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WHITEFEATHER FOREST COMMUNITY RESOURCE
MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY
Kangung (The Land) - The People (The Forest)
Head Office: 1140 George Street, Box 111, Red Lake ON P2Y 2B6
Tel: 807-728-1228 Fax: 807-728-1228
www.pikangikum.com

Sustainable Forest Licence Issued for the Pikangikum Whitefeather Forest Initiative

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Backgrounder

Contact Alex Peters: Cell: 807-728-1228

(Pikangikum, Ontario, June 19, 2013) After more than sixteen years of effort guided by Esteemed Elders from Pikangikum First Nation, a Sustainable Forest Licence (SFL) has been issued for the Whitefeather Forest.

The Whitefeather Forest is located in Northwestern Ontario (The Whitefeather Forest is an 11,749-square-kilometre area in Northwestern Ontario, located approximately 80 kilometres east of the Manitoba border, 90 kilometres north of the Town of Red Lake, Ontario and 400km northwest of Thunder Bay, Ontario) and is part of the Far North of Ontario. It lies within the largest area left on earth where indigenous people speaking their own languages are the majority of people living on the land. Pikangikum First Nation people are noted for having among the highest rates of indigenous language retention in Northern Ontario.



The issuance of the SFL represents the culmination of a comprehensive and intensive long-term planning effort to create new land-based economic opportunities for Pikangikum First Nation people. The Whitefeather Forest Initiative is a community economic renewal and resource stewardship initiative to support the rebuilding of economic independence for Pikangikum people while sustaining the Whitefeather Forest as an indigenous cultural landscape.

“Our Elders are elated with the issuance of the SFL for the Whitefeather Forest,” noted Alex Peters, the President of the Whitefeather Forest Community Resource Management Authority. “At times we wondered how we would make it. But we have. It was the encouragement of the Elders and their vision of creating new economic opportunities for our youth and for future generations that kept us going.” Peters added: “The need to create new opportunities has only grown more urgent since we began. Now we can move forward into beginning our enterprise operations.”

Beginnings

The origins of the Whitefeather Forest Initiative lie in the collapse of the fur and commercial fishing economy that sustained Pikangikum people for most of the 20th century. This economy collapsed in the late 1980s.

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In 1996 the Elders of Pikangikum saw the urgent need to address their economic circumstances. This need was growing acute not only because of the collapse of commercial trapping and fishing. It was also growing as a result of the fulfillment of a prophecy given long ago to Pikangikum people that their population would be renewed. Like other First Nation people across Canada, disease and sickness had taken a terrible historical toll on Pikangikum people. The late Elder George B. Strang affirmed several years ago at a planning meeting for the Initiative where he discussed this prophecy that Pikangikum people were "coming back."

Elders from Pikangikum discussed their economic crisis in the mid-1990's working with their Economic Development Officer, Peter Quill. "We knew we had to do something," noted Quill. He added: "As EDO, I participated in discussions with the Elders. They decided that we had excellent timber on our lands and that this was an opportunity. When I was travelling once with Paddy Peters to Red Lake during this time, we could see non-natives were developing forestry opportunities and gaining the benefits. Forestry was already taking place in our lands north of Red Lake.

Elders like George K. Strang had worked in sawmills in Red Lake. They concluded that forestry would be the central economic renewal opportunity that they would pursue for their youth. As the late Elder George K Strang noted during an early planning meeting: "This is my desire, to work in the area of forestry, because we have good timber in our forest. If we go through with our planning process to do forestry we can create employment for our people in the making of lumber. If we are successful in obtaining our forestry [forestry tenure] we will achieve a landmark that will help us in our future forestry endeavours" [in translation].

The Strategic Planning Approach

In 1996, when Pikangikum Elders gave the mandate to pursue a forestry opportunity within the ancestral lands of their people, it was an enterprise development mandate. The Elders directed that the Initiative would focus on business. It would not deal with political issues like jurisdiction over natural resources. Issues like these would be dealt with in other political venues with the involvement of political leaders.

