

# A Robinson Huron Treaty Settlement Proposal to Save Anishinaabemowin

by Quinn Meawasige

**ANISHINAABEMOWIN IS ON THE BRINK** of extinction. Saving it requires working with current speakers, a coordinated revitalization strategy including immersion opportunities, and a commitment from our leadership and communities more generally. It also requires resources – it requires *zhooniyaa*. It just so happens that Anishinaabeg in the Robinson Huron Treaty (RHT) areas may soon have significant resources as a result of the Restoule Case and the subsequent Robinson Huron Treaty Settlement. Through extensive community engagement sessions in 2023 into 2024, all 21 Robinson Huron Treaty First Nation signatory communities emphasized the need for further financial investment in Anishinaabemowin revitalization efforts. And, yet, we rarely hear our leaders publicly speaking and advocating to invest those resources into language revitalization.

But we have an opportunity to save Anishinaabemowin. And some of us have a plan.

## Re-Thinking Investment & Disbursement

Most of the conversation about the settlement is happening on social media, for better or worse. I read a post recently from a potential beneficiary arguing that if a 10 billion dollar settlement was invested, it could yield about \$1.3 million per day in interest. If we let that investment accrue interest for just two years before coinciding the per capita or community distribution, the interest accrued from this settlement could approach nearly \$500 million per year, or over two years, one billion dollars—a monumental sum. Imagine: if we waited two years we could save our language for our descendants for generations to come. Our ancestors signed the Treaty with us in mind. It's time for us to do the same.

If two years were too long to wait, there are alternatives to this kind of approach.

**Imagine the transformative impact of dedicating a mere two percent of the \$10 billion RHT settlement towards the revitalization of our language. This would represent a \$200 million commitment to developing a comprehensive language strategy that benefits not only current RHT communities but also the broader Anishinaabeg. We could even invest this two per cent and generate a much smaller but still substantial four to ten million dollars annually (depending on interest rates and investment strategy) for language revitalization.**

While the idea and conversation originated on social media, Yellowhead Institute reviewed and confirmed the math. This is all possible. It is up to our communities and leadership to make it happen.

We know that leadership and our lawyers have already created a **disbursement agreement**: it pays our lawyers first, then the communities that financially supported the court case and negotiations, followed by disbursement to each of the 21 First Nations, and finally, a much smaller ten per cent disbursement “for collective purposes of advancing rights and interests of the First Nations who participated in the trust.” But at the next Robinson Huron Treaty Special Chiefs and Trustees meeting, April 22nd,

2024, a group of Anishinaabeg will propose this idea and to make space for our proposal within, or even outside of this framework.

We need the support of at least thirteen of the twenty-one First Nation Chiefs involved in settlement decisions. Thirteen is the threshold to move a proposal forward.

But should something like saving our language not be unanimous?

We strongly encourage all citizens of the 21 First Nations of the Robinson Huron Treaty to lobby their Chiefs and Councils to support our proposal for two per cent for Anishinaabemowin Revitalization. Chiefs and Councils have been sent the proposal this week, in advance of their upcoming meeting.

### Considering the Counter-Arguments

In discussions so far there seem to be two counter-arguments to this approach.

First, there is a belief that there are more immediate needs to address with the settlement funds; needs that can't wait. Those making this argument challenge the risky nature of long-term investments that could potentially threaten addressing the immediate needs. While it is true that our communities are dealing with a range of social and economic challenges, what need could possibly be more pressing than ensuring the survival of our culture for future generations; what risk could outweigh the permanent loss of our heritage?

### **The potential disappearance of our language—a core component of our cultural identity—poses a profound question: what legacy do we intend to leave behind and how will we explain to our grandchildren that they are disconnected from a significant part of their heritage because we prioritized short-term relief?**

We are not opposed to large per capita distributions to address those needs, but we must do what we can to consider the future and do it collectively – not on a community to community basis that will result in the same uncoordinated efforts we have seen in the past.

The second argument is that the government took our language and they should invest in resources to bring it back. We do not oppose continued advocacy for restitution here, too, but who are we kidding? The reliance on government funding for the preservation of our language has proven time and again to be a mirage. We can't wait for government funding. They'll never invest any type of meaningful resources to save our language. It's up to us. Even the Indigenous Languages Act, received royal assent in 2019 and has been a **failure**. It has limited resources, power, and leadership to make a meaningful difference. Any support the Languages Office can provide is proposal based and Canada has already missed the window for the Parliamentary review of the Act. Again, demonstrating their lack of commitment. Even as the work on UNDRIP implementation legislation and action plan unfold (which were supposed to have a focus on language), the commitment to Indigenous language revitalization is all but absent.

According to Statistics Canada in 2021, there were only 25,000 Anishinaabemowin speakers remaining, less and less every year. This is actually a five per cent decline from 2016. At this rate of decline, and without transformative intervention, Anishinaabemowin may survive for a generation, maybe two. In writing this, we lost a kind, loving and caring language speaker who showed me so much care and compassion in my own language journey.

She, like many of her generation, advocated hard for language revitalization. At a 2000 Chiefs of Ontario Special Chiefs Assembly, Robinson Huron Chiefs championed resolution #00/05, that recognized "Nations in Ontario consider languages to be the foundation of our individual and social identity" and "First Nations Chiefs in Ontario should bring language to the forefront of their agenda, and a strategy should be developed to ensure the preservation and growth of languages."

After so long, so many missed opportunities, and so much loss, the urgency is now, we can't wait. This is why WE must take action for Anishinaabemowin revitalization.

### No Excuses

Anishinaabeg have resisted colonialism over the past two centuries. We have fought and survived but it has taken all of our strength to arrive on the edge of some kind of justice. We have a chance to honor the resistance of our ancestors with a commitment to two centuries of the

revitalization of our language and culture. We ask the members of the RHTLMC, our leaders, the lawyers that advise them, and our communities generally to consider this proposal seriously; to avoid telling us its achievable without changing the existing framework or whatever other excuses for why we can't do this. We can, and we must.

**So we expect nothing less than significant and dedicated settlement zhoonyaa for language revitalization – for our survival as Anishinaabeg.**

I am not sure how waabandaadzijig is translated exactly - but in short, I understand it as “the future generations”: waaban is dawn, the time just before the sun comes up, so waabandaadzijig are the people, who, just like the sun at that time of the day, are not yet here. But we are certain they are coming. This is how I imagine our ancestors thought of us.

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