

# THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAM IN PROTECTION AND EXPLOITATION OF WILDLIFE TERRITORIES— FIRST NATIONS COMPONENT:

## When Structures Adapt to Culture to Offer a Customized Training



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In this report, we are proud to present an innovative project developed with a desire to serve the interests of First Nations in consideration of their cultural and territorial concerns. The vocational training program is called, *Protection et exploitation de territoires fauniques (PETF)*, within which a First Nations component has been developed in response to the needs of the Innu Nation. Unique in Quebec, this initiative now provides Indigenous students with an opportunity to experience training that is firmly grounded in their territory and culture. Offered at the Centre régional d'éducation des adultes (CRÉA) of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, in collaboration with the Centre de formation professionnelle (CFP) du Fjord, this 1320-hour program leads to the issuance of a diploma recognized by the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (MEES). In summer 2018, 15 students from five Innu communities received their diploma of vocational studies (DEP code 5179) issued by the Commission scolaire des Rives-du-Saguenay (CSRS). This large-scale project is the result of a sustained collaboration involving many organizations, all united in the same cause: to take into consideration Indigenous issues related to the training of workers in wildlife areas. In all respects, it is an example of innovation leading to tangible accomplishments.

The report, punctuated with the Innu culture's typical humour, gathered around the table collaborators inspired by an obvious complicity which should be presented here. Involved since the very beginning, Dominic Simard, an international and First Nations development officer of the CSRS, helped to organize this meeting. The presence of the CFP du Fjord Director, Gilbert Paiement, and Denis Dionne, Director of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam's CRÉA, testified to the involvement of the management staff of the two educational institutions concerned. We were also honoured by the presence of Hermel Bégin, Member of the Mashteuiatsh community and Liaison Officer at the First Nations Human Resources Development Commission (FNHRDCQ). As an expert in Indigenous content, he coordinated the CRÉA's vocational training for the first cohort of Innu students who experienced the adventure in 2017–2018. Two teachers involved in the project, Marc-André Racine and Caroline Huot, were able to share their field experience with students whose representative, Jonathan Moreau-Tremblay, enrich the meeting with his testimony. The participants also wanted to recognize the contribution of Julie Rock who, according to them, is at the origin of the project. Former Director of CRÉA and originating from Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, Julie Rock is said to have set

the first guidelines for the project and facilitated the participation of key players in its implementation. The contribution of the Tshakapesh Institute and its instructors, such as Alfred Mackenzie, Denis Vollant, Évelyne Saint-Onge and Kathleen André, to name a few, was also highlighted. The expertise, the sensitivity, but above all the generosity of the involved actors are guarantees of the success of this project, which contributes to the Innu nation's self-affirmation. The following paragraphs present, through the comments of the participants who took part in the report, a background of the project, the objectives and specificities of the PETF Training Program—First Nations Component as well as its future perspectives.

## FROM IDEATION TO CREATION

When we invited the participants to explain the reasons that inspired the project, Dominic Simard took the time to situate its emergence context:

Previously, a few Innu students would follow a similar training in one of the six centres offering it in Quebec, more specifically in La Baie, Saguenay. We noticed that, to complete the program, they had to leave their families behind and uproot themselves from their land, which does not correspond at all to their values or the Indigenous education model. This rang a bell; training such as this in their environment could be beneficial for communities.

At the basis of the PETF Program—First Nations Component is an extension of the Nutshimiu Atusseun Project, which was created in the '90s. Meaning in Innu language "working in the forest", this program aimed to develop the traditional knowledge and skills learned and practised on the ancestral Nitassinan territory. Established by Société de développement économique Uashat mak Mani-Utenam (SDEUM), this project had received financial support from Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada (AHRDCC).

With the aim of providing Innu students with up-to-date training adapted to the labour market in wildlife areas, the mission and values of the Nutshimiu Atusseun project have been incorporated into the Program of Vocational Studies. "There was an obvious complementarity between the two projects; we therefore had the idea of combining them" (Julie Rock).

## AN ALL-OUT MOBILIZATION

According to Dominic Simard, the contribution of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam's CREA Director Julie Rock from September 2015 to June 2017 was instrumental in developing the program: "She contributed to her ideation, ensured a transfer of values and guided us in the construction of a training reflecting the Innu nation". Even today, Ms. Rock remains

committed to the project: "I have always sought to defend the interests of First Nations by ensuring that the services put in place correspond to our realities. This strategic position in program direction allowed me to do so". Now Director of Services sociaux Atikamekw Onikam de La Tuque, this manager who specializes in help relations, shares her thoughts with us: now, we are setting up our own services, within our communities, which correspond much better to who we are. It demands great adaptability from all our partners."

