



Seminar Series

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**Trent University
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Indigenous Environmental Studies: The Changing face of Environmental Education

The 'education' brought by colonial governments to many Indigenous Peoples was used as a blunt tool of assimilation. It conducted frontal attacks on languages, religions and cultures, eroding both Indigenous identity and Indigenous rights. It is not ancient history. Living survivors of abusive institutions and policies continue to suffer, and there is strong evidence that the damage resounds through generations.

As contemporary Indigenous peoples, we must approach formal education pragmatically, carefully weighing its challenges and opportunities. Education offers us the tools to join or challenge a globalized economy. It offers our future leaders the tools to ensure that we will not be marginalized in development; that we will never again be poor spectators as our lands are exploited. Knowledge can be used to protect the land as an ancient trust or it can be used to participate in its destruction. The global economy gives us choices, each with their own costs to human and environment alike. We are all too aware of the costs.

The cost of unchecked development is unacceptable. Indigenous peoples feel this keenly: we are the first to be hurt. We suffer the deepest pain. It will take generations to reverse the environmental damage that threatens life's existence today. Both developed and developing nations need to change their ways, quickly and deeply. My people, the Haudenosaunee, explained this in 1975 with *A Basic Call to Consciousness*. The message has not changed. We need to change the face of education to begin to serve the environment, the people who depend on it and we must do this for the benefit of all Life. These issues are the focus of the evolving discipline of environmental studies. Less than forty years old, it is still in its infancy as an academic discipline. Environmental education finds its roots in the natural sciences and the social sciences. It is often depicted as a combination of 'sciences' and 'studies.' From scientific inquiry we draw part of our understanding of the biology of the natural world. From social sciences we learn about our own relationships with it. More recently, traditional Indigenous knowledge has been recognized as an important component of environmental understanding. Indigenous people are now beginning to take their rightful place among educators.

One intersection of Indigenous knowledge and environmental education is located at Trent University in Canada. Indigenous Environmental Studies is a new academic discipline, but not a new idea. It is based on the precept of Indigenous resiliency and adaptability. It fosters necessary conversations between Indigenous environmental knowledge and scientific environmental knowledge. It seeks to identify differences, similarities and commonalities in these knowledge systems, to create a mutually beneficial, focused perspective. This shared perspective, in turn, encourages a broader and deeper understanding of environment, ecology, place and spirit. This presentation will provide an overview of both the process and content of the program. It will stress the need to create IES programs in other academic environments. To address the environmental crisis we all face, we need to share our best thinking and our most powerful knowledge, in the most effective ways possible.