This enterprise development mandate, however, was set within a particular indigenous context: In order to ensure that they could sustain their cultural landscape, the Elders mandated that a Sustainable Forest Licence be sought for the Whitefeather Forest. Forest management responsibilities needed to be acquired so that forestry in the Whitefeather Forest could reflect the cultural context of Pikangikum that is so important to the Elders.

For the Elders, the ability of future generations to make their livelihood from their ancestral lands in keeping with their culture was an essential part of their being indigenous people. As Elder Solomon Turtle stated early in the planning process: "We started this Initiative because of the land. The people of Pikangikum have lived for a long time and this is how we survived... We started this for our youth. For my part, I am now old so I need to plan for their future" [in translation].

The Elders also directed that their customary stewardship approach would have to guide the development of a First Nation-led forestry opportunity. This is because the Whitefeather Forest, as it is today, reflects the Keeping the Land tradition of Pikangikum people. It is an indigenous cultural landscape. Pikangikum Elders insisted right from the beginning that they wanted non-native people to understand and acknowledge the nature of the Whitefeather Forest as an indigenous cultural landscape. They constantly reminded the planning process that there is no place anyone can go in the Whitefeather Forest without finding the presence of Pikangikum people - past and present.

Elder Charley Peters stated this most succinctly in the planning process: "We are reflected in the land and the land is reflected in us" [in translation]. For example, it was Charley's father Daniel Peters who carried out extensive work planting Manomin (wild rice) in the upper reaches of the Berens River. People like Daniel and Elder Solomon Turtle were also acknowledged as experts in indigenous pyrotechnology (prescribed fire).

Charley Peters has described the ecology of his father's burning: "Those areas that they burnt, from what I saw, when they burnt those grass areas in the early spring, once everything thawed out, when things started to grow on the land in the late spring, these burnt areas tend to grow much faster and more plentiful whereas these ones that we did not touch just grew with the season. In other words those areas that they burnt, they helped those areas grow faster. *Geeminozahgeegink* - for the land to grow beautifully. Those other areas just grew with the season" [in translation].

The Keeping the Land stewardship tradition became a foundation upon which planning for a new forestry opportunity in the Whitefeather Forest proceeded. Alex Peters noted that this approach is common to many First Nation people: "In 2002, we chartered a bus and took twenty Elders and twenty youth to visit the Menominee Forest in Wisconsin. We had heard about their stewardship approach so we went to visit them. Our Elders were so happy to see

how another First Nation was able to carry out their internationally recognized sustainable forestry based on their tradition.” Menominee people call themselves “forest keepers.” Peters added: “Our forest is different than the forest of the Menominee people but it is their approach that is important. Like our Menominee brothers and sisters our tradition is that we are people of the forest and not of the field. This is important.”

Milestone Planning Achievements for Forestry

Soon after Pikangikum Elders gave their mandate to pursue a Sustainable Forest Licence for the Whitefeather Forest, a dialogue was initiated with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. In the meantime, the Elders directed that the economic potential of timber resources of the Whitefeather Forest be assessed. A partnership with the private sector was established to carry out this work.

By 1999 a shared Strategic Action Planning partnership framework with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources had been put in place. This was the beginning of a partnership-building process to achieve a number of planning milestones. No Land Use Plan had ever been developed or approved for the Whitefeather Forest. Approvals for forestry had never been put in place. The Whitefeather Forest was what non-natives call a “Greenfield” context.

Pikangikum Elders proposed an approach for planning: The First Nation, directed by the Elders, would take a leading role in planning but every decision made would reflect consensus with Ontario. This approach was jointly embraced by Pikangikum and Ontario. Its results have been nothing less than remarkable:

1. The first Community-Based Land Use Plan in Northern Ontario, Keeping the Land, which embodies the rich Indigenous Knowledge and customary resource stewardship of Pikangikum and harmonizes it with the best of western science available to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (2006) (<http://www.whitefeatherforest.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/land-use-strategy.pdf>);
2. The incorporation of the role of the Elders and the role of Indigenous Knowledge into the Forest Management Planning Manual for Ontario in a section specific to the Whitefeather Forest (2009); (http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/stdprodconsume/groups/lr/@mnr/@forests/documents/document/stdprod_100221.pdf)
3. The signing of the inaugural Forest Management Plan for the Whitefeather Forest based on the “light footprint” forestry approach provided by Pikangikum Elders (Hune 2012 - National Aboriginal Day) (<http://www.appfmp.mnr.gov.on.ca/eFMP/viewFmuPlan.do?fmu=994&fid=100106&type=CURRENT&pid=100106&sid=11582&pn=FP&ppyf=2012&ppyt=2022&ptyf=2012&ptyt=2017&phase=P1>)
4. The issuance of the Sustainable Forest Licence to the Whitefeather Forest Community Resource Management Authority (May 27, 2013).