In the fall of 2015, the arrival of Hermel Bégin, who will become the coordinator of the PETF Program—First Nations Component at Uashat mak Mani-Utenam's CRÉA, helped to make the project a reality by "providing the bond of trust with the communities (Dominic Simard). For Hermel Bégin, such a project is an opportunity for nations to gain more autonomy in education: "We must inhabit our territory if we want it to be protected." In order to assess the needs and interests of the community, Dominic Simard and Hermel Bégin first submitted the idea of the PETF Program—First Nations Component to the First Nations Human Resources Development Commission (FNHRDCQ) before undertaking a tour of the Innu communities of Côte-Nord, which allowed them to validate the relevance of offering such training. From there, collaborators from various Indigenous and government organizations were called upon to create a focus group to develop the program. The partnership between CFP du Fjord and CRÉA was enhanced by the addition of many contributors. Thus, the MEES, Emploi-Québec, the Société de développement économique de Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, the Société du Plan Nord (Gouvernement du Québec, 2015), Innu Takuaihan Uashat Mak Mani-Utenam (ITUM), the Centre de service urbain of Sept-Îles and the First Nations local commissions of Essipit, of Pessamit, of Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, of Ekuanitshit and Unamen Shipu, and the Service aux entreprises (SAE) of CSRS have all been involved as financial partners. « We focused on job creation, which ensured the financial support of the Plan Nord and of Emploi Québec » (Hermel Bégin). Nearly \$900,000 was needed to start the project.

## A PROGRAM REFLECTING INNU CULTURE

The PETF Program—First Nations Component presents common teaching sequences and skills with a traditional value. On the 48 weeks totalizing 1320 hours of training, of which 120 spent on internships, "30% of the Program's content is dedicated to Innu Nation cultural and territorial practices" (Denis Dionne). The Indigenous component is then integrated into the training, according to an andragogical approach based on needs which give priority to the learning mode through sharing. In order to reflect the main skills of Innu culture, the contents are designed according to five dimensions of traditional value: cuisine, crafts, tales and legends, traditional medicine and spirituality. Like the holistic model of lifelong learning for First Nations (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007), these cultural landmarks allow students to develop transferable generational skills. "For us, the caribou opens the door of the ancestors. We make a

total use of it" (Julie Rock). For Denis Dionne, current Director of CRÉA, "it gives them the taste to learn more about their culture." According to the wheel of medicine perspective, a symbol common to all First Peoples of America, the curriculum is designed in a circular manner, consistent with the cycle of seasons. In that respect, the contents are adjusted to the ancestral territorial practices of the Innu. "Migratory bird hunting happens in the spring, so that's when we teach it" (Julie Rock).

Throughout the training, the presence of master trainers, often elders, comes to strengthen intergenerational links: "They come to provide us traditional know-how and give full meaning to the Indigenous component" (Marc-André Racine, Teacher). The program includes courses in animal biology, forest ecology, wildlife management, transportation (canoeing, all-terrain vehicle [ATV], snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, dog sledding), including the various traditional hunting and fishing techniques. Customer service, personal assistance, patrolling, investigation, survival in the forest, health and safety, but also the laws and regulations related to the protection and exploitation of wildlife are also part of the skills to develop. To do this, four outings of two weeks in territory punctuate the course at the rate of one per season<sup>1</sup>. In all these respects, this experience allows us to "share and nurture Innu pride of identity" (Denis Dionne). "The Indigenous vocation of the program is not yet officially recognized; we are working on this," said Gilbert Paiement, Director of the CFP du Fjord. Defending the legitimacy of such a program, Denis Dionne questions: "If there are sport-education programs everywhere, why can't there be community-based cultural learning programs built on Indigenous traditions?"

**"Life does not lie in the molecules, but in the bonds that unite them" (Linus Pauling).**

## PRACTICE NARRATIVES OF PERSEVERANCE IN SUCCESSES

At the beginning, the partners had received the authorizations from the MEES to offer the training to 13 subsidized students based on requisites (having completed Secondary 2). However, more than 45 applications for admission were sent to the CRÉA from all Innu communities. The coordination team had to make a rigorous selection that led to the start of a first cohort of 16 students in September 2017. The participants were 19 and 59 years old, with an average age of 33 years of age. "Only one student had to withdraw from the project, allowing us to issue diplomas

to 15 Innu students," explained Denis Dionne. The graduation ceremony was filled with emotion and pride. For teacher Marc-André Racine who has experienced it, it is important to know how to adapt to students: "The contact with the students showed me that you can learn with laughter, which is typical here." The following comments by Jonathan Moreau-Tremblay, a graduate of the first cohort, report on what was learned during the training:

I wanted to get closer to my origins, to know the territory, to learn my language. [...] What I remember is the pride and support that emerge from this experience. We were like a family! [...] I also discovered my leadership. Today, I work for AMIK<sup>2</sup> with good conditions and I can also transmit what I learned.

