



Executive Summary of Aboriginal Maple Values Focus Groups

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This summary provides an overview of three focus groups held with Aboriginal maple producers throughout the summer of 2014 in various locations in Ontario, and is a component of the Maple Syrup Innovation Toolkit. For other components see www.resilientresearch.ca

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Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ontario Maple Syrup Producer's Association, and Wilfrid Laurier University for their generous support of this project. We want to thank all of our team members for their insightful and inspirational contributions. Finally, we wish to thank all of our participants who gave so generously of their time and wisdom to make this project happen.

Maple Syrup Innovation Toolkit

This executive summary is part of a larger suite of final documents, called the Maple Syrup Innovation Toolkit, that are part of the final deliverables for this project. These documents include five summaries of work completed at earlier stages of this project, two workbooks (one Aboriginal-focused, one commercial industry-focused), a policy brief and a video (<https://youtu.be/zLjyvmwe18Q>). The toolkit can be accessed at www.resilientresearch.ca

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Suggested Citation for this Document:

Chrétien, A (2015). Executive summary of Aboriginal maple values focus groups. A report submitted to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 10p.



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Introduction

In the summer of 2013, a graduate student associated with the *Ontario Maple Syrup Agri-Food Value Chain: Enhanced Competitiveness Through Innovation and Capacity Development* project funded by Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) conducted fifteen interviews with sixteen Aboriginal people throughout the province of Ontario. The purpose of those interviews was to explore the values that Aboriginal people associate with the production of maple syrup, and other associated maple syrup practices. The collected data and subsequent analysis provided us with a preliminary understanding of Aboriginal practices, values and beliefs related to maple products and resulted in a preliminary *Maple Values Report*¹.

As a follow up to these preliminary interviews, focus groups were held in three different locations throughout the province of Ontario namely, Sudbury, Guelph, and Gananoque in the summer of 2014. A total of 16 knowledge keepers participated in these focus groups. This report summarizes the results of those interviews. For the purposes of the OMAFRA project, these focus groups contributed to a workbook that provides information to Aboriginal individuals who would like to learn more about the maple syrup sector, would like to get into the sector, or would like to upgrade their operations. This workbook is part of a larger suite of resources available as part of the Maple Syrup Innovation Toolkit.

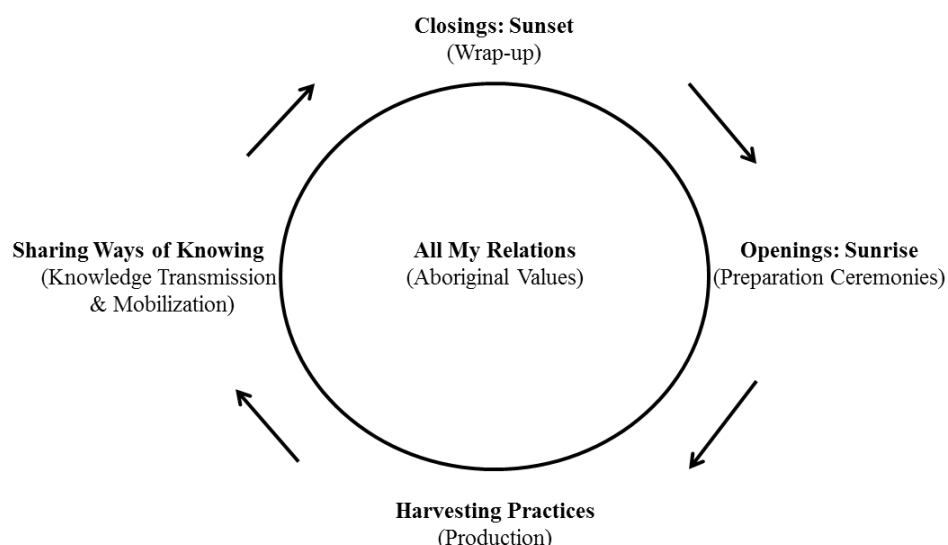


Figure 1 - Aboriginal Perspectives of the Maple Value System

To further understand the maple values and needs of Aboriginal producers, we took an approach that reimagines how we think about value systems (Figure 1). Based on stories and interviews collected to date, an Aboriginal value system has been mapped according to an adapted Medicine Wheel model (Figure 2) suggested by Elder Charles Restoule. The medicine wheel teachings represent mental, spiritual, emotional and physical connections. It is an important Aboriginal symbol of peaceful

¹ Annette Chrétien, 2014, *Maple Values Report*.

