

MEET THE ARTISAN

THE STORY OF THE NORTHEAST SUPERIOR GUARDIANS PROGRAM

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Operating in the boreal forest of Northeastern Ontario, Wahkohtowin is a development corporation that is 100% owned by three First Nations (FN); Brunswick House FN, Chapleau Cree FN and Missanabie Cree FN. The Northeast Superior Regional Chiefs Forum came together from 2008 to 2015, to create a more coordinated approach to integrated community and economic development across the region. They decided to form Wahkohtowin Development Partner Inc., in 2016, to help take up opportunities related to forest tenure reform and achieve the community's priorities for sustainable management. In the Cree language, 'Wahkohtowin' stands for connectedness, and recognizes the complexity and interconnectedness of land, air, water, animals, and spirit. Its literal meaning is "kinship".

The Guardians program is a Wahkohtowin initiative that was inspired by the Elders' vision statements, and is all about youth empowerment, cultural revitalization and providing opportunities for youth to connect with the land, their Elders and therefore their culture as well. The artist who designed the logo beautifully incorporated a turtle's back and a birch tree. The turtle represents being true to yourself, to others and being truthful in everything you do. It also reminds us of where we are on Turtle Island and the many teachings provided by the turtle, including the 13-moon teachings, which are largely used to help guide seasonal Guardian work. The birch tree happens to be a very prominent species in the boreal forest, with a rich history of traditional uses within Indigenous cultures. The Guardians program has explored a variety of non-timber forest product related activities, while incorporating traditional ecological knowledge and land-based learning wherever possible.

During the month of May, the Guardians spend three weeks operating a mobile sugar shack at a nearby birch stand. It is located just inside the Chapleau Crown Game Preserve, where approximately 150 birch trees are tapped every year. Guardians are active participants in the entire process from tapping the birch tree to bottling and marketing the finished product. We enjoy hosting sugar shack tours and invite communities and Elders to come out and engage in knowl-

edge transfer with us. Youth can help gather buckets and taste a fresh glass of birch water right from the tree itself. It is best when there is a cook in progress so that guests can smell the sweet aroma while learning exactly how all the equipment operates. We respect and preserve the integrity of the tree by checking our buckets daily and the trees let us know when it is time to pull the taps. Guardians develop relationships with these trees during this project where feelings of accountability to the forest and connection to land are inevitable.

June is prime time for harvesting materials to build a traditional birch bark canoe. Master Canoe builder Chuck Commanda shared these teachings with us, as well as how much easier it is to harvest these materials in the spring when they are moist, as opposed to dried up materials closer to the end of summer. We learned a lot about the birch tree and what kind of qualities the bark must have to effectively be used for a canoe build. We really see the importance of intact landscapes and old growth forests while harvesting for quality materials. With help from ground-truthing and use of forest resource inventory data, we spend many days on the land trying to locate these rare trees. Although we are always trying to harvest larger canoe-quality materials, Chuck also taught us how to recycle any smaller leftover materials for creating birch bark baskets. The baskets were traditionally used for food storage because the 'wiigwaas', which is the Ojibwe term for birch bark, is known to have anti-fungal properties.

During the months of July and August, our seasonal Guardians begin full-time employment and engage with a variety of training opportunities, field activities, and land-based programming. We engage with industry to learn about herbicide alternative programs and spend two weeks conducting vegetation index surveys to help reduce the amount of glyphosate being sprayed onto the land each year. We also work with each of the First Nations Lands and Resources Departments and industry partners to help expose youth to a variety of career opportunities with workplace professionals and role models who can help guide and inspire them. We



engage in medicine walks with Elders, walking in the forest with trappers and aim to empower Guardians to bring this knowledge back to their communities, in order to bring their communities back to the land.

It is so important to revitalize these cultural practices and to ensure these teachings live on with our future generations. These teachings are intrinsic to who we are as First Nations peoples and truly help foster connection to land. Participating in traditional craft activities

with birch bark helps to rekindle the culture in the community, as we create practical art the way our ancestors would have generations ago. Understanding natural law, reciprocity and how everything is connected is the first step in learning how to sustainably manage the

land. It is our hope that the Guardians Programs will inspire our youth to take up the torch to be stewards of the land, and meaningfully participate in the natural resource sector, so they can ensure the benefits of the forest will still be there to enjoy generations into the future.

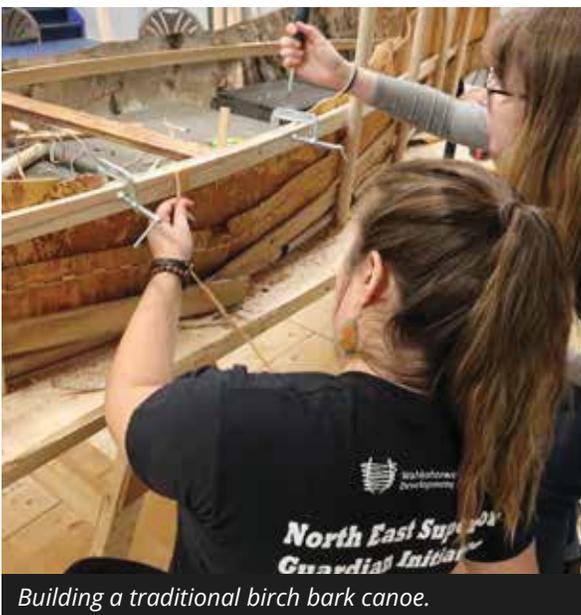
“THE PROGRAM IS ALL ABOUT PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH TO CONNECT WITH THE LAND”



Beautiful birch bark baskets.



Birch syrup produced by Wahkohowin.



Building a traditional birch bark canoe.



Launch day for a beautiful birch bark canoe!

