three departments to come together for the benefit of each other and for the community. And that's the piece that I can tackle within a policy paper for the Government of the Northwest Territories. But I think the whole paper and concept relies on the spaces taking on a life of their own and becoming what they're meant to in different communities in the North.

HAYDEN: Right. That sort of challenges the way of doing things. I think that's a fluidity, flexibility, that a lot of people would have difficulty with. But from my perspective, it would be a good thing.

CHLOE: Yes. It's not that we have to control the details, but rather that we can set it up to work in a holistic, flexible way, with the ultimate value on our relationships. An Indigenous process. As far as I know of my own ancestors, and what I understand of many peoples around Canada, that was our way of governing: creating our rules of engagement dynamically by taking time to honour and understand the relationships implicated.

HAYDEN: Can you point to any examples you have seen in your own work or experiences where these ethical spaces have been created and sustained?

CHLOE: There is awesome work happening in Indigenous-led conservation. In the NWT, we've started to see some protected/conserved areas that are self-determined by Indigenous nations but with parallel sets of legislation: Indigenous legislation from Indigenous governments and Western legislation from public governments to protect the land in ethical space.

The result is very close to shared governance with flexible accountability mechanisms built into the process. It's an inspiring example to me of how ethical space is possible, and especially in the North.

HAYDEN: What's next for you, are there plans on the horizon?

CHLOE: Right now, I'm in a period of planning, resting, and building. I think Bushkids will always be a part of my life; however, it's never a full-time part of my life because I do different and diverse work always. I've been living in Wood Buffalo National Park for the past year during the pandemic, which has been eye-opening for me. This park has a very dark history and it's the Land of my ancestors — I want to help be a part of healthy solutions. I'm having lots of thoughts around that and possibilities to bring together my work with Indigenous-led conservation and Bushkids.

But like I said, it's been a period of reset for me and it feels right. It's interesting what the Land is telling us. The water has been so high here; we had a couple of flood warnings last spring, and it's the highest it's been in decades. It looks like it is going to be high again this year. This usually brings more animals and ecosystem revitalization. All this abundance is just incubating around us and I don't know what it means yet: I'm just going to have to see where I land.

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