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interaction among all living beings on Earth. The model starts in the East reflecting Aboriginal beliefs for beginnings, and progresses through the yearly cycle of maple production by moving around the adapted Medicine Wheel.



Figure 2 - The Medicine Wheel

East – Spring, new beginnings, dawn. Represented by the colour yellow. Sacred medicine of tobacco comes from this direction and is used for prayer and gift giving.

South – Summer, youth, noon. Represented by the colour red. Sacred medicine of cedar comes from this direction and is used for protection.

West – Autumn, adult, dusk. Represented by the colour black. Sacred medicine of sage comes from this direction and is used for healing and purification.

North – Winter, elder, midnight. Represented by the colour white. Sacred medicine of sweetgrass comes from this direction and is used for bringing goodness and sweetness to life.

As a conceptual tool, the Medicine Wheel is used and interpreted differently in many Aboriginal communities. Its purpose is to respect the holistic approach that is characteristic of Aboriginal belief systems and ways of knowing often referred to as Indigenous Knowledge (IK). The Medicine Wheel represents the cycles of life, interconnectedness of all things, and the harmony of the whole.²

In the focus groups, our discussions were organized around the five themes represented in the adapted wheel presented above: openings; harvesting practices; knowledge sharing and transmission; closings; and all my relations. The results of these discussions are presented in more detail below.

² Brenda Murphy, Annette Chrétien, and Grant Morin (accepted), Maple Syrup Value Systems and Value Chains: Considering Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Perspectives in R. Bullock, F. Broad, L. Palmer and P. Smith (eds), Bridging Practice, Research and Advocacy for Community Forests in Canada, University of Manitoba Press.

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Theme 1: Openings

Many of the Aboriginal producers who participated in the focus groups consider the harvesting of maple sap as part of a yearly cycle rather than a seasonal activity. Specifically, many Aboriginal communities follow the teachings of the turtle and the lunar calendar which is divided into the 13 moons. There are 13 large segments on a turtle's back which represent the months in the lunar year. The smaller segments on the outer rim of the shell add up to 28 which represent the number of days between new moons in the lunar calendar. The third moon, Ziisibaakadake Giizis is the "Sugar Moon" and is considered the New Year in Aaniishnaabe beliefs. This is when maple season begins.

Different harbingers of spring were shared by the participants in the focus groups. For example, one Aaniishnaabe producer said the saw-whet owls were known as the sugar bird. When he starts to sing, that is the time to get ready and prepare for collecting the sap. He claimed that is when the sap would be the clearest. Another example that was given was when the trout or pike spawn. Reading the environment was a major aspect of measuring when the collection of maple sap should begin.

One producer talked about "preparing the forest, opening up the canopy." To do that they touch the trees, measure them, and talk to them. He related how he went out with three young boys who would converse with the trees and ask each tree if it was ready to come out. They also track the nesting sites of squirrels, and examine where other birds and hawks are established. The decision of which trees to tap is made based on a variety of reasons. The producer explained that preparing the forest is tending the land.

Preparations for what one producer called the Maple Moon extend well beyond the harvesting season itself. One producer who has a very large maple bush says he prepares for the next year, or five years down the road. Another producer commented on the harvesting process as ongoing, always harvesting wood, for a couple of years in advance, because it has to be dry. By contrast, another producer said they start gearing up around December, purchasing the materials for the spring run. And, a smaller producer generally starts around Valentine's Day (February 14th).

Most of the producers involved in the focus groups described a first tapping ceremony of some sort which was specific to their own beliefs. The ceremony itself happens before the first tap. For example, one ceremony that was described took place a week before the harvest. They had an Elder come out to do the actual ceremony. They invited school children to participate in the ceremony. Another producer said they do the sacred fire and water ceremony and then bring in the kids. A Mohawk participant said they do the sweetwater (maple sap) ceremony for a large group and it includes music as well as the blessing.

Children are an important part of the ceremonies and harvesting. One producer described how they teach the kids about the trees, being thankful to the trees for honouring them with another season and water. Traditionally, the sap or sweetwater was seen as a strengthener, and the first cleanser of the season. It is the first sign of spring and it has great medicinal value, which is discussed in further detail below.

With regards to 'opening' the season, the lunar calendar was one of the significant guiding factors. Certain months are tied to the harvesting of various species and all are considered medicine from

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berries to fish. Other beliefs include the association of maple harvesting with the New Year, spring, and renewal in the cycle of life.

