



A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS
A CULTURE OF PEACE

CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS

A Message Regarding Development at South March Highlands

January 6, 2011

William Commanda



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A Message from William Commanda regarding the Proposed Development in South March Highlands

Your Worship the Mayor and City Councillors,
City of Ottawa

Re: Proposed Development in South March Highlands

Greetings for the New Year.

I write again with respect to the campaign to save the South March Highlands site. This holiday season has been afire with the passion of many community voices determined to protect this unique area.

I together with many others again urge City Council to initiate an immediate and comprehensive archaeological survey of this site; I believe it is the underlying responsibility of the crown and governments and the National Capital Commission to safeguard this ecologically and archaeologically unique site of the South March Highlands as a potential national heritage site, one of significant Indigenous importance, and as an Algonquin in the unceded, unconquered and unsundered Ottawa River Watershed, I add my voice to the call for such action.

I also add, as spiritual elder, that beyond its archaeological history, this is a living temple, a place of *Manitou*, a special place of nature, and that precious reality also demands immediate protection and reverence.

I, like many others, am deeply concerned with the devastation of yet another precious bio-diverse eco-space; the ancient history and records of the land itself, and the signature and knowledge of its original inhabitants of 10,000 years ago, yet to be uncovered and comprehended, add to the potential irreplaceable loss. It is no insignificant heritage that lies here – the likes of this site and heritage would be deeply valued in other homelands.

I am Algonquin of the Ottawa River Watershed, and this Kichissippi landscape is the traditional homeland of my ancestors over countless centuries; our predecessors occupied this ancient, earliest habitable, land over ten centuries ago, and this is significant in the history of Turtle Island and the globe. Our understanding of this history and heritage in the Watershed has been obliterated and distorted over the past five hundred years, but increasing numbers of people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are beginning to reach to this heritage that now binds us all to this land, and they are already finding their lives enriched.

In recent correspondence to the City's Arts, Culture and Heritage Advisory Committee, I wrote *"It is becoming increasingly apparent to most citizens that Aboriginal Peoples and our history, art and culture are largely invisible in the capital city. During this past year,*

I have had meetings with the City's Cultural Renewal team, and I am encouraged to see that some work is now underway to address this deficiency/omission."

The present challenge presents an opportunity for transforming this history.

I have written two notes on this matter in past months. I add these words to support the great community effort now underway both to protect an ancient forest and to understand the complexities of the Indigenous voice.

1. It is very encouraging to me to see communities questioning historic land acquisition and ownership practices, development, and environmental stewardship practices; I have seen in recent years the growing strength of diverse voices coming together and impacting established governance structures with considerable knowledge and expertise. I pray bridges of understanding will evolve in engaging with these voices of the future in the exercise of true leadership in our complex and evolving societies.

2. I have followed the efforts of the local community for many months, and I see the huge challenges in the cause being addressed with creativity, passion, research, information, prayer, dedication and commitment. I note the group has also made courteous outreach to the developers, and I hope this brings positive outcomes. I see the growing awareness of the need for Indigenous voice in the effort. Unfortunately, most Indigenous Peoples have been far removed physically from the energy and heritage of this place. But this does not mean that the protection and preservation of this heritage is not of crucial importance.

3. I speak for myself alone, and for my *Circle of All Nations*, a global eco-community unified by my fundamental and unshakable conviction that as children of Mother Earth, we all belong together, irrespective of our individual colour, creed or culture.

I am ninety-seven years old; in less than a month, my spirit will have been part of this land ninety nine years; that is a long, long time. I have witnessed much transformation here and across Mother Earth, and I see many, many shortcomings in our individual and collective relationship with the penultimate source of life, shortcomings that are costing us, future generations, animals and plant life more and more dearly each day. I believe Mother Earth herself must and will draw us back to *sustainable relationships* for and with all.

I have been passionately interested in my history and heritage for close to a century; this passion fired the creation of the *Circle of All Nations*, focused on advancing *Respect for Mother Earth, Indigenous Wisdom, Social Justice and Peace Building*, and we conceptualize the intermix of these priorities under the rubric of *Sustainable Relationships*. This is the essence of our ancient Indigenous prayer, *Ginawaydaganuc*, which reflects that, in the final analysis, we are all connected – with the water we drink, the air we breath, with the food, medicines and gifts the earth provides us, with the animal teachers, with the larger universe, and with each other. Modern scientists and

quantum physicists are trying to apprehend this immense reality of the circle and cycle of life. This is a medicine circle and medicine cycle that demands respect and responsibility. Thousands of people from across the world, Indigenous and non-Indigenous have participated in my annual gatherings to engage in the creation of such an understanding of and in our lives. South March Highlands is one such learning site.

