

The Land Pillar: Elder Jerry Sawanis explains Creator's curious systems of relations



"The land is our original teacher," said Satsan (Herb George),

The co-founder and President of the Centre for First Nations Governance (CFNG) introduced the third Inherent Rights Youth Initiative (IRYI) storytelling session, drawing on his experience as a Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chief.

"Old and sacred stories offer teachings about how to interact with the land, water, sky, and all beings of the world. By careful, respectful, and reciprocal methods, people lived in balance," he added, addressing the First Nations youth and Elders joining the virtual gathering.

Satsan and CFNG, with the help of partner organizations including [The Rebuilding First Nations Governance Project \(RFNG\)](#), [Laidlaw Foundation](#), and [The Institute of Public Administration of Canada \(IPAC\)](#), are bridging generations of First Nations people across Turtle Island in a series of online storytelling sessions leading up to the end of 2022.

The series aims to educate young First Nations people how to become inherent rights leaders and support Indigenous self-government. Each session features a virtual visit with Elders from communities across Turtle Island who have partnered with the RFNG research project to explain one of [The Five Pillars of Effective Governance](#).

The Five Pillars were created by the Centre for First Nations Governance with help from First Nations leaders, elders, and scholars. They're a tool for First Nations communities exercising their right to self-government to bring their traditional governance practices into the present day.

"The Five Pillars come from the voices and the vision of our great leaders of the past and today who were fighting for the recognition of Aboriginal Title, treaty rights and our inherent right to self-government under Section 35 of the Constitution," said Satsan.

This session focused on The Land Pillar and highlighted how First Nations people have a right and responsibility to govern their land.

'Something we can always count on'

The gathering's featured guest, Elder Jerry Sawanis of Nishnawbi Aski Nation, says First Nations have a sacred relationship with the land. Thanks to Creator, everything, including First Nations people, their spirits, laws, and governance is in relation to the land.

First Nations' creation stories explain how this important relationship first began. Elder Sawanis started his conversation with the youth and attendees by retelling one such story shared by countless Indigenous communities—the story of Turtle Island.

"We need to find out where we got the land from, where our land came from," said Elder Sawanis. "We all have creation stories. So that's what I would like to share with you."

The Elder told the story of a determined muskrat, who sacrificed his life to swim to the depths of the world, on which Creator unleashed a purifying flood, to bring up a tiny pawful of dirt.

One of the muskrat's animal friends, a turtle, volunteered to rest the soil on his back. Blown in directions by the four winds, the piece of earth grew to become Turtle Island, also known as North America.

"The first thing that I heard when I read that story was when they talked about the four winds and the Creator, which tells us that there's spirituality here in our lives," said Elder Sawanis. "And that is something that we can always call on. If we can't do something, just by ourselves, we have the spirit of our Creator with us."

In other words, Creator imbued First Nations' laws, governance, and knowledge into the land, he explained.

'The story about our spirit'

Elder Sawanis' second story, The Legend of the Mole, explains how the sacred knowledge First Nations people need to lead isn't just in the land. Thanks to Creator and the land's insightful animals, it's inside First Nations peoples' spirits too.

“Creator is talking to the animals about where to put man’s spirit so that he doesn't find it so easily,” the Elder began. “Idea after idea was suggested. But there was no safe place they could think of and the animals started to get discouraged.”

It wasn’t until a mole made a clever suggestion—to place people’s spirit inside them—that Creator and the animals cheered, knowing they had found the perfect hiding place.

“This story always reminds me of when I was growing up”, said Elder Sawanis. “You know, as young people, as we grow, we wonder: why am I here? Who made me? What am I supposed to do? And this is where that question leads to the story about our spirit.”

Both stories, Elder Sawanis added, also show the important relationship between Creator, animals, and the land.

‘Be curious’

Curiosity, the Elder explained, is the key to accessing the knowledge Creator stored in First Nations peoples’ land and spirits.

“Be curious. Chances are, as your curiosity comes out, that knowledge you want—that’s coming. That’s coming towards you. That’s how Creator’s system works,” he said.

Every First Nations person is born with the inherent right and responsibility to the land. Elder Sawanis says leadership tools are inherent too—finding them is as simple as looking inwards.

“By golly, we’ve got tools there that you haven’t seen yet. To be a leader, you need to look in there and say, ‘okay, what did my Creator leave me to be a leader?’” Elder Sawanis said. “To want to know our Creator—that’s the most important thing.”

Now, it’s up to the youth to ask those important questions.

For information on how to join future IRYI storytelling sessions and other gatherings, please visit our [events webpage](#).

[Read more about staying true to First Nation’s values and the Five Pillars of Effective Governance from governance expert Julie Williams in RFNG’s educational Q&A series—The Pathfinders](#)