At the end of the program, employment prospects are high. They include positions of wildlife protection assistant, warden, park warden, hunting and fishing guide, outfitting manager and adventure tourism positions. Denis Dionne told us the emotion experienced during the graduation ceremony: "It was very touching to see the pride in their eyes." With a strong sense of belonging within his cohort, Jonathan Morin-Tremblay said before returning to his professional obligations: "If I could do the program again, I would start over tomorrow." During the last edition of the Convention on Perseverance and Academic Achievement for First Peoples (2017), Denis Dionne experienced what he described as the peak of his thirty-year career in education, when a woman got up in the audience to thank the initiative to create this program. She claimed that this training had saved her son's life, as he had found the motivation to get his life back on track.

## FROM REAPPROPRIATION TO INTERNATIONALS CELEBRATION

As an enrichment, the Innu students had the opportunity to experience a professional immersion internship at Haidas Gwaii (formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands), located in British Columbia. And so, in June 2018, the first cohort of the PETF-First Nations Component flew to Western Canada to meet with the Haida Nation to discuss their respective practices regarding protection and exploitation of wildlife territories. The three internship sites visited (Haida Gwaii Museum, Gwaii Haanas National Park, Haida Style Expeditions) have enabled students to develop their professional, cultural, social and personal skills. Planned at the end of the course, this unique experience, supported by programs facilitating mobility and encouraging school perseverance (Éducation internationale et Les offices jeunesse internationaux du Québec, LOJIQ), fostered a consolidation of learning and an openness to other cultural realities. "The Haidas introduced us to a way of managing the territory which spans a thousand years"<sup>3</sup> (Dominic Simard). According to him, this knowledge

would benefit from being known by local communities. Innu students were also introduced to other models of Indigenous tourism integration and practice their hunting, fishing and forest survival skills. During an interview, Geneviève Fradette, Coordinator of student mobility at LOJIQ, explained that the contact with First Nations has led the organization to “reinvent itself and approach student mobility in a different way, in order to allow Indigenous students to achieve success while respecting their learning style and values.” She explained that the primary mission of LOJIQ is “to support the dreams of young people aged 18 to 35, through mobility projects”; she believes that the experience played a “transformative and potential-revealing role” for Innu students. According to her, “to go out and meet others, is to go out and meet oneself.”

## PERSPECTIVES AND OUTREACH

Building on its success, the PETF - First Nations Component now makes it possible for Innu students to develop the skills required to enter the job market in the areas of environment and wildlife. Recognized by the MEES, it is a real lever of perseverance and academic success that fits strategically in the economic and tourism context of the northern Quebec region (gouvernement du Québec, 2015). The mobilization of a wide variety of Indigenous and government organizations, all involved in the

common interest of serving First Nations, has helped to lay the initial foundations needed to create a structure that is fundamentally adapted to culture. From 2018 to 2021, this innovative project will receive support from MEES. In addition to the PETF - First Nations Component, a certificate of professional studies (AEP) for hunting and fishing guides totaling 720 hours of training was also implemented at the CRÉA in 2017<sup>4</sup>. Concomitance, defined here as the possibility of completing a general education at the same time as professional training, as well as the recognition of prior learning, are among the strategies that allow these training courses to be better adapted to the needs of First Nations. Other indigenous communities have also expressed interest in developing similar models. Considered a model of excellence in Indigenous education, the PETF - First Nations Component was featured in a report that will soon be posted on the National Center for Collaborative Indigenous Education (NCCIE) website<sup>5</sup>.

By integrating the Innu Nation's language, values and traditional practices, the project presented here is an eloquent example of cultural and territorial re-appropriation through education. In this respect, this initiative is in line with the objectives of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and aligns with the Declaration of Human Rights among First Nations (ONU, 2008). The report ended on the shared aspiration to see other similar initiatives emerge so that the First Peoples of America can regain autonomy of their modes of transmission of knowledge and know-how. ■

## NOTES

- 1 The curriculum is the same as that offered at La Tuque under the DEP program code 5179 PETF, except for the addition of content related to Innu culture.
- 2 The Agence Mamu Innu Kaikuseth (AMIK) supports the Innu communities in the sustainable development of the fishing industry on Côte-Nord.
- 3 Government of Canada & Council of the Haida Nation (2008).
- 4 The AEP is a 720-hour program with the prerequisite of completing Secondary 3.
- 5 NCCIE link: <https://www.nccie.ca/>. Affiliated to First Nations University (Regina, Saskatchewan), the NCCIE's mission is to foster, support and represent collaboration, innovation and excellence in Indigenous education at the national level.

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