4. While focused on the protection of this specific site, I see the seeds of this larger vision taking form in this South March Highlands Campaign.

By way of illustrating this point, I mention the following:

- Indigenous Peoples have expressed our concern for Mother Earth to the United Nations since the 1940s, myself amongst them; in October 2010, the *Policy Matters* book emerging from the UN Conference on Biodiversity in Japan (after which Canada and the United States signed on to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) notes (page 209, my photo included) *the struggle to practice Ginawaydaganuc, and sustain the biological diversity of (our) homeland*; that day is coming;
- In 1987, at the Constitutional Debates, as Carrier of our Sacred Wampum Belts, I reminded the then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and the Premiers of their historic and collective failure to protect the environment, consistent with the *Three Figure Welcoming Wampum Belt* heritage of the land, and issued an urgent warning and appeal for sustainable stewardship;
- In 1996, with the release of the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, I drew attention to the polluted Ottawa River waters, noting that the survival of Indigenous Peoples and the environment were in fact one and the same thing, something that others not genuinely “*at home*” here need to understand, in order create a respectful relationship with Mother Earth; in the end, the pollution impacts all our lives;
- I served as spiritual guide for the 1995/96 Sunbow Five Walk for Mother Earth, a walk from First Encounter Beach, Cape Cod to Santa Barbara, California, to bring Indigenous prayer back to land despoiled by bloodshed, expropriation and exploitation;
- On my *Circle of All Nations* brochure, I note that endless stream of logging trucks through my homeland feels “like a needle in my eye”;
- and it is only since my Waterlife Workshop of 2006 that the capital city and now Gatineau have awakened to the gravity of the pollution of the Ottawa River.

I mention these few things to show that my concern for the South March Highlands is consistent with a much larger and longer commitment to the environment and Mother Earth. Further, I have been engaged here in Kanata regularly over the past dozen years, have conducted countless ceremonies here with people from all over the world; and I photographed the four-trunked tree in my *Circle of All Nations* logo myself, here in Kanata. Hence my message.

It has not been easy to awaken people to my way of understanding life; my ancestors have had to suffer dismissal of our traditional practices over countless years. In view of our commitment to assert an Indigenous position, and in the spirit of the Seven Fires Prophecy, I try again.

I realize this file is not an easy one to resolve, given decisions, management, legislative, and development precedents. Yet this is one of the critical challenges of our times. Already, much pristine space has been lost to development.

In view of the body of information and the interest now come to light, I pray deep wisdom and urgent action will guide interventions and the crucial next steps. True consultation with a range of players, creative engagement, genuine exploration of options and opportunities and *time* can guide us to new pathways out of the forest.

With respect.

Sincerely,

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Dec 20, 2010 Email message to the Mayor and To Members of Ottawa City Council regarding South March Highlands.

I have been involved in the effort to Save the South March Highlands site since July, 2010, included mention of this at my Annual *Circle of All Nations Gathering* in August, and expressed thoughts in writing in late August 2010. We communicated our concern for this area to the National Capital Commission, and have encouraged them to support creative problem solving on this contentious file. I have visited the area on a few occasions to add my tobacco to the prayer to protect this ancient, unique and very special sacred space.

I am moved by the passion that the local and extended community has expressed in its effort to protect this area from development, have followed the local newspaper coverage, and I am very interested to know more about its archaeological history, particularly with respect to the stone medicine wheel, and some stone artifacts we have seen and touched. Indigenous Peoples have been talking about the protection of Mother Earth publicly since the formation of the United Nations, and we have suffered the commodification of countless special places, and the eradication of countless plant and animal life forms, the landscape itself, as well as our very history from the soils of America. It is no surprise to us to see the climate crisis that at this moment preoccupies the world.

It is very encouraging for me to see so many younger voices engage eloquently in this effort to protect an area that has become so special to them, and in the process, for them to discover that Indigenous history and heritage is also vitally important to them, this country's collective history, and to future generations. It is also encouraging to see the growing interest in and respect for our traditional ceremonies.

