



**Land Knowledge Circles**

# NGO CIRCLE PROCEEDINGS

**Let's Get Back to the Land and Our Communities**

An effort to extend grassroots and inclusive governance & leadership



Knowledge Circles held with Non-Government Organization (NGO) Leaders from the Land Between bioregion in central Ontario. June 2017



**The Land Between**

Cottage Country's Conservation Organization



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## 1.0.0 INTRODUCTION

The Land Knowledge Circles (KC) project is a cornerstone project of The Land Between charity in partnership with Curve Lake First Nation and Hastings Stewardship Council. The project's goals are to advance inclusivity in the social environmental sector; increase capacity of the sector; and to facilitate behavioural change and land stewardship through the cultivation of relationships and the provision of new democratic organizational tools. Talking Circles are used by Indigenous peoples across the world to facilitate greater understanding and bring about new relationships and potential solutions. Talking Circles provide a platform for equal voice and democracy. They are a central to the Land Knowledge Circles Project.

The Land Knowledge Circles project will convene Talking Circles to bring about greater understanding and capacity related to the state of the land and wildlife. The primary stakeholders of land and resource users and purveyors, which include folks such as hunters, farmers, anglers, naturalists, gardeners, road-crew workers, baitfish operators etc. In addition to cultivating new relationships and understanding, and therefore increasing capacity, these Talking Circles would elucidate priorities for land resource management and stewardship.

It was therefore decided to convene leaders within the grassroots sector in order to understand the capacity of the sector to respond to the outcomes and priorities revealed by the Land Knowledge Circles, and the general needs and issues which help or hinder these groups in taking action.

On Tuesday June 20 and Wednesday June 21 the Land Between charity, Curve Lake First Nation and Hastings Stewardship Council held Talking Circles specifically for grassroots groups and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in the region.

The NGO Talking circles were convened to be primary, smaller circles, and specifically for those leaders in the sector who have ample experience in nonprofit and grassroots environmental management. The organizations invited would represent the social sector as opposed to government or regulatory agencies that may have ongoing funding and support from fees, dues and publicly generated revenues.

The proceedings from these smaller NGO-circles provided much needed insight and context for the entire chronicles, which will be published at the end of the project.

***The following organizations were represented at the meetings:***

- Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre
- Museum Planning Partners; cultural conservation
- Royal Astronomical Society of Canada
- The Land Between charity
- Hastings Stewardship Council
- Curve Lake Cultural Centre
- Wye Marsh expert
- Ontario Nature Field Naturalists
- Friends of the Salmon River
- Watersheds Canada
- Ontario Archaeological Society
- Algonquin to Adirondacks

- Buckhorn District Historical Society
- Hastings Prince Edward Land Trust
- Harvest Hastings
- Land Conservancy for Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington
- Kingston Field Naturalists
- Ontario Woodlot Association
- Lennox and Addington Stewardship Council
- Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle and Beausoleil Island Cultural Committee

***Additional organizations, invited, provided regrets, but also completed online surveys to provide insights to similar investigations:***

- Couchiching Conservancy
- Alderville First Nation Black Oak Savannah
- Muskoka Watershed Council

These initial meetings were intimate. They would allow us to record the needs and challenges facing NGOs in the environmental sector and substantiate issues of capacity in communities. We asked two simple open-ended questions:

- A. What are the issues that your organization faces in terms of capacity?***
- B. What are the issues that you face in terms of operations?***

An Anishinabeg First Nation Chair led the first Circle held at the Buckhorn Community Centre on June 20th. The second session was facilitated by Leora Berman of Land Between charity. An opening prayer was said at each gathering to honor the Creator and to ask for good words and insights. The first round provided an introduction of all participants. The sacred object, of the Goose feather, was the instrument chosen to guide discussions and was passed around the circle two more times; first for insights into organizational capacity and then to discuss operations.