Theme 2: Harvesting Practices

For Aboriginal producers, land stewardship is often central to the maintenance of traditional ways of life and to the fulfillment of spiritual responsibilities since the links between land and culture are integral to their worldviews and ways of knowing. Many Aboriginal communities believe that trees are actually sentient beings. Some believe that the trees have families of their own, and even form nations of their own. These relationships are part of the concept of 'All My Relations'. Aboriginal sap and syrup producers often view their trees as active agents who generously and consciously share their sap with the human community. In return, the sugarbush needs to be treated with respect and honored through ceremony and good stewardship practices.

Further, as IK is reclaimed in a contemporary world, it is reinterpreted and reconstructed to some extent resulting in blending old and new beliefs, traditions and practices. Thus, the harvesting practices of Aboriginal producers are quite diverse and demonstrate a blending of traditional and state of the art practices. Recurring themes that arose from the focus group discussions include technologies, distribution practices, and traditional/ceremonial practices.

2.1 Technologies

As can be expected, harvesting practices among native producers vary significantly depending on the size of the bush and the purpose for the collection. Specifically, many Aboriginal people use maple sap as medicine rather than to produce syrup or sugar. With regards to harvesting, the focus group discussions revealed that some producers combine traditional approaches with state of the art commercial methods. For example, one large commercial producer uses lines, tubing and a vacuum system but keeps a few buckets and spigots to monitor the harvest. He uses these trees to assess how the trees are doing. Since the lines are a closed system there is no way of knowing when to stop tapping. In his opinion, it runs the risk of drying out the trees. When the sap gets milky in the buckets, he knows it is time to stop harvesting. Another example of blending technologies was for educational reasons. This large producer does over 9000 taps and uses two wood-fired evaporators. They also do buckets with the children. They keep enough trees to show the buckets and the tapping process.

In terms of technology, we also found substantial differences based on the different belief systems of individual communities. For example, in some communities buckets are considered acceptable, but tubing is not. A vacuum system is considered even worse. In fact, in the opinion of some participants, using this type of technology is considered to hurt the tree, and to negate the sacred and medicinal values of the sap, syrup and sugar. The most recent change that is viewed as acceptable in this context is the style of bucket that is a closed container rather than an open bucket. In an Aboriginal context, each technology has to be evaluated by the people doing it, in order to see if it is acceptable.

In the focus group discussions about technologies, similar attitudes towards manufacturing practices were expressed. For example, some preferred to use three kettles or cauldrons for beginning with boiling in the first one, and moving it along to the last one for the finishing stage. Firewood or propane gas is a preferred source of heat for many traditional producers. Some feel that using a wood fire to boil

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the sap affects the quality and the flavor of the syrup. This seemed to common practice among smaller producers. Other producers used homemade evaporators recycling other large metal containers. And, of course, larger producers used commercial evaporators ranging from smaller ones to large state-of-the-art evaporators.

2.2 Distribution Practices

Economic factors were far from the main value expressed by most producers. The reclaiming of culture, history, identity, and the medicinal and spiritual values of maple far outweighed economic gain as the major factor for maple practices. Many producers see making maple syrup as a way of reclaiming their Aboriginal identity, history and culture and of re-establishing a relationship with their ancestors. One producer indicated that one tap is as spiritually significant as 1,000 taps. He produces just enough to keep himself and his family connected to the process. Even if the outcome may be a teaspoon of sap for each person, in his mind it keeps that connection and says that he is doing an important thing.

The intimate relationship that some traditional Aboriginal producers have with maple is connected to the idea that the sap or sweetwater is medicine, not a commodity. This belief influences every aspect of traditional production and prevents many producers from using more recent technologies and production methods as well as selling their sap or syrup. In this context, maple products are for medicinal, ceremonial, personal and community uses only. Any change of practice is seen as tainting the product and taking away its sacred and medicinal values.

This is not to say that some Aboriginal producers are not interested in developing maple practices as an economical, sustainable resource. Even then, as one producer explained there are different interpretations of what constitutes a sustainable resource. In his mind, maple syrup is economical when he trades a pound of deer meat for a gallon of syrup. In his mind, they produce enough syrup for their community which means it is already a sustainable resource.

In keeping with the belief of the renewal of life, the sap, which is called “sweetwater”, is used medicinally, especially for pregnant women who are considered the givers of life. The use of sweetwater as medicine and as a cleansing agent is widespread in Aboriginal communities. Further, maple sap has recently entered the health drink market similar to current uses of coconut water. However, this practice is frowned upon by Aboriginal traditionalists who insist that sweetwater is medicine, and should never be sold, or worse, widely marketed. It is considered sacred, not a commodity.

