

February 2, 2011

The Campaign to Protect the South March Highlands

Cultural Renewal and the City of Ottawa

1. You may know that the further destruction of the South March Highlands, the most ancient landscape of the Ottawa River Valley, within the heart of the country's National Capital Region, has commenced with its with irreversible consequences, irrespective of the extensive interventions of many people passionately concerned about protecting and preserving this unique site.

2. Quite separately and inadvertently, I was contacted on January 31, 2011, by the City of Ottawa's Cultural Renewal Team.

Over the course of the past year, City of Ottawa staff initiated contact with Elder William Commanda in the context of their five year Cultural Renewal review and policy/program development work; the team met with him several times; thereafter they consulted with Chiefs Kirby Whiteduck and Gilbert Whiteduck from Pikwakanagan and Kitigan Zibi First Nations, Claudette Commanda, Executive Director, National Association of First Nations Cultural and Education Centres, Marc Maracle, Guignol Housing, amongst others; and prepared eleven Discussion Papers based on interviews with seventy five community leaders.

The **First Two** Discussion Papers focus on the following themes:

1. Aboriginal Arts, Heritage and Culture

- **Aboriginal cultural Landscapes in the Ottawa area**
- **Aboriginal Archaeological Sites**
- **National Indigenous Centre at Victoria Island**
- Connections between Ottawa's Aboriginal Communities and Local Cultural Venues-Programs-Services
- **Commemorate and Promote Ottawa's Aboriginal Arts, History, Culture and Accomplishments**

2. Cultural Places and Spaces

- Local Cultural Facility Development, redevelopment and Repurposing
 - o Sustainable Source of Municipal Funding
 - o Municipal Cultural Capital Funding Program
 - o Private sector Incentives
 - o Artist Live-Work Space Pilot Project
 - o Six Existing and /or legacy Municipal Cultural Facilities Initiatives
 - o Places and Spaces that present local aboriginal Culture
 - o New Central Ottawa Public Library
- **Local Cultural Heritage**

- o **Archaeological Master plan**
- o **Cultural Heritage Landscapes**
- o City Owned Heritage Buildings
- o Adaptative Re- use of Historically significant buildings
 - Local Cultural Neighbourhoods and Clusters
- o Cultural Neighbourhoods
- o Transformation of under-utilized buildings into
 - Community Cultural Assets

(Highlights mine)

We were being consulted regarding follow up focus group meetings – and informed that the Discussion Papers were scheduled to go on line to the public next week – the week of February 7, 2011.

3. In view of the obvious huge focus on Aboriginal Arts, Heritage and Culture, and the specific emphasis on Aboriginal Archaeological sites and Cultural Landscapes, I queried whether the Mayor and Slate of Councilors would be aware of this substantial work already undertaken by their staff, and enquired which Councilor was responsible for this file. I was informed that no one had been appointed to the responsibility yet, and that the political and senior leadership might not necessarily be aware of the ground breaking work being undertaken by their staff.

I requested that this information be brought to the attention of senior management and Council immediately, and alerted Councillor Marianne Wilkinson to the file – she being the person who had taken the community’s petitions forward to City Hall. At that precise moment, City officials were engaged in an emergency meeting on the crisis at South March Highlands.

I naively believed that this intervention and update might give the City impetus to review its own emerging policies and be guided to make the urgently needed decision to halt tree cutting, at least for the interim, in this most ancient, irreplaceable biodiverse eco-forest of the Ottawa landscape, this in view not only of the massive community campaign, but also now especially in view of the urgent call from Algonquins from across the Ottawa River Watershed for a thorough archaeological assessment of their ancient heritage. This would have provided a possible opportunity for creative problem solving.

There has been no response to this information, and I repeat, the tree cutting has commenced.

Further to the frustration of months of witnessing the City’s refusal to examine critically the mounting case for urgent action to intervene in this environmental and heritage sacrilege, I was disheartened to realize that even the City’s own emerging priorities have no power to shift rigid, predetermined bureaucratic or political positions.