We hope Ottawa, as capital city, can play a positive influential role in a meaningful resolution of the urgent and critical environmental preservation and heritage protection issues of the South March Highlands site, including credible archaeological re-evaluation.

With respect,

William Commanda
Founder, *Circle of All Nations*



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Remarks Regarding Development at South March Highlands

Full Moon, August 24, 2010

William Commanda and Romola Thumbadoo



Today, the 24 August, 2010, on the evening of the Full Moon, we add our prayers to the prayers of Algonquin Elder Albert Du Mont and the friends gathered here for the protection of this very special place on Turtle Island, known now as the South March Highlands.

We were here in July 2010, and learned from Paul Renaud and Adam Caldwell much about the current crisis endangering this place. We invited them to inform others of this urgent matter at our annual *Circle of All Nations* Gathering in August. We are glad to see so many passionately engaged in this cause. We are adding our voices to call for a halt of the expansion of Terry Fox Drive and housing development at this ancient sacred site, one also of great archaeological importance to Indigenous Peoples of the Kichissippi, the Ottawa River Watershed.

We want to share with you something unusual, something strange perhaps. In August 1997, 13 years ago, we were returning from a long journey which retraced the steps of the ancient original ancestors of the land along the Ottawa, Mattawa and French Rivers, along the Great Lakes down through Sault Ste Marie and Minnesota, to Pipestone, the place of pipe, prayer and sundance, and then around Lake Superior and ancient copper mining sites towards home; when we reached the Arnprior area, we saw a strange sight – the space ahead was covered in water, and in the distance there were two hills or islands. This image stayed with us a long time, and we were startled, because we realized we were both seeing it! *Is this a vision*, I asked the Elder. *Write it down*, he said; *you will understand it some time. Don't analyse, that is not the way with visions.*

At that time I was a relative newcomer to Ottawa, and I did not know then of the ancient sea that had covered this land. Years later, when I began to study this history, I thought, *We did not have a vision of the future, we saw the landscape as it had been in the past!* This was pretty shaking.

Still, I did not know what to make of the islands – sure, we were deeply involved with Victoria and Chaudière Islands in the National Capital Region by now, and affirming it a Sacred Site, a site for a National Indigenous Centre, but, they were low, not high above a water filled basin.

On April 3, 2007, as we began to give thought to our writing, we were led to the word *Algonkian*, in William Commanda's *Webster's Ninth New*

Collegiate Dictionary (1987); quite unexpectedly, the word jettisoned us into the past – Mother Earth’s past, with the word *Proterozoic*. It led us to the word *Geology, a science that deals with the history of the earth and its life especially as recorded in rocks*, and in the accompanying Geologic Time and Formations Table (page 512), we learned *Algonkian* referred to an era of geological history that includes the period between the Archeozoic, the most ancient era, which commenced 3,800,000,000 years ago and the Paleozoic, which emerged 620,000,000 years ago. In that vast undifferentiated period of time are found the earliest records of invertebrates, spores and marine algae, the precursors to life.

So *Algonkian* was associated with magnitude of history beyond our realization!

Then, in *The People of the Ancient Americas* we learned that “hundreds of millions of years ago, long before mankind was on the earth, the Americas were two continental islands. The northern one, covering the area of Quebec, and some eastern parts of Canada and the United States, still survives as a geologic area known as the Laurentian Shield. The southern one remains in the very ancient mountains of Eastern Brazil, also among the earliest rocks to still remain on the surface of the earth. Millions of years later, a great convulsion of the earth, probably due to contraction during cooling, caused enormous crumplings of rock, thus originating the Alps in Europe and the Himalayas in India.

Thus we realized that here, in the National Capital Region, we were standing on one of the two most ancient rock formations of the Earth. Then, too, one could understand why the Sacred Chaudière Falls was quite so special.

This July, we began to see that the hills in the Gatineau and this spot, the South March Highlands, were the island hills that rose above the waters in the image revealed of the ancient sea in 1997. It is deeply private thing that we are now sharing – somehow, we are compelled to write this now; but, others too have reported the strange magic and energy of this area.

