



2019 Indigenous Environmental  
Justice Research Symposium

# Highlights Report

Osgoode Hall Law School and Faculty of Environmental Studies  
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## Acknowledgements

The 2019 Indigenous Environmental Justice Research Symposium took place on the traditional territory of many Indigenous Nations. The area known as Toronto has been stewarded by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and the Métis. Symposium organizers and participants acknowledge the current treaty holders and the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. This territory is subject to the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an Indigenous agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.

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Finally, we greatly appreciate the graphic note-taking efforts of Patricia Martin. Patricia is an Anishinaabe artist who designed various graphics based on the 2019 Symposium presentations. She drew from each speaker's research, stories, and insights to craft visual representations of overarching themes and messages. Examples of her work can be found in the presentations section.



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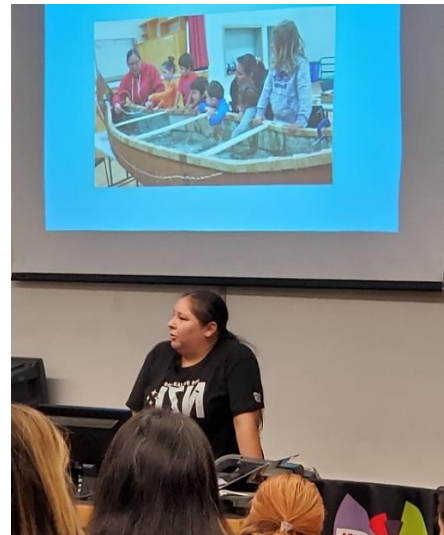
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## Summary

This report presents highlights from the Indigenous Environmental Justice (IEJ) Project's Research Symposium that took place on November 23, 2019, at York University. Continuing from the success of the Project's first Symposium in 2016, this one-day event brought together researchers, students, and activists to share their experiences and perspectives on the theory and practice of Indigenous environmental justice.

IEJ is a framework for addressing the environmental harm and injustices that disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples in Canada and across the globe. The IEJ Project brings Indigenous laws, knowledge, principles, and values to the discourse on environmental justice. The Symposium served the important purpose of further refining and contributing to this field.



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Photo Credit: Jayce Chiblow

Each presentation at the 2019 Symposium spoke to the interwoven theme, as termed by our keynote speaker Sylvia Plain, of **putting research into motion**. Knowledge and learning are not confined to the pages of a thesis. All the presentations discussed research that was active, grounded in the environments it studied, and intended to develop and improve over time. Whether attending Water Gathering events, speaking to elders, canoeing the Great Lakes, or researching land-based education in their home community, our speakers practiced what they wrote and put words into action.

Many speakers discussed the **importance of the land and the knowledge it possesses** in challenging the destructive forces of climate change and colonialism. Learning from the land and its traditions, whether rebuilding Indigenous food economies (Max Klein),

constructing birch bark canoes (Sylvia Plain), or trapping (Jayce Chiblow), evokes traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). **Connecting with the land is recuperative**, as discussed by Nicole Latulippe, in that the traditional knowledge gained from this act can heal past and present trauma. In describing the prevailing issues of climate change and colonialism, our speakers pointed to the message from Elders and knowledge holders from communities such as Whitefish River First Nation (Mahisha Sritharan) who view re-establishing healthy relationships with the land as the means to counter these injustices and sustain communities' well-being.

A number of speakers focused on land-based youth education. Sylvia Plain spoke of teaching young people to build traditional birch bark canoes while Jayce Chiblow engaged youth in land-based climate change workshops. Both projects were framed as a form of **youth justice**. The important task of drawing on the past to sustain the present, all in the hopes of a better future, lies with youth. To give them the knowledge and skills to gain an understanding of this is a significant step toward greater environmental and community justice.

The deep connection between women and water was also highlighted (Nasreen Husain). In Anishinaabe worldview, women and water experience shared trauma at the hands of colonialism. Many Indigenous women, inspired by incredible leaders like the late Josephine Mandamin, are reclaiming their relationship to water and increasingly working to ensure its protection.

Just as community research does not end with the final page of a thesis, the work of the IEJ Project does not end with this Symposium. To bring attention to the issues discussed at this year's event, **knowledge must continue to be shared**. All our speakers noted their intentions to continue studying Indigenous environmental justice, engaging with communities and youth, and challenging the forces of climate change and colonialism. The critical importance of promoting Indigenous rights through such concepts as free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in this process was highlighted (Courtney Arseneau).