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ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND OPERATIONS MAY AT TIMES HAVE OVERLAPPING THEMES AND ISSUES. THEREFORE, PROCEEDINGS RELATED TO ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY WERE ORGANIZED INTO AREAS THAT HAD A DIRECT BEARING ON THE “MECHANICS” OR THE RUNNING AND CONTINUANCE OF THE GROUP SUCH AS THE ORGANIZATION’S STRUCTURE OR CONSTITUTION, FUNDING SOURCES, STAFFING AND VOLUNTEERS, AND OTHER RESOURCES.

## 2.0.0 ORGANIZATION CAPACITY

### 2.1.0 Constitution

#### 2.1.1 FIRST NATIONS

- There was a lack of recognition of groups and endeavours to their relationship to First Nations and Traditional Territories and Agreements/Treaties, which may consider to impede the effectiveness of groups in the environmental sector, but also which hinders First Nation communities from thriving and being autonomous

- The issue of a lack of recognition and related autonomy can then be demonstrated in the fact that there is no money and resources available to keep First Nation languages alive
- Along these lines, is that there is always a pull to appropriate our sacred spaces and culture to benefit tourism- a delicate balance needs to be struck here so as not to turn these things into commodities; and many are investigating how to do this.
- Simply stated, First Nations recognize the spiritual value of the land and do not assign a static monetary value the land, whereas government does not recognize and value the invaluable spiritual value of the land.

“ If Treaty Rights were recognized we would have stronger partnerships -- for that is what we wanted originally -- We need to have the environment sustainable for everybody.”

Tracey Taylor, Curve Lake Cultural Centre

“ If we were valued for what the social sector does and for what First Nations do- the inherent value of what we look after - we would probably not have to market, innovate, communicate and advertise.”

Gary Williams, Curve Lake First Nation Counsellor

- First Nations understand and deeply value the interdependence of nature and our place in it. This needs to be shared but not debased or monetized.

## 2.1.2 INCORPORATIONS AND CHARITABLE STATUS

- One notable group indicated that they began as an incorporated NGO and have since let their status lapse because the administration and reporting was too much work
- Many indicated that the public tend to believe that a charity should not appear to be too financially successful- this being a puritan ethic perhaps- that a charity's employees and managers should not be remunerated overly much; whereas the skills required and demands are actually equal to or greater than those same positions in the private sector. The expectation seems to be that staff volunteer, or that the charity rely entirely on volunteers. The skills required to run a charity and programming do not seem to be understood or valued in the public's eyes.
- There is a prevalence of hybrid NGO's; agencies that are set up by governments, through legislation, or which receive funding through government agreements, from fees and dues under regulations and legislation, and which identify as charities, or even social sector NGO's, such as Community Care, Community Living, and some Conservation Authorities etc.

## 2.2.0 Organizational Funding: Grants, Sponsorship and Donations

### Grants

#### 2.2.1 FUNDING: GRANTS

- It is very clear that true NGO's (rather than hybrids) have a hard time obtaining consistent and reliable funding
- The majority of NGOs rely majorly on grants; and many feel that successful grants are a "hit and miss" making it very difficult to plan for any work in the year ahead.
- Also notable is that the skills and time required for grant-writing are substantial. Some NGOs feel the need to hire grant-writers, but do not have the funds; while others expend time and effort to face rejection notices.
- Another outfall of the reliance on grantors is that approval and funding may be late in coming, and NGO's must wait for these notices before hiring contractors and staff to implement the projects. Therefore, project management becomes very stressful and under these circumstances, finding staffing or people to deliver the projects often becomes challenging-never mind finding the right people with the right skills to write grants.
- Issues arise also around the timing of the funds: funding programs and onsets may not coincide with natural resource wildlife seasons and payments may not be timely, so as to create difficulties for land management or field assessments and project delivery.
- Funding/grants can also be very restrictive or limiting: Grants will not generally pay for salaries, but only support operating costs. The other itemized allocations are also restrictive or regulated and are often resourced according to the funder's priorities or understanding of the project; too the funds are given for a very restrictive timeline. Too, a main issue is that, more and more there is money for operations or even capital projects such as building but not for maintenance, ongoing operations or core staffing.
- Therefore, while the majority of NGO's rely on funding in Ontario and provide valuable public services, some feel their operations are constrained or even "micro-managed" by the dictates of funders.
- A current contradiction in funding has come about as well, where some granting bodies penalize NGO's and charities for having too much unrestricted operating funding or reserve funds, and expect them to spend these reserves before requesting funding; while other foundations and funders want to see organizations with greater reserves and core funding so that they do not feel they are "backfilling" the organization. Because of these limitations, smaller or newer NGO's find it difficult to build capacity.
- It is evident that there is an increase in demands for funds and lessening amounts and opportunities.

