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Export date: Fri Mar 29 0:07:17 2024 / +0000 GMT

Hunter to run for chief as land claim is signed

By Sarah Vance

A press release by the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation confirmed on Oct.18 that Algonquins have reached a milestone towards an Agreement-In-Principle (AIP) with the province.

?This is a key step toward a modern-day treaty to resolve a long standing land claim that covers an area of 36,000 square kilometers,? read the document.

It's the largest land claim in the province's history, which when ratified will be protected under Section 35 of the Constitution Act.

Kijicho Manito is a local community involved in the claim affecting Whitney, Bonnechere, Bancroft and Pikwakanagan.

Kijicho Manito have been successful in their application to the extent that they have been able to demonstrate that the land in question is embedded in their cultural traditions, economies and trades.

The application has led to the development of a framework for transferring more than 200 parcels of provincial Crown land ranging from a few acres to over 30,000 across Ontario.

Stephen Hunter, a local tradesperson and a cultural and environmental steward on the Kijicho Manito band council, is enthusiastic about the AIP.

Hunter's trade requires him to gather birch bark from living trees, a traditional practice that has led to him developing a close partnership with the Ministry of Natural Resources.

?It has been very important that our community has been given a voice around logging and forestry management,? said Hunter, who gets GPS co-ordinates for birch trees by the MNR.

Using traditional tools, Hunter's trade involves removing large sections of bark from birch trees, being careful not to penetrate the Cambium layer below the bark, which would damage the tree.

He also digs spruce root, a traditional resource that is refined into rope, known in Algonquin as wadub.

?The AIP clarifies and defines the rights and obligations of Algonquins as they relate to the lands and natural resources we are using locally,? said Hunter whose work underscores what is at stake for local Algonquin tradespeople.

?The fact that Pikwakanagan has signed and that all ten other Algonquin communities in Ontario have signed too should tell you how we (the local Algonquins) are feeling,? added Hunter. ?The signatures say it all.?

Hunter responded to Bancroft This Week's request for an interview from the bush north of Peterson Roadd, where he had a bow in his hand for the moose hunt.

?The AIP is a framework we can use moving forward and it is bringing new momentum and engagement for our communities,? said Hunter who added. ?I've found a few good birch during this hunt.?

The doe his camp tracked this week, left Hunter thinking about harvesting rights, despite the fact that the hunt leaves him emotional.

?If the bull steps out, I will have to, but I am hoping it doesn't,? said Stephen. ?I am always left feeling debilitated and very emotional, during the hunt.?

Stephen, who helped spearhead the Town of Bancroft's birch bark canoe build, with Chuck Commanda and Jerry Wilson, has noted a growing engagement, with Kijicho Manito.

?I feel a momentum, a time of healing and growth is coming,? said Hunter. ?I would like to see more efforts to engage with Kijicho Manito and I want to see us reaching out also.?

Language and cultural practices are a priority within the AIP framework and for Hunter who is busy releasing the 2017 Kijicho Manito calendar.

?This year's theme focuses on indigenous bees and their role in harvest and pollination,? said Hunter.

The annual Kijicho Manito calendar makes strides to share language with each month compiling a different set of keywords.

Current Chief Catherine Cannon has used her term to protect the use of Algonquin words, for designations such as local street names.

One such example is Chemaushgon Rd,. off Station and Monck, which is a traditional (albeit misspelled) phonetic variation of the Algonquin word used to describe the marshy shoreline found around the York River.

?There was a time when efforts were underway to change the name to reflect Airport Rd,? said Chief Cannon, describing how the Kijicho Manito office lobbied to stay this change. ?It is important to keep Algonquin words, and the language of our community in the present.?

The new year will bring changes to the organization of Kijicho Manito, with elections for chief scheduled to occur in March.

?I am prepared to announce that I will be running for chief,? stated Hunter during his interview with Bancroft This Week. ?But we are still in the early stages and I have not officially filed.?

Hunter has plans to enhance existing relationships with educational institutions such as local colleges and public schools, if he is elected.

?For years Kijicho Manito has lobbied for an allocation of lands to represent our local people,? said Hunter. ?I have a hope that people will come home, I hope to see a strengthening of relationships.?

Hunter believes the AIP will provide pathways for more cultural celebrations and gatherings.

?I know for a fact that the ten other Algonquin communities in Ontario would support a local pow wow,? said Hunter, who is advocating for enhancements along the cultural spectrum.

?The AIP is making strides towards greater peace of mind within our community,? added Hunter.

That said, the AIP is nothing more than a framework to use when moving forward. And court has been known to be slow.

In the meantime, Hunter will be gathering medicine and searching out birch trees, with his community, during the moose hunt.