The City uses the following as its rationale for non-action: *Longstanding practice provides that the Ministry of Tourism and Culture provides direction in archaeological*

matters to municipalities. Unless otherwise directed by the Ministry, the City remains bound to rely on the Ministry clearance letter of June 1, 2004. It is the position of staff that there are no new issues identified in the (archaeological assessment secured by the Algonquins of Ontario on January 28, 2011, calling for the City's intervention to halt cutting).

4. South March Highland advocates have taken countless messages for intervention to the three levels of government. The Province has taken no action to address the crisis to date either. The National Capital Commission has declined to engage.

5. The developer has asserted his views in this Citizen article on January 31, 2011 - <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/Cutting+begins+Beaver+Pond+Forest+construction+site/4197086/story.html> and yesterday and today, commenced clear cutting the forest. I attach a video clip of the first onslaught: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MsxhXW2x_c The article and the clear cutting provoked a response by Algonquins and others that resulted in police intervention.

We have initiated communications with the developer, and hope to forge a path of goodwill and dialogue.

6. I have lived in Ottawa since 1991, have worked in the criminal justice system across the country, have studied the historic abuse of the First Peoples, and noted the dismal failure historically of both the National Capital Commission, and the Capital City, (both holding a special responsibility to affirm the true face of Canada), to recognize and acknowledge the Algonquins of the Ottawa River Valley, whose land and resources, good will and labour, gave birth to Canada and this city; instead the practice in the heart of this country has been one of obliterating any true sense of Indigenous reality and presence.

7. Algonquin Elder William Commanda, now 97, recognized this vacuum in the Nation's psyche, and forty years ago began building bridges with the new inhabitants of his homeland. Over the past decade, his presence and influence in the capital city has only become more pronounced – and is experienced at innumerable levels.

He is Carrier of the Anishinabe Ancestral Three Figure Welcoming Wampum Belt of 1700s, created before there was a Canada and a United States, when his ancestors agreed to share their grand natural resources and values with the newcomers to their land. Indeed the older brother, consistent with the commitment of his ancestors, he still holds out his hand in friendship, and he still strives to instill his fundamental values in our hearts. And every time he encounters yet another logging truck in his ancestral lands, or contemplates the pollution of his ancestral river, he works harder to instill his ancestral values of respect for Mother Earth and all life in our hearts and minds.

It is quite phenomenal how many people of diverse backgrounds, old and young, he has reached, and how extensive his outreach and influence is. He has done this entirely on his own, with no organization, foundation, staff or money.

Many have begun to respect and value this, and this is evident in the honours and awards now poured upon him. His UN International Day of Peace *Paddle for Peace* launched the City's Peace Festival, and here he animated his conviction that the *Environment* is the pathway to deep peace.

He has a far greater vested interest in his homeland and its peoples than the rest of us, and it is time for our municipal, provincial and federal leadership to pay serious attention to his voice and to the voice of the First Peoples.

8. Over and beyond the local and extended community's campaign to protect the South March Highlands, there are significant political and legislative shifts that must awaken politicians to their responsibilities to First Peoples, not the least of which here in Ontario includes the **Ipperwash Inquiry**, the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**, and the City of Ottawa's awakening to its duty to respect and protect "**Aboriginal cultural Landscapes and Aboriginal Archaeological Sites**".

We hope it is not too late for political leadership to rise to occasion and take progressive steps forward to ensure First Peoples are afforded their rightful place in decision making in their homeland – in this *sign of the new times* campaign to save the South March Highlands, they will find their constituents are already marching in partnership and friendship with the First Peoples, consistent with Grandfather Commanda's vision for a *Circle of All Nations, a Culture of Peace*.

With committed and creative engagement, surely we can build partnerships *and* protect the South March Highlands as a national heritage site for all.

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