“It is a challenge going forward; we need money for core funding”

“We are always jumping through changing hoops”

“There are too many rules and regulations to follow for grants”

“It is too much work to apply for grants”

- Exacerbating the already restrictive climate is that, recently, provincial funders require the NGO to spend the awarded amounts (and provide proof of their spending) before the NGO coffers are reimbursed with the grant allowance. This situation necessitates large reserves or a reliance on contracts that do not require immediate compensations.
- (Note that this last point of reimbursements for disbursements, has always been the case with core First Nation Band funding in eastern Canada; and moreover when the funds provided are actually legally owned by and owed to First Nations.)
- Grantors (and the public) seem to want NGOs to provide services for a fraction of the true costs through reduced remuneration rates, volunteerism and other sources matching funds. This adds even more pressure on this sector and its volunteers.
- There is always a requirement to find matching funds. Usually this could be in-kind funding, but more and more funders want an actual cash match for the grant. Therefore, while the public expects an NGO or charity to be primarily a volunteer organization, the funders want the organization to have money.
- Because of the increasing demands or prescriptivism of funders, smaller NGO's are having to compete at the same level as large or hybrid NGO's that have core regular funds to leverage. Smaller NGOs feel that they cannot compete for funding, as they don't have the corporate dollars required, nor do they have the reach that current funders and the new fast-paced digitally-inclined competitive market is looking for.

“Applying for grant. you have to meet the objectives of the grant giver - you have to adapt what you are doing to meeting their objectives you also have to fit into their timelines.”

“I don't think there is a government solution to solve my operational problems: I think it is far to annoying to go through the grant application process.”

- Some NGO's feel that the level of competition is a catalyst for innovation and adaptation and attempting to meet the challenges; but burn-out, weaning dedication, and therefore a lack of tenure and skills needed to navigate strategic development, still pose significant obstacles.
- Finally, too, a positive is the awareness that generally the government, private funders, and the public are getting a lot smarter and better informed; They are asking good questions, perhaps as a result of the increasing demand with more limited resources. This can result in those agencies or projects that are awarded having, potentially stronger projects that use funds more effectively.

“If NGOs can afford consultants, consultants will spend the money people raise and hopefully help them leverage more.”

“You have to adapt to change if you are going to get funding. “

## 2.2.2 DONATIONS AND SPONSORSHIPS

- Donations and sponsorships require simple yet savvy skills; the right statements and communications that are inspiring and convincing to the public. They require a more visceral approach, tenacity or simple gut instinct.
- However, some NGO’s have resorted to marketing tactics that may lack integrity; they may stretch the truth to motivate the public to donate or to get involved, such as indicating that an issue is time-sensitive or is threatened by inaction when it is not entirely true. This conduct puts other charities and NGO’s at risk; and may tarnish others as well as result in a loss of trust and loyalty.

“To get donations someone needs to write a compelling letter”

## 2.2.3 OTHER GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

- Very few government programs exist in the environmental sector that support the operations and capacity of the social sector.
- However, one mechanism that is proving very successful for land trusts and conservancies, is the Ecological Gift Program from Environment Canada and Climate Change.
- Also, the modern arena is evolving to allow for new arrangements, such as private-public partnerships. Other innovative agreements are possible.