## Introduction

Dr. Deborah McGregor's opening remarks began with congratulating the IEJ researchers for their commitment to environmental justice and ethical research practices with Indigenous peoples. She also commended the symposium organizers for providing an opportunity for students and research associates involved in the IEJ project over the past few years to share their insights and findings. In 2016, the IEJ project began with a knowledge-sharing symposium, bringing together scholars, youth, artists, activists and Elders to share their experience and insights to inform a path forward. A number of participating student researchers took these words to heart and since that time have been engaged in critical research that promotes Indigenous ways of understanding justice and appropriate relationships with the natural world. The 2019 IEJ Research symposium provided an opportunity for graduates to share this work beyond defending their thesis/MRP or project.

An important part of the IEJ project is to recognize work that is already occurring in communities, and on the lands and waters. The work of community leaders/organizers like Sylvia Plain, for example, is particularly significant, as these are the people responding to the imperative that "words must be put into action".

Another aspect of the IEJ project is the sharing of knowledge and ensuring it is accessible to those who wish to learn more or *act* on the knowledge. The project website provides resources for educators, organizers, artists, youth, students, and anyone interested in utilizing the information in their own environmental justice work. Dr. McGregor thanked participants for coming and supporting the IEJ project.

The floor was then turned over the Emelia Khalil and Jayce Chiblow to co-facilitate questions from the participants. Ms. Khalil then introduced each of the speakers whose presentations are summarized on the following pages.



Photo Credit: Emilia Khalil

## Presentations

### **Food Sovereignty, Climate Change, and Indigenous Environmental Justice by Max Corne-Klein**

Max Klein, graduate of the Master of Environmental Studies (MES) program at York University, presented his research on the effects of colonialism and climate change on Indigenous food systems. He concluded that the regulatory state and environmental change limit Indigenous peoples' ability to operate self-determining economies and food systems. Max identified the development of Indigenous-led urban food efforts - what he terms 'Indigenous determined initiatives'- as an important step toward Indigenous food sovereignty.

Chronicling his journey as a settler researcher, Max noted the need to inhabit the context in which one is working. As a result, his research has adopted an Anishinaabe worldview and largely focuses on the challenges in building and maintaining food systems in Toronto, Canada. A central barrier to fostering these urban food systems is the existing regulatory system. Max examined the regulatory difficulties Toronto restaurants serving Indigenous cuisine face in securing a traditional food supply. In restricting access to certain products, these laws constrain Indigenous food systems along with the valuable ecological knowledge embedded in them.

Max also discussed how his research has led him to the problem of climate change and environmental injustice. His interviews with Indigenous knowledge holders demonstrated the significance of self-determination through subsistence activities and the importance of knowledge sharing to overcome the impacts of colonialism. Based on this research, he advocates for the development of Indigenous food systems led by Indigenous peoples based on traditional knowledge and processes.

One of Max's research outputs is a podcast which assembles his interviews with Indigenous knowledge holders and discusses Indigenous food systems in urban and rural contexts. You can find his podcast at <https://iejproject.info.yorku.ca/food-relations-environmental-justice-indigenous-sovereignty/>



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Photo Credit: Jayce Chiblow

## **Anishinaabe & Climate Justice: An Indigenous Food Sovereignty Approach by Jayce Chiblow**

Jayce Chiblow's presentation, drawn from her MES research on climate action in her Anishinaabe community of Garden River First Nation, focuses on the utilization of land-based learning. Her ties to the Garden River community, specifically youth groups, complemented her methodology, which focused on reciprocity and learning from our relationship with the land. Jayce's connection with land-based learning can be attributed to her passion for canoeing, trapping, and passing down knowledge to her nephew. The methodology for her research also included applying an Indigenous Food Sovereignty framework because it places an importance on relationship-building rather than just getting food on the table.

Jayce highlighted how Elders' teachings and advice helped guide her to pursue solutions centred around climate change and youth issues. Conversations with youth from her community assisted with implementing an intervention that suited youth from Garden River while also contributing to her climate action research. Jayce explained how her experience working with an Elder trapping in the winter helped her understand climate change from a first-hand perspective and connect with youth on a personal level. With a high level of engagement during the youth workshop, she understood the importance of having a robust methodology, connecting with community members, and understanding what they wanted to include in interventions.

Jayce also brought up how the Garden River youth shared their thoughts on issues beyond mainstream climate change, such as the water level changes, animal distribution, land-based education, and the flaws with the western education system. She concluded by acknowledging that every community is different. What works in Garden River First Nation may not work in another setting. However, she stresses that cultural activities, community support, and interconnectivity are vital for youth because they are the future. You can find her Major Research Paper at <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/36980>





Photo Credits: Emilia Khalil



Photo Credit: Jayce Chiblow | Graphic Notes: Patricia Martin

## Impacts of Climate Change on Whitefish River First Nation by Mahisha Sritharan

Mahisha Sritharan presented her Master's in Environmental Science research on the impacts of climate change on the health and well-being of Whitefish River First Nation in Ontario. The objective of her project was to address the lack of research on the effects of climate change on First Nations communities in the Great Lakes region.