As the Champlain Sea began to recede some 12,000 years ago, numerous species of life on land were birthed, and a great forest developed here on this most sacred of earth. This area and the species that evolved here are said to be thirty five hundred years older than the rest of the city of Ottawa area, and proportionately stronger and pristine. The ancient ancestors occupied

this land from the earliest of times, and evidence of their presence in the Ottawa River Valley has been documented – documented, but scarcely studied yet.

Over the centuries of contact, Indigenous presence and relationship with the land was forcibly eroded, and the true history, the history of the peoples and their connection with this watershed, obliterated from the record and unknown to the people now occupying the shores.

But the Sacred Land is awaking us all from the fog that has dulled our senses and sensibilities, and is pointing to our responsibilities – we are all children of Mother Earth, and we must begin to affirm and honour our relationship with the penultimate provider. Her newer children are now leading the charge, and we are told by Paul Renaud that the South March Highlands is one of the most bio-diverse areas remaining in Canada and that it contains over 675 different species of life, including at least 26 types of plants traditionally used as medicine by the First Peoples. Sadly, due to our lack of balance with Mother Earth, 18 of these species are at risk of extinction, 11 species are already locally extinct, and another 18 may soon be at risk.

The proposed construction of a four-lane highway, the Terry Fox Drive, (what irony in the name) through this forest will sever the eco-connectivity of the area and will lead to the inevitable eradication of rare species of ancient life. The construction of the road has also triggered housing development plans whose realization will clear-cut and blast about a third of the forest, killing many endangered butternut trees and numerous other species. Scientists believe that the remaining forest areas will no longer be able to sustain the wildlife and rare plants that are currently found here because of the erosion of its unique ecological integrity and because of pressure from urban development on all sides.

Instead of destroying this special land, surely we should be celebrating it for its immense bio-diversity and unique physical and historic characteristics. Located in the National Capital Region, the South March Highlands can serve to raise awareness of native history, medicinal plants and the rich bio-diversity of our forests, and constitute a national example of how we can transform our relationship with Earth from one of interminable exploitation and abuse to one of respect, reverence and stewardship. It is this transformation in our relationship with Mother Earth that will contribute to

the deep healing, both hers and ours, that we are beginning to worry about at every turn in our modern society.

This special area is also a place of extremely important archaeological significance to the nomadic Algonquins of the Ottawa River Watershed and beyond, since evidence has recently emerged regarding its occupation by our ancestors 10,000 years ago. So much of the early history of the Kichissippi has been obliterated already, so much of our Indigenous history distorted by colonization, racism, cultural oppression and near genocide, as well as by linguistic and provincial barriers; and the Algonquin sacrifice and contribution to Canada's short history and development has been rendered invisible quite deliberately. The revelation of the true history of this site and its original inhabitants will reframe our understanding of our individual and collective place on Turtle Island.

Some have begun realize that the land requires the prayer of her first children to *be* sacred again – it is this awakening that we have sacrificed and prayed for over many, many years – this is the energy shift needed to breath life on into the future.

With this we shall return to a reconnection to Sacred Land, Sacred Landscape, and affirm our right to the great legacy of Mother Earth. From here, others will learn to retrace their footsteps to the source. It is telling that the August 2010 National Geographic magazine carries an article entitled *Native Lands: Something remarkable is happening in Indian country*, it states. *Tribes whose lands were once taken from them are setting an example for how to restore the environment.*

The past is a long way back, and the future? What of it? It is said that we make the road by walking it. May the prayer of the ancestors of the land, *Ginawaydaganuc – We are All Connected* - in the web of life - light our pathway into a future of *Sustainable Relationships* for all.

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A Mini-Biography of Dr. William Commanada, OC, Algonquin Elder Founder, A Circle of All Nations

Ninety five year old Alonquin Elder William Commanda from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Maniwaki, Quebec was born on November 11, 1913 under the bright light of the Morning Star, so his mother named him *Ojigkwanong*; thus the larger universe figured in his personal story from the very beginning. Today, he is seen by many as the symbol of light emerging from the darkness of the first World War, illuminating a path to a new world with his vision for a *Circle of All Nations, A Culture of Peace*.