Some of the Aboriginal producers who participated in the focus groups are large commercial producers. In fact, one producer has international aspirations and has begun a pilot project with a gentleman from New Zealand who is looking at an Indigenous food trade network. His organization wants to deal with a First Nation producer to market Canadian maple syrup. They are also dedicated to organic products.

Although maple syrup is inherently organic, producers are still required to go through the same process for certification as other food products. Also, this producer has to pay 1500 dollars a year to get organic designation because he sells to the health store. The inspectors must verify the cleaning products that are used, how many taps are used per tree, and the tapping diameter. Even though this producer goes through the process for certification, he still feels that the process is exploitative and that maple syrup is already organic and should not need to be certified to be marketed as such.

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Other producers are also interested in value-added uses for not only the sap and syrup, but for the wood itself. For example, one producer is in discussion with a guitar company. However, they are looking not at cutting the wood, but going to existing mills, and picking through their product. They are looking for specific grains and wood patterns. As one producer mentioned, they are really good at writing proposals, and finding potentials.

Another producer mentioned that for now his operation is within a permit system, but that will be hopefully changing to a community forest model. These types of initiatives are difficult because everything has to be brought to chief and council. They are the ones to set up the template. They are looking at a variety of scenarios for non-timber forest products and logging is a low priority. Recreation and tourism are possible initiatives for expansion. They are creating the necessary geographic information system models, producing different data layers, and trying to get data from the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). However, what is clear is that they are looking for non-timber expansion. Their survey indicated that they could possibly be looking at 100,000 taps. Having said that, this producer emphasized that although it may be easy to come up with ideas, they often stop at implementation because of capacity.

Most producers seek the right balance in production levels to meet their family's needs, socially, and economically. One producer says he sells all his maple syrup and candy in the market in Ottawa, and makes an entire year's salary in 3 weeks. Bartering is also an economy reality and is widely practiced. One large producer says they make money every year, and create up to 10 jobs in their community. Community and pride is everything.

Some producers are aware of marketing and/or branding possibilities as well. With syrup that is produced by Aboriginal people, there is a chance to differentiate their product through labelling and different bottles. This approach opens the European and larger city markets like Toronto where there is demand. Different markets are seen as an opportunity for advancement. Producers preferred to keep maple syrup as a luxury item, like wine.

Still, there is a problem in that some people feel that sap and associated products lose their medicinal value if they are sold. Commercialization and commodification are seen as a double-edged sword. On the one side, there is the potential of losing the unique or special element if maple products become a commodity. These individuals feel it should not be commodified or commercialized at all. On the other side, the potential contribution of maple to economic sustainability, especially in rural and remote locations, is emphasized.

2.3 Traditional/Ceremonial Ways

In contrast to commercial operations, many producers see making maple syrup as a way of reclaiming their Aboriginal identity, history and culture and of re-establishing a relationship with their ancestors. The reclaiming of culture, history, identity, medicinal and spiritual values far outweigh economic gain as the major factor for many maple practices. There are also other social conventions and mores that accompany traditional/ceremonial ways.

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Once producer explained that his wife is the one who handles the sap and water and he is the one who does the work to get it. It is the same division of labour that they have in the garden. According to his belief system, a woman is not supposed to break ground. The man breaks ground, but he does not plant seeds. She has to plant the seeds. And, when you harvest and sing to the plants, you need to include the children and the Elders who can harvest. Each group of people has a different responsibility in the harvesting and processing. It is not just one gender or age that deals with it. Everybody has something to do. Based on his Seneca beliefs, those practices are done in his own territory, his own village, and his own family. He also mentioned that they do not limit harvesting sap to maple trees. They will harvest any sap, a birch, or whatever is convenient. He gives thanks to all those trees for giving the water to them, and each has different medicinal values.

For traditional producers, everything is around thanksgiving, showing appreciation for the natural world. One woman recounted that when they would start with the making of the sugar, there would also be cats, and the bear would come out. This meant that they would do the bear ceremony as well, and honour the bear. There are songs for that ceremony.