Through focus groups of community members and Elders, in addition to key informant interviews, Mahisha identified several themes in how climate change has affected the community. These common points of discussion included the physical impact of climate change, the detrimental effect on health, and issues with water and traditional food supplies.

In asking participants what their hopes were for Whitefish River, Mahisha found that community members stressed connecting youth to nature, sharing traditional ecological knowledge, collaborating with stakeholders and neighbouring groups, and building awareness around climate change. She concluded her presentation in stressing the importance of community knowledge in addressing the effects of climate change. You can find her Major Research Paper at: <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/34840>



Photo Credit: Emilia Khalil

### **Research in Motion by Sylvia Plain, Keynote Speaker**

Member of Aamjiwnaang First Nation and founder of the Great Lakes Canoe Journey, Sylvia Plain, shared an inspiring keynote presentation on canoe-building as a means of Indigenous nation-building. The Journey is an annual event that brings citizens of the Great Lakes together to celebrate and learn about Anishinaabe canoe culture. In discussing her work with canoes, Sylvia offered stories and insights on topics ranging from the canoe as a mode of understanding Canadian history to the importance of knowledge exchange and canoe-building as youth justice. As suggested by the presentation's title, Sylvia strives to put words into action and ensure research continues to move towards, act upon, and inform nation-building.

Sylvia explained how her research and canoe-building began as a promise to Grandmother and water protector Josephine Mandamin. Sylvia promised to carry on Josephine's work in protecting the water of the Great Lakes region and Anishinaabek teachings focused on that water. This promise led Sylvia to examine how water governance is exercised by building and using the canoe. She began researching canoe cultures from across the globe to learn and exchange knowledge. These travels have

brought Sylvia to the west coast of Canada, across the Great Lakes Region, and as far away as New Zealand.

Ms. Plain detailed the role canoes have played in the history of Canada, the early Canadian economy, and Indigenous-Canadian relations. Europeans appropriated canoes to travel and to transport goods; canoes were the “first Cadillacs of the Great Lakes.” Canoes also model Indigenous understandings of history, in that they connect the past, present and future. This conception, Sylvia explains, is why canoes ought to be used on the water rather than displayed in a museum.

A major element of Sylvia’s project is educating youth on building birch bark canoes. She has thus far trained four canoe builders, designed technical workshops, and taught over 2000 elementary and university students about her work. Sylvia explained how training young people to build canoes and learn from the land is justice for communities. When on the land, youth gain valuable knowledge on the non-human world, the ancestors, and the environment.

Sylvia closed in posing her goals for the future of her project. She strives to own a canoe-building school or technical college which would house the exchange of Indigenous knowledge and stories regarding canoes. The Great Lakes Canoe Journey, and all of Sylvia’s work to educate and share, aims to bring spirit back to knowledge. In activating knowledge on the land, Sylvia emphasizes the importance of putting teachings to practice.



Photo Credits: Emilia Khalil |  
Graphic Notes: Patricia Martin

## Significance of Water: A Critical Reflection by Nasreen Husain



Photo Credit: Emilia Khalil

Nasreen Hussain, Master's graduate from York University's Environmental Studies program, shared her connection with water through research, poetry, film, and stories of her time spent in Garden River First Nation. Her research highlights the different ways in which water manifests its role in Anishinaabe worldview, and the effect of water contamination and colonialism on women.

Drawing on Anishinaabe teachings around water, Nasreen explained how water is the lifeblood of the Earth and the sustainer of all life. She spoke of how water accompanies life at birth and ensures our survival, and highlighted the power of water to provide solace and reflect our emotions. Another aspect of Nasreen's work highlights our reciprocal relationship with water. She shared a poem she wrote, based on Anishinaabe water teachings, which reminded listeners that our relations with water must be maintained through love and respect.

Nasreen proceeded in discussing her research on women's connection with water in Indigenous worldviews and the shared trauma women and water experience at the hands of colonization. At the 2016 Water Gathering at Garden River Nation, she witnessed women using their connection to water, as traditional water keepers, to heal themselves and the water from such trauma. Later in her presentation, she shared a clip from her documentary 'Significance of Water' in which Elder and water keeper, the late Grandmother Josephine Mandamin, explained how women must respect water and maintain a connection with it.