The Strategic Enterprise Development Approach

Early in the development of the Whitefeather Forest Initiative the journey that would have to be undertaken to achieve success became clear. New achievements in land use and resource management planning would be required. An orderly and focused approach supporting enterprise development would be required. Continuity and focus would be required.

The Whitefeather Forest Initiative was gifted with the participation of Elders who understood this. They understood the business context. They had been successful trappers and fishers. Unilingual Ojibway-speaking Elders like the late Whitehead Moose and Elder Gideon Peters even brought experience from successful business careers in retailing to the process. Both of these Elders had even owned their own aircraft, and hired their own non-native private pilots to fly them, to help them carry out their retail business operations.

It was the Elders of Pikangikum who provided what Alex Peters calls the “capacity” for guiding planning and enterprise development: “The Elders understand not only how to successfully conduct business operations. They are also experts in the qualities of the fibre of the timber of the Whitefeather Forest. They understand the strength of Whitefeather Forest timber and its potential for value-added products. And the best thing is that they know how the forest has to be renewed after harvesting to sustain the excellent quality of this timber.”

Right at the beginning of the planning for the Whitefeather Forest Initiative, the late Chief Louie Quill understood how important the role of the Elders would be when he and his Council affirmed a focused approach for developing the Initiative. Louie also understood the necessity of separating day-to-day business from politics as a prerequisite of future success in the Initiative. In 2001 he stated that Chiefs and Councils come and go, the Whitefeather Forest Initiative would need planning continuity to support the realization of successful enterprise, the Elders are the decision-makers in Pikangikum and they would guide and direct planning.

This foundation for success is what supported more than sixteen years of planning to acquire the Sustainable Forest Licence for the Whitefeather Forest. The Limited Partnership enterprise structure that has been established for enterprise operations is complemented by strong partnerships including with FPInnovations, Canada's national forest resource research agency. The Whitefeather Forest Initiative partnership with FPInnovations will support the development of value-added forest products enterprise right from the start of enterprise operations.

Linking Sustainable Indigenous Forestry to Value Added Enterprise

The Keeping the Land forest management approach involves sustaining the slowly growing strong wood of the Whitefeather Forest. Non-native forestry in many parts of Canada often seeks to increase timber growth through silvicultural practices, such as spacing planted trees to maximize growth rates in the renewed forest. This is often called "plantation forestry". The direction of Pikangikum Elders for forest management in the Whitefeather Forest came from their Indigenous Knowledge and customary Stewardship tradition.

The primary goal of forest management and renewal for the Whitefeather Forest that was gifted by the Elders to the Initiative is to sustain was to sustain the all forest values in the forest including fibre and even root quality. Pikangikum Elders like Lucy Strang and Gideon Peters repeatedly emphasized that it is sustaining customary relationships not only large Living Ones (such as charismatic megafauna like caribou) in the forest but also the small creatures of the forest as well.

It is by continuing to live on their ancestral lands and continuing learn from the land by living in direct relationship with all Living Ones that Pikangikum people will be able to ensure forest renewal that sustains the diversity and abundance of the Whitefeather Forest. As Pikangikum Elders note, by following this tradition, and by working with the best of knowledge from non-native society, future generations of Pikangikum people will be able to sustain the diversity and abundance of the forest. Indeed, the Elders say, that by following this tradition, future generations will even be able to nurture this diversity and abundance as their ancestors have. In doing so, they will help to gift a valuable tradition not only to their children but to the larger world as well.

Photos: Pikangikum Elders



The late Norman Quill



Signing the inaugural Forest Management Plan for the Whitefeather Forest (June 21, 2012 - National Aboriginal Day)

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