## 2.2.4 GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

- Generally, governments and NGOs, while both public bodies, have very different experiences and understandings simply because government has an ongoing and stable source of resources to support their programs and operations, and NGO’s are always on the uncertain edge. Therefore, this inherent difference makes NGO’s feel that government does not fully understand the social sector, its demands, and the challenges that face the sector. Therefore, NGO’s feel that governments do not innovate and are not aligned with the modern arenas/the modern climate within the sector; they are not pragmatic or reflective of the land base.
- In order to navigate this rift, NGOs feel the need to find champions within government departments.

“I don’t think they (government) know who we are”

“The support of one individual helps with many of the small and tedious things.”



“Governments seem to rely on prescribed best practices, which are often born out of experiences of worst practices, and not out of innovation or vision”

### 2.3.0 Volunteers and Staff

- For NGO's it can be considered that human resources are always the limiting factor: getting people out to do work, to be on the board and drive the organization's mandate, or whether it is simply volunteers to do paper-work. And NGOs report losing members and volunteers each year because of the aging demographic.
- Many NGOs are finding that it is hard to find volunteers who will take on any meaningful responsibilities or ongoing roles; for instance, volunteers are willing to help in social arenas and with workshops but not for administration. Often only paid employees are the only ones who will do the back-end “dog” work. This exacerbates issues of corporate or operational sustainability even more.
- Volunteers also require management, and as volunteers, they do what they do best or what they are interested in - it is not likely or often that you can tell them what to do.
- Because of the lack of new volunteers, the limitations of volunteers, or more pressures on existing volunteers to do more work due as a result of limited resources, burnout in the sector is increasing.

“It is hard to find younger volunteers to carry on; ones with the same spirit of volunteering and the same talents as the current volunteers - that are all elders now”

- NGOs also report massive problems in getting and keeping staff and board members: for instance, burn out rates for Executive Directors (EDs) are three years on average and six years at most. Therefore, EDs are often not versed in the sector and certainly few already have the dynamic mix of skills required to navigate the sector or role effectively. Board members, too, are also not often experienced in the sector, or skilled in strategic management. Finally, EDs and staff, both are often temporary as they are funded by grants.
- Therefore, NGO's are finding that there may only be viable value in offering small discrete projects or where commitments/tasks are limited, such as with seasonal or place based monitoring programs, or workshop events, instead of large ongoing programs.
- Finally, a general impatience and lack of distress tolerance are noted in the emerging generations, which require new skills by EDs and Boards, but also which translates into limited commitments where they do not want to invest time in gaining deeper experiences. Often too, they are focused more on simple metrics of success or reward.

### 2.4.0 Collaboration/Need for Partnerships

- Many NGO's will partner and cooperate with others to increase their leverage and the effectiveness of their case in the eyes of funders, as well as to extend resources to greater effect, but too, there is an inherent risk in collaboration. Risks include to each party's

reputation according to their affiliations or actions, and to the project's success according to varying work ethics, levels of dedication, or even differing corporate cultures.

- Collaboration also requires greater management skills and resources.
- Too, some NGOs instead of collaborating in times of scarcity, end up as protectionists of sorts; guarding all projects, efforts, and initiatives against cooperation in an effort to stand out in the crowd.
- However, some NGOs expressed that collaboration is essential across groups and also sectors in order to navigate the increasing complexity of issues we face.

“Collaboration and putting our thoughts together to see how we can tackle issues is absolutely vital to navigate major issues such as Climate Change.”

“The challenge is getting people to relate to the big picture to think longer term, especially in the current environment with Climate Change and other social issues.”

- For some NGO's and for some projects, however, when dealing with larger areas or bigger issues, having a team or even a Board of Directors that is representative is a challenge.

“Diversity is a peculiar double edged sword: different people have different views and understanding of the world; this brings new perspectives to the table to consider but also increased management issues or skills are needed.”

- Collaboration also reduces duplication of efforts. However, individual groups may feel they have specialized objectives and not know how to merge their operations towards their goals.

“The challenge in collaboration is self-interest: getting people and groups to stop being self-interested, and instead to work together to benefit each other and the common good.”

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PROCEEDINGS RELATED TO ORGANIZATIONAL OPERATIONS WERE ORGANIZED INTO AREAS THAT RELATED TO DELIVERING SERVICES IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE ORGANIZATION'S PURPOSES OR MANDATE, SUCH AS PUBLIC PERCEPTION, DEMAND, UPTAKE ETC.

## 3.0.0 OPERATIONS

### 3.1.0 Public Perception

#### 3.1.1 PUBLIC PERCEPTION- GENERAL

- It was a strong feeling amongst all NGOs that the public *don't have a clue* about the roles of different provincial and federal jurisdictions, or of the programs in the environmental sector, but too, they don't know about the regulations and requirements of NGOs in the sector. Also, that people are wholly unaware of the contributions of the NGOs to communities and the common good.

- Other concerns have emerged related to the prevalence of hybrid NGO's, where people may think all NGOs and charities too, are part of a government organization or are supported by governments, when this is not the case. This makes asking for support in any form and even for donations a challenge.
- There is a general expectation from the public and even funders, for both charities and NGOs, that they limit or cap remuneration rates of staff and pay them at lower rates than other mainstream organizations or similar private companies. The public seemingly expect NGOs and charities to be run mainly by volunteers. This may be because they not understand the demands, skills, and management requirements to run NGOs, nor do they know of the value of contributions by NGOs, but this also could be inherent as part of a systemic Puritan Ethic.
- In this same vein, as a pure charity or NGO, as opposed to a hybrid, the public expect that all the services that are provided by them should also be provided for free.

"As social sector leaders, we need to market ourselves and create clear messaging of who we are, what we do and why it matters"

"There is a lack of knowledge and many myths about the workings and work of NGOs and charities"

"I am always careful about integrity; a charity always has to be honest and transparent in everything they do and say"

### 3.1.2 URBAN/ RURAL

- It is evident that it is a greater challenge to get the attention of rural areas or landscapes, to that of the urban centres: It is harder to coordinate and communicate any messages where there are no central, readily accessible, or prevalent media or platforms that people use or access (to the same extent as in the city); and as communities are formed of small and dispersed centres across large divides.
- Funders and seasonal cottagers in The Land Between bioregion especially, come from the Greater Golden Horseshoe and urban areas; Therefore, they often lack a fundamental orientation and then understanding (and perhaps respect) for the essence or culture of these wilderness or rural areas.

"There needs to be a change in perception of the value of rural communities - both by those from urban areas, and too, by those residents of rural areas who undervalue their way of life, knowledge and contributions."

- People that cottage in the region or even visit are less tolerant of venturing into wilderness areas to explore or even less accepting of the inherent features of natural areas; Therefore, areas across the Land Between bioregion are being terraformed and also gentrified to match a new ideal that resembles urban, uniform, or "clean" landscapes.
- The major development pressure in the Land Between bioregion is from the Greater Golden Horseshoe and not internally.
- Lack of high speed internet access in rural areas is common.

- The value of social media in this sector is uncertain and unproven when tested/response and rewards are limited especially for the effort; this may be a reflection of the rural nature of the region where the dominant demographic is over the age of 50, and the predominant culture here being one of local newspapers and neighbourhood gatherings. But also social media may distract and detract from other necessary investments in dialogue and relationships.

“Social media negatively affects behavioural patterns, values and cultural fabric of rural areas - and it could be just another layer for distraction.”

### 3.1.3 YOUNG PEOPLE

- It seems the Millennials are very frugal in areas of social-spending and also do not inherently value the social sector’s role or services.
- And again, as expressed in areas related to staffing and employment, it is noted that Millennials display an impatience or lack of distress tolerance when dealing with difficult or complex issues.
- Therefore, the social sector, especially the environmental sector needs to cultivate the innocent inspiration that is incumbent in youth:

“I have seen children total in awe of nature inspired by the natural phenomenon”

### 3.2.0 Demand for services and Uptake/Response

“Immense issues such as Climate Change are challenging us to work together and even across jurisdictions and we are seeing an increase in the demand for our services (