Nasreen presented water justice as a process of empathizing and forming relationships with water. She concluded in sharing her continued work in this field as a researcher with the IEJ Project and an Event Coordinator for Water Allies, a hub for water issues at New College within the University of Toronto.

You can find Nasreen Hussain's final MES project at:

<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/34703> and her video on the IEJ website at: <https://iejproject.info.yorku.ca/the-significance-of-water-video/>

### **Free, Prior and Informed Decision-Making About Proposed Development on Indigenous Territories in Northern Ontario by Courtney Arseneau**

Courtney Arseneau is a recent PhD graduate in Community Psychology at Wilfred Laurier University. During her graduate studies, she worked with the Pan-American Indigenous Rights and Resource Governance Research Group. Her research and her presentation centred around the concept of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) as well as her work in Matawa First Nations.

Dr Arseneau's research is pertinent to Northern Ontario Indigenous communities faced with ever-increasing development pressures and the need to promote Indigenous rights related to FPIC. Dr. Arseneau also stressed the importance of building social and infrastructure capacity in Indigenous communities to help relieve coercive pressures in decision-making. She explained how relationships between development groups such as mining companies and the communities in question are often challenging to manage because of the struggle to balance economic development and environmental protection.

Using a case study from Matawa First Nations in Northern Ontario, she provided examples of how there is often a lack of community consultation when development agencies and mining companies communicate with an Indigenous group. She also stressed that the inconsistent enforcement or implementation of Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination occurs at all levels, from the local to the international.

Dr. Arseneau suggested that there be a reconciliation process established to help address the many wrongs of past development. She also asserted that community dialogue must occur in any development situation, and that continuous consent is vital to FPIC. As a non-indigenous scholar, she believes that we all have a responsibility to learn about Indigenous peoples' rights and worldviews and to work together in meaningful ways.



Photo Credit: Emilia Khalil

### **Indigenous Environmental Justice: Community Perspectives and Practices from the Research by Nicole Latulippe**

Assistant Professor at University of Toronto Scarborough, Nicole Latulippe presented her findings from interviewing Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, artists, community members, and activists on the topic of Indigenous environmental justice (IEJ). These interviews centered on the meaning of IEJ and varying frameworks for examining issues related to the environment and colonialism. Her presentation covered interviewees' divergent conceptions of IEJ, the importance of language, recuperation, and the power of narratives to alter colonial structures.

In her interviews, Nicole identified two seemingly conflicting interpretations of IEJ. The first focused on understanding environmental justice within an Indigenous framework while the other conceptualized IEJ in more environmental activist terms. Nicole stated that her intention in the presentation was to unpack the assumed tension between the two interpretations.

With regards to language, Nicole discussed the importance of selecting the proper words to describe IEJ. Since the conversations were in English, many of the concepts discussed were laden with colonial baggage. Additionally, she noted how participants were careful in selecting the right word as a means of respect to previous generations and their work.

Nicole spoke at length about recuperation and recuperative acts as an important tool to understanding Indigenous worldviews and concepts. Based on several interviews, she noted how recuperation is context-specific and respects the land in which it takes place. Such acts of recuperation require being active on the land, listening to the land, and

sharing knowledge. Conversely, these acts also require accountability for past and current harms.

She concluded with a discussion on changing structures and narratives from a focus on Western legal norms and systems. Nicole noted how an emphasis on colonial perspectives is damaging for communities. As an example, she explained how the Ontario government's condemnation of French River First Nation's outdated water treatment operations was premised on the notion that Indigenous peoples are unable to manage their environment. This statement did not account for the Nation's excellent care for their water that prior to European activity in the area was clean even without advanced treatment. To reframe these structures and perspectives, Nicole underlines the potential utility of changing narratives in order to alter structures.

Learn more about Dr. Latulippe's research at: <https://utsc.utoronto.ca/geography/nicole-latulippe>



Photo Credit: Emilia Khalil

## Conclusion

The IEJ Project's 2019 Symposium was a major step in continuing to bring awareness and change to ongoing issues faced by Indigenous communities with respect to climate change and colonialism. Drawing on the research, insights, and stories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, the Symposium sparked discussions on Indigenous self-determination, climate change action, youth justice, land education, and Indigenous research methodology.

It is important for words and research to bring action. As demonstrated by the presentations, this is and continues to be a priority for the IEJ Project. The Symposium gathered various perspectives and topics from listeners which cultivated a recognition and understanding for Indigenous environmental justice. Through their stories and struggles, the speakers evoked a call to action in support of Indigenous communities in this key area.



Photo Credit: Jayce Chiblow