Treating our Land as a Family Member

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• Champlain and his crew arrived at Port Royal, NS in 1604. With assistance from members of the Mi’kmaq Nation and a local chief, Membertou, the settlement prospered.

• The Europeans were invited to join a respectful circle of people who knew how to live on this continent. 400 years later, after so much hurtful history, the invitation is still open today. (I’ll come back to this)
Thriving Aboriginal culture on Canadian land

- Europeans arrived with a cultural arrogance and an assumption that the raw landscape and uncivilized people must be developed to have “real value.”
- Aboriginals died of smallpox and other European diseases, from ‘gifts’ such as Hudson’s Bay blankets.
- There was a steady displacement of Indigenous people by Europeans, especially on fertile land.
• Finally, Aboriginals — their populations decimated — lived on small reserves.

• There was a deliberate attempt to assimilate their children with specific racist policies and subsequent actions, in residential schools.

• “Aboriginals originally received gifts for their land but the language shifted — Aboriginals getting relief and then welfare. It’s quite possible that they originally understood gifts would be ongoing, as rent.” (Tod Augusta-Scott, NS)
• At a recent workshop, an aboriginal elder who was abused at the Schubenacadie residential school in NS invited workshop participants to walk beside her and other Aboriginals.

• “That’s all we ask” she said. “We don’t want you to walk behind us or ahead of us. Just walk beside us and we’ll learn and grow together.”

• It is remarkable, after so much hurtful history, that the invitation is still open to walk side by side on Canadian land.
Stepping Back about 2 Centuries

• “The Gillis's lived on the mountain
  For about a hundred years
  Where we picked berries, they cleared land
  Spent their blood and sweat and tears”
  (The Rankin Family)

• There was a time when our ancestors
  intimately knew and respected the land they
  lived on. This land provided. People who didn’t
  live on Gillis Mountain or similar homesteads
  were closely related to those who did. Land
  was a member of everyone’s family.
To borrow an Irish expression ‘We Hardly Know Ye’

• Today, many Canadians hardly know a specific knoll, valley, meadow, field, farm or even a garden.

• Only a few relate to land and know the low spots where drainage is slow and reeds grow, or where the oak tree will resolutely cling to some leaves through January storms.

• For the most part, land is depersonalized as an asset and/or a resource.
What do we ask of Farmland?

Farm land asked to provide 4Fs
Food, Feed, Fibre and Fuel (energy)
and Fun

Our responsibility is to help maintain Functioning Farm Ecosystems
Export and Import

• The pattern of using Canadian farmland to produce export commodities is increasing. To grease the wheels of export we’ve also agreed to import food and are becoming reliant on trade.

• In 2010, exports of agri-food products totalled $35.5 billion. Over 50% of exports comprise grain and oilseed products.

• Livestock and meat are 20%. 
Pedal to the Metal and Eating Poorly

• Two-thirds of health-care costs can now be attributed to chronic diseases associated with unhealthy eating. *20th Century Agriculture: the health cost*. 2009, CAPI

• What if we ate to be healthy, rather than wasting ourselves?
Available and Needed

- Food system in Canada provides about 160 Bil cal/d
- If not waste 40%, we could live with 96 bil cal/d
- Furthermore, if not eat 1.2 x need, we could live with 80 bil cal/d or about 2300 cal/person/d

- There is room to sustain production rather than to maximize production now
Sustaining Productive Capacity with Red Clover and Other Forages

Increases Microbial Activity

Increases Soil Organic Matter

Increases Aggregate Stability

Builds Soil Tilth

Improves Water Holding Capacity

Decreases Soil Compaction

Sources: Lupwayi et. al, 1998; Snapp et. al, 2005; Queen et. al, 2009; Blaser et. al, 2011

Photo: Amélie Gaudin
KEEP YOUR SOIL COVERED
i) mixtures of annual and perennials
ii) cover crops and catch crops in rotations when cash crops are not growing
iii) mulches with growing cash crops
iv) underseeded cereals
v) winter cereals
vi) agro-forestry
When corn stover and wheat straw leave the farm

- If remove crop residues from arable land for bio-products and bio-fuel,

then maintain SOM with soil builders, with and between cash crops.
Soil Renewal Rate

• To form a 2.5 cm depth of soil (340 t/ha) requires 200 to 1000 years, a renewal rate of 0.3 to 2 t/ha/yr


• In ON about half is at risk of >6t/ha/yr
Productivity of eroded soil

- Productivity of eroded soils will decline even if fertilizer is added (Brady and Weil 2002, Fig 17.8)

or if the eroded soil is irrigated (Larney et al. 1995 J. Soil Water Conserv. 50:87-91)
Importance of Observing and Caring

- Erosion control practices tend to increase on farms:
  1) with farmers mostly on the farm
  2) organized as family units

(Wall et al. 2002)
Farmers Struggle

• Family farmers struggle in many areas to make a decent living while cheap food, increasing input costs, variable weather, and labourers with urban aspirations, challenge farmers’ capacity to manage.
ACRI includes i) frost-free period, 2) summer heat for crops and 3) moisture limitation. ACRI from 1.0 in N, to > 3.0 in S. ON (Essex County). ACRI > 2.0 are critical lands.

• < 15 % Canada’s farmland with ACRI > 2.0 and only ON with ACRI > 3.0

• 95% Canada’s farmland with ACRI 2.5 - 2.9 in ON and 42% Canada’s farmland with ACRI 2.0 – 2.4 in ON
Canada Land Inventory (CLI)

• Only 11% Canada’s land can support ag production (classes 1 – 5).
• 0.5% Canada’s farmland is class 1, i.e. no significant limitations for ag, highest productivity, wide crop range
• 52% of class 1 is land in ON and 18% of class 1 land is already urbanized
• Central ON (York, Peel, Durham, Parry Sound), lost 1,897,000 acres farmland (49%) last half 20th Cent.
• S. ON (Hamilton, Niagara, Brant, Oxford, Elgin, Chatham-Kent, Essex) lost 535,000 acres farmland (13%) last half 20th Cent.
A Question of Value

• Do buildings and roads for a century or 2 or 3 provide more value than ongoing capacity to produce food, feed, fibre, fuel and fun for millenia?
• Urban Canadians tend to be too quick to assign blame to farmers who want the right to sell their farmland to developers.

• The old adage of ‘cash poor and asset rich’ represents farmers who sacrifice most of their lives for our benefit, and justifiably seek a modest, comfortable retirement.

• The cost of preserving agricultural land should not be borne only by the farm community.
More people in rural areas?

• 81% of Canadians live in urban areas

• Additional homes in farm communities on land not suitable for cropping? Rural community vitality and resilience could be improved.

• Soil health, food health and community health may respond well to diverse approaches.

• Profitability can be improved with added value products and community inputs.
Ancestors

• Our ancestors accepted formidable challenges to sustain their lives. They set us up not only to survive, but to thrive. Now it’s our turn.

• We have the information to see where we are in the arc of land use history. A bit of sacrifice and more knowledge of ourselves and our land, will, in the end, lead to more resilient and richer lives.
Thinking Expansively

• Canadian farmland really is the relative that can sustain our descendants. Nevertheless, it cannot, if we abuse or destroy it.

• Like our ancestors, we and our descendants, can know Canadian farmland as a family member. This includes an extended family of farmers, eaters and even other creatures.
An Attitude of Gratitude

Take moments to be thankful for food, feed, fibre, fuel and fun and for land, the ancient family member, who will outlive us all.