

Media Release
February 8, 2011
For Immediate Release

SACRED FIRE WILL BURN AT QUEEN'S PARK FOR OTTAWA'S SOUTH MARCH HIGHLANDS

(Toronto) Daniel Amikwabe Bernard, Algonquin Firekeeper, will keep a Sacred Fire burning at Queen's Park from Wednesday 9th to Sunday 13th February to urge the province to halt tree-clearing and to promote understanding about Ottawa's most important ecological and cultural heritage area.

The South March Highlands is one of the most bio-diverse areas remaining in urban Canada, with more than 675 different species of life, including 240 species of wildlife and over 134 different types of nesting birds.

For the past year local citizens, environmentalists and First Nations groups representing over 14,000 people have mounted a vigorous campaign to save undeveloped lands in the 10,000-year-old, ecologically unique, South March Highlands. In the 1970s it was protected as a Natural Environmental Area but urban development has steadily eroded it until less than 1/3rd remains protected. Citizens have actively opposed development since 1981 because the South March Highlands is an old-growth forest having the densest bio-diversity in Ottawa and provides critical habitat for 20 species-at-risk.

In the latest assault on the forest, KNL Developments recently began clear-cutting trees for a subdivision in an area known locally as the Beaver Pond Forest, even though development depends on planned water diversions without Environmental Assessment and a questionable archaeological study.

The principal Algonquin Spiritual Elder, Grandfather William Commanda, Ancestral Carrier of the 3 Sacred Wampum Belts, Officer of the Order of Canada, recognized as a spiritual leader and founder of the Circle of All Nations, considers the South March Highlands to be Sacred and sees this as an opportunity to renew our sustainable relationship with Mother Earth.

Algonquin across the Ottawa River Watershed in both Ontario and Quebec have called for a comprehensive archaeological assessment of the area. KNL's archaeological study was accepted by the Ministry of Culture in 2004 despite being described as 'fatally flawed' by Dr. Robert McGhee, past president of the Canadian Archaeological Association. A review of the KNL study by Groupe de recherche archéologique de l'Outaouais (GRAO) led by Marcel LaLiberté, concurred that the area "can no longer be ignored as of low archaeological potential".

In addition to questioning many irregularities in development approvals, the Coalition to Protect the South March Highlands has put forward creative proposals for stewardship of the South March Highlands that the City of Ottawa and the Provincial Ministries of Environment (MoE), Natural Resources (MNR), Culture (MTC), Aboriginal Affairs (MAA) and Municipal Affairs (MMHA) have to-date declined to discuss.

“We are also asking why the MNR has yet to confirm the area as a provincially- significant Area of Natural and Scientific Interest despite the fact it was recommended for that designation in 1992, and why the MMHA has yet to enforce the Provincial Policy Statement that prevents development in ecologically significant areas such as ANSI candidates,” says Paul Renaud, of the Coalition to Protect the South March Highlands.

“We are asking why the MoE is allowing development to proceed without Environmental Assessments and why the MAA has yet to uphold the Canadian Constitution which requires the Crown to consult and accommodate the interests of First Nations,” adds Renaud.

Starting Wednesday, a Sacred Fire will burn as a beacon of hope within the provincial capital to promote understanding and to request support from the Ministry of Tourism & Culture, to issue a Ministerial Order to halt the clear-cutting, in light of the two independent archaeological reviews, and the discovery of potentially significant sites since the 2004 MTC approval.

In an unprecedented recognition of aboriginal religious practices by the Provincial Legislature, permission has been granted to keep the Sacred Fire burning day and night. The Sacred Fire is an altar for prayer and visitors are invited to approach respectfully and spend time with the Firekeeper to learn more about the South March Highlands and to discuss our relationship with Mother Earth.

On Sunday, February 13th, the Sacred Fire will go out at mid-day. There will be Closing ceremonies, with drumming, prayers, and singing, a message from Grandfather William Commanda, and from other First Nations elders and chiefs. Everyone is invited to join with us regardless of religion, race, or culture.

PLEASE NOTE: There is a protocol regarding filming and photography at the Sacred Fire and media are kindly asked to speak with the Firekeeper before recording or photographing.

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The Sacred Fire will be directly in front of the Provincial Legislature at Queen’s Park.

For more information:

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Background Info:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhSU5heJl5o> (cultural and natural heritage video)

http://www.renaud.ca/public/Presentations/2011-01-13-SMH-1-SMH_Overview_v16.pdf (SMH Overview presentation)

Letters of Support (e.g. First Nations leaders, Grandfather William Commanda, David Suzuki Foundation, MP Gordon O’Connor, MPP Norm Sterling) may be downloaded from http://www.renaud.ca/public/Letters_of_Support/

Dr. McGhee’s comments on the Archaeological Study <http://www.renaud.ca/public/Archaeology/2010-08-06-Archaeological%20Assessment%20of%20KNL%20Study.pdf>

www.union-Algonquin-union.com

www.ottawagreatforest.com (website for the Stewardship Plan to protect the SMH)

www.southmarchhighlands.ca (website for the Coalition to Protect the SMH)