

The Governing Systems Pillar: tricksters and transformers teach the tools for nurturing human ability

“We’re on our last stop today,” said IRYI Coordinator Amsey Maracle. “Wow, it’s been a long journey.”

Maracle introduced the fifth storytelling session in the Inherent Rights Youth Initiative (IRYI) event series. Over nearly four months, the IRYI team assembled First Nations youth and Elders to delve into self-government through [the Five Pillars of Effective Governance](#) and traditional storytelling from different nations across the country.

In this fifth and final event before the celebratory gathering in the new year, IRYI participants virtually visited Upper Nicola Nation to learn about the Resources Pillar through the Nation’s traditional stories.

Upper Nicola’s own Elders-in-training, Ira Tom and Tim “Spike” Manuel took participants on a journey through the Nation’s stories pertaining to the Resources Pillar. Mat Swit, a young storyteller-in-training and nephew to both Tom and Manuel accompanied the duo with a story of his own.

The IRYI event series is bringing Elders and youth together thanks to a coalition of national governance organizations and funders including [The Centre for First Nations Governance](#), [The Rebuilding First Nations Governance Project \(RFNG\)](#), [Laidlaw Foundation](#), and [The Institute of Public Administration of Canada \(IPAC\)](#).

The Resources Pillar

According to Maracle, the Resource Pillar encapsulates more than natural resources. The Pillar is about human capacity just as much as it’s about what we receive from the land.

“It’s everybody’s gifts—all of our gifts that we have. Those are the resources that we bring to our communities and to our people,” she said. “The Resource Pillar is really about the way a community’s social and political organization helps to maximize human capacity.”

Since time immemorial, First Nations’ stories have taught their peoples to value and nurture their individual and collective gifts. As both national histories and laws, traditional stories set guidelines on how Nations should manage their capabilities.

“The knowledge and wisdom of stories often taught about putting boundaries on human action and the use of that which sustained them,” said Maracle.

‘He told us how to live’

For many First Nations, this resource management know-how has come from the example of the always-charming but often-devilish Coyote.

The Coyote appears as a central character and in countless communities' traditional stories. Many of Tim Manuel and Ira Tom's lessons on the Resource Pillar featured the trickster and his (mis)adventures.

According to Manuel, Coyote is a character that sits atop a pendulum between good and bad. His personality is a mirror of humanity, which makes him our perfect teacher.

"He's a reflection of who we are. He's our ancestor," Manuel said, "He taught us the laws. Through the places that he visited, he told us how to live and showed us how to live."

Tom's first story featured the canine swindler galivanting with the magic stick of the great hunter wood tick. Coyote uses the stick, which kills anything at which it's thrown, to amass a mountainous pile of deer too big for the creature to possibly eat on his own.

"Holy smokes Coyote! What do you think you're doing?" Tom said, in the voice of the great hunter.

"Well I'm getting tired of just fixing the one deer, and I think I just want to kill a whole bunch and fix it all up," he replied, now as Coyote.

Beside a pile of rotting deer, the great hunter reclaimed his powerful stick, and so the story ends, says Tom. The narrative explains the difference in character between Coyote and wood tick. It teaches us lessons about over-abundance and the important law of only taking what we need.

The story is a showcase for each of the duo's different individual resources. Wood tick is an excellent hunter, Tom says, while Coyote is a resourceful provider—lazy as he may be.

'Everything will have its own song'

The idea that each person has something of their own to offer their community is hardly something unique to only a few of Upper Nicola's stories. Storyteller-in-training, Mat Swit, shared the story of the Four Food Chiefs: one of Upper Nicola's captíkʷł, the sacred oral histories which are the basis for their laws.

"All creation was talking about the changes that would come for Mother Earth. They were told that a new kind of being would soon be on this Earth," Mat Swit began. "The four Chiefs of the animal people were Skemxist (Black Bear), Síya? (Saskatoon Berry), Nítyiyix (King Salmon), and spíłm (Bitter Root)."

After much debate on how to provide for humanity, three of the Chiefs decided to defer to the oldest of the leaders, Skemxist, to come to the decision for them.

"I will give myself and all the animals that I am Chief of to provide food for the people to be," said Mat Swit in the voice of the ancient Chief.

One by one, the other Food Chiefs followed suit and pledged their lives to feed humanity. Skemxist laid his life down, but was brought back to life after Fly and the animal people sang a healing song.

“Skemxist spoke for all the Chiefs,” said Mat Swit, “From now on, when the people-to-be come, everything will have its own song. The people-to-be will use these songs to help each other as you have helped me.”

Together, both the animal people and Chiefs used their resources to not only provide for the people-to-be and themselves but establish a way of helping one another, acknowledging relations, and giving thanks.

‘The importance of ceremony’

Upper Nicola’s stories also inform how citizens use their resources in the present day. Elder-in-training Manuel recounted how the traditional history of nearby Nicola Lake helped him see the need for a recent ceremony.

“In our captíkwtł—in all of our Indigenous stories all across Turtle Island—we know that we had transformers and tricksters come through and make the land livable. And at this time, there was no lake there. It was just flat,” he said. “There were four brothers who were transformers that were coming through the land.”

On the then-flat tract of earth was a cave home to a people-eating monster disguised as a beautiful woman. She lived with an equally monstrous guard dog who had the head of a snake and the head of a bear.

When woman killed the youngest brother, Manuel says, the elder siblings wised up to her true nature and decided to transform her.

“The woman had a brother that she was having sexual relations with, so they transformed the man into the north side of the mountain” said Manuel.

The brothers put Nicola Lake between the two and set the monstrous guard dog loose inside it, where it remains today Ever since, locals have known to stay away from the lake, which has become the site of several drownings.

In recent years, the story prompted Manuel’s family to intervene.

“We brought a medicine man up to do a ceremony that hadn’t been done for a long time to appease the supernatural power of the of the lake,” he said. “We had to make an offering at sunrise with all our traditional foods that a grizzly bear would eat, and the foods that a snake would eat.”

“The men stopped drowning and dying in this lake,” he added. “Our ancestors had taught us about this: the importance of ceremony and to pray for the safety of our people and of our men.”

Reviving ceremonies and the lessons of the past won't just guide First Nations in the present, it will help ensure a brighter outcome for nations' futures, says Manuel.

Plus, there's one gift that's guaranteed to make the effort worthwhile.

"We've got our children as our greatest resource to motivate us to do this work," he said.

With the final storytelling session over, IRYI youth and Elders now look forward to a day-long gathering in the new year, where they'll meet the series' previous speakers, apply their newfound knowledge, and celebrate this chapter of their learning journeys.

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

Looking for recap on the meaning of each of the Five Pillars of Effective Governance? [Visit The Centre for First Nations Governance's website](#) for helpful resources and more.