He is a respected spokesman and spiritual leader at many conferences, participates in United Nations peace and spiritual vigils, and his work is acknowledged nationally and internationally. Fully trilingual, he shares his words and prayers in Algonquin, and translates them into English and French. Central to Elder Commanda's teachings are the concepts of equality, balance, respect and responsibility for Mother Earth, for all life forms and for people of all racial and cultural backgrounds, and he works ceaselessly, alone and entirely without an organization, staff, structure, formal or financial support to animate the *Circle of All Nations*.

A most senior representative of the Algonquins of the Ottawa River Watershed, he is the great, great grandson of the legendry *Pakinawatik*, the Algonquin chief who in the mid eighteen hundreds, led his people from their lands at Oka on the Lake of Two Mountains to their traditional hunting and trapping grounds at the confluence of the Desert and Gatineau. He is the carrier of three sacred **Wampum Belts of historic and spiritual importance**: the ancient Seven Fires Prophecy Belt about choice; the 1700s Welcoming Belt about sharing the grand natural resources and values of the original peoples with the newcomers; and the Jay Treaty Border Crossing Belt which recognized Turtle Island as a coherent entity. His ancestors inscribed their legends, prophecies and agreements in these carefully crafted items over many centuries. He is seen by many as the carrier of the Seven Fires Prophecy at the time of the unfolding of its final message, and the messages of all these ancient artifacts are as deeply relevant today, as they were in the past.

He was acclaimed chief of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg for over nineteen years, though he himself never participated in the elections. He also worked as a guide, trapper and woodsman for much of his life. He is a **birch bark canoe maker and craftsman** of international renown, and there is a special display dedicated to his work at the Canadian Canoe Museum of Peterborough. He built a canoe for Queen Margrethe of Denmark, and he helped Pierre Trudeau repair his famous birch bark canoe. At the age of 90, he shared his canoe making skills and philosophy in Valerie Pouyanne's documentary, *Good Enough for Two*.

He has promoted **environmental stewardship** and respect for Mother Earth passionately for many decades. He conducted pipe ceremonies for the Pre-Rio Earth Summit Conference hosted by President Mitterand of France in 1991, and his prayers lie behind *Agenda 21*. He participated in the United Nations first Indigenous *Cry of the Earth* conference. He served as spiritual guide to the 1995 seven and a half month *Sunbow Five*

Walk from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific, to raise awareness of the growing environmental crisis; received the Bill Mason River Conservation Award in 2004; hosted workshops on water stewardship in 2004 and 2006, and 2009; is honorary chair of the Ottawa Heritage River Designation Committee; and offers interventions on current environmental issues such as the identification of the American Eel as a Species at Risk, the building of a mega dump on Danford Lake and the Navigable Waters Act.

He is the recipient of numerous awards and acknowledgements of his works and talent: the Wolf Project and Harmony Awards for his **efforts to foster racial harmony and peace building** through the creation of a *Circle of All Nations* (one very well received example of this commitment is the annual international gathering he hosts at his home during the first weekend of August – the 2001 Gathering is presented in the *Circle of All Nations* documentary); a Justice Award from the University of Ottawa and a Peace Award from Friends for Peace. He promotes restorative justice, forgiveness and his outreach to prisoners is captured in Lucie Ouimet’s National Film Board Documentary, *Encounter with an Algonquin Seer*.

Recently, his efforts were acknowledged in Ottawa with two special recognitions: in 2005, with an **Honorary Doctorate Degree** from the University of Ottawa, shortly after his book, *Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout*, was published; and in 2006, with the **Key to the City of Ottawa**, a singular honour for an Aboriginal person from a reserve in Quebec. This was presented on Victoria Island, where the tireless ninety five year old continues working on his vision for a National Indigenous Centre, for the restoration and development of **the Sacred Chaudière Site** as a special national historic centre, and as a think tank for environmental stewardship and peace building of national and global relevance. Two other books, *Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout Book Two*, and *Passionate Waters–Butterfly Kisses* include further reflections on his work and ideology.

In December 2008, he was appointed **Officer of the Order of Canada**, for *his leadership as an elder who has promoted intercultural understanding and has raised awareness of the traditions and legacies of Canada’s Aboriginal people*. Elder Commanda says he is deeply honoured to witness this recognition of the relevance of Indigenous Wisdom to this country at this time.

In November 2009, the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards Foundation announced his selection as 2010 Lifetime Achievement Award recipient. In January, 2010 Willis College announced the Dr. William Commanda Scholarship!

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www.circleofallnations.ca (General Information)

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