In keeping with the belief of the renewal of life, maple sap is used medicinally, especially for pregnant women who are considered the givers of life. The use of sweetwater as medicine and as a cleansing agent is widespread in Aboriginal communities. The sap is given for ceremonies, to teach the children, and as medicine. For example, one producer mentioned that diets over the winter may mean that people have been low on different minerals. He advocated drinking half a cup of sap for 30 days to strengthen the immune system.

It is important to note here, that not all the Aboriginal producers who participated in the groups followed traditional ways or ceremonies. One woman indicated that there wasn't really anything they practiced and that she could not contribute to that piece. Some producers either did not know traditional ways or chose not to practice them consciously. And, some of those who did not know their traditions were interested in learning more about them and reclaiming the traditions and ceremonies they may have lost over time.

Theme 3: Knowledge Sharing and Transmission

Wide-spread Aboriginal producers are often isolated or have lost their Indigenous Knowledge (IK) due to colonial policies that outlawed many traditional practices and led to discrimination. Thus, harvesting sap and making maple syrup is connected to exercising Aboriginal and treaty rights and rectifying this historical legacy of cultural interference. Government policies impacted Aboriginal maple production in profound ways both economically and culturally. However, the extent to which Aboriginal maple culture and economy were affected is not well understood. Some interesting questions remain to be addressed. Early sources note that maple sugar, not maple syrup, was the preferred commodity in the 19th century before processed sugars became widely available later. Colonial mechanisms aimed at assimilating Aboriginal peoples also deeply affected Aboriginal maple cultural practices. This partially explains the discrepancies in the type and depth of IK held by today's Aboriginal producers.

One producer recounted that many ceremonies were outlawed. In his community, in the 60's when they would want to have a gathering, they planned to go 20 miles in the bush. They would just bring the drums. However, he said there was always a snitch, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)

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would inevitably show up. One day the RCMP showed up and stamped out the fires. They brought back the water ceremony in 1998 when one of the grandmothers had a dream.

The question of what to do with the community that has lost its IK was raised numerous times. One producer said that for them, if a community loses, say the water ceremony, that community has to take the step to say “I want to relearn that”. In his opinion, lost knowledge is available even if it takes some searching to find it.

Another issue that was raised with regards to IK and knowledge transmission was the fact that Aboriginal traditions are stored differently than non-native tradition. They are not stored in libraries, they are stored and recounted by their Elders. He called it a “living library”. In his opinion, when a community gets to a point where they want to relearn their ceremonies, there are always people to ask. His grandfather used to say that if there is a ceremony that is really lost, then maybe we should have lost it. But if a ceremony needs to be there, water or whatever, then it will be there for you. But, those who are interested are the ones who need to ask for it. When the sign is there, that person needs to say “yes I want to do this”. And, when the sign is there, that person is responsible to do it.

With regards to learning about maple practices, there was a wide range of experience among the producers. Some learned when they were small children from their family members, their father and mother, grandparents and Elders. Others learned from written sources, government pamphlets and seminars.

Community and school tours were very popular with many of the Aboriginal producers. Some give lots of tours upon requests from community members. Part of this sharing is aimed at honoring the love of the land, the maple syrup, and its value. Children are an important recipient of these activities to incorporate these teachings into their value system as they grow.

Theme 4: Closings

In terms of closing the season, most producers follow typical clean-up and sugarbush management processes. Commercial producers clean their tubing systems and equipment and store it for the following year. The bush is examined for diseased trees which may or may not be culled. Smaller backyard producers will also survey their bush. One producer commented that cleaning the small brush around trees helps the trees grow much bigger. Having said that, for those who follow a more cyclical understanding of the harvest, clean-up does not necessarily mark the end of the season since the cycle is ongoing. One producer likened the cycle to the chicken or the egg dilemma. Beginnings and endings are not clearly defined in a circular model.

Some producers were finished around the second week of April. Then, they do all the clearing and have everything put away and secured by the end of April. Some have a season finishing ceremony. For example, one producer mentioned that they have their closing later (in June), at the end of a powwow. Typically, the clean-up takes a few weeks especially when cleaning the tubing. Apparently, deer like to chew on the tubing because it is syrupy. The lines are checked regularly for damage from animals including squirrels and bears as well as weather-related events such as ice storms. Constant monitoring is undertaken.

Theme 5: All My Relations

In this work, we have adopted the phrase “all my relations” to reflect the different understandings of communities and social networks held by the Aboriginal producers. The phrase “all my relations” is literally translated from the Lakota Sioux term *Mitakuye Oyasin* (Elk and Lyon 1990). It refers to the belief that all things are living sentient beings, and that we are all connected or “related”. All my relations include not only the human family, but also plants, animals, and the forces of nature. This worldview was clearly expressed in our interviews and focus groups with Aboriginal producers and expands on the view that socio-ecological systems can include both humans and trees. And, it is interesting to note that scientists are beginning to catch up with the traditional belief in the social lives of plants³.

One producer said that his community looks at the maple tree as the leader of all the trees, because it gives of itself to the human community. And, they give thanks every time it does give of itself. The trees are not only considered to be “social beings” but they are part of the human social network at the family level. The trees are even considered to have families of their own. One producer referred to them as having “uncles and aunties” and even their own nations. In sharing their sap, the trees were visiting and teaching their human relatives.

The sense of responsibility as caretakers of this world was clearly articulated by many of the producers. They advocated appreciating maple practices rather than commercializing the products. Giving thanks is mandatory as is taking care of these trees. It has been that way since the beginning of time.

One producer recounted that it is important to honor the beliefs and traditions of the community and its mores. There is a different dynamic being in a reserve community. For example, he stated that if a person was going to carry out an activity, and the community does not want them to do that, the community has many ways to sanction that activity. Suddenly, you can't get gas from the stations. Suddenly, you find that the local store that would normally sell milk doesn't sell to you. And so you're told the practice is unacceptable. It's a different type of economy that's based on that need. The need also has a responsibility to it. Other people who don't want to follow the mores need to buy milk and gas elsewhere, paying the premium outside. The social system is based on need and sharing. If one person needs maple syrup, they put that need out and maple syrup comes to them. Sharing among the community is an important part of social relationships.

Politics constitute another important difference with regards to social relations for Aboriginal producers on reserve. As one producer mentioned, bosses are different in that they want to see a profit, or at least a viable operation. For the chief, the sugar bush needs to be socially acceptable and viable. Communal property on reserve is not the same as a private maple operation. The chiefs and councils are the leadership, and their role is to provide the framework, or infrastructure, for economic development. There is a cultural difference with regards to communal understanding. For example, when you kill a moose, you share with your Elders. A well-managed, healthy forest, is an indicator of a healthy community.

³ Brenda Murphy, Annette Chrétien, and Grant Morin (accepted), Maple Syrup Value Systems and Value Chains: Considering Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Perspectives in R. Bullock, F. Broad, L. Palmer and P. Smith (eds), Bridging Practice, Research and Advocacy for Community Forests in Canada, University of Manitoba Press.

Conclusion

All in all, even though the focus groups included participants from different regions of Ontario, and from diverse Aboriginal backgrounds, there were very clear themes that emerged from the discussions. These themes were effective in mapping the process that many Aboriginal people use in their maple practices. In our approach, we used these themes in an adapted Medicine Wheel model that served as a guide and a framework for conducting the focus groups and for analyzing and reporting the findings. These themes included openings; harvesting practices; knowledge sharing and transmission; closings; and all my relations.

With regards to openings, the idea that maple practices are part of a lunar cycle was widely-agreed upon. And, even members from different communities followed the lunar calendar drawn from the teachings of the turtle. In keeping with the intimate relationship that Aboriginal people have with the environment, maple practices are part of a larger picture that is connected to other species and harvesting practices. And, many of the producers used traditional ceremonies to mark the beginning of the harvesting of sap. By the same token, Aboriginal harvesting practices are diverse and can sometimes include a blending of traditional practices with state-of-the-art technology. Depending on the purpose of the harvest, different tools and processes are used to reach the desired goals. These goals can range from the medicinal uses of sap to large commercial endeavours that even have international scope. The sharing and transmission of knowledge has been deeply impacted by colonial policies, however, all producers were adamant that including children and Elders is a fundamental part of maple sugaring as a social practice. In this way, IK is not lost and serves to help revitalize maple practices in Aboriginal communities. Closing the season follows the same principle as opening the season in that it is not an ending but rather part of the yearly ongoing cycle. Finally, perhaps the most revealing theme that formed an underlying thread to all other aspects is the notion of all my relations. The belief that all things, including maple trees, are sentient beings and that we are all connected permeated all the discussions. As many of the producers mentioned, maple practices are part of their history, identity, and social relationships. In this sense, maple practices are seen as a responsibility. And, the notion that we are all interconnected brings with it the guiding principles of honor, sharing, respect and caring for the land. As such, maple practices are an integral part of Aboriginal healing and wellbeing in all ways, physically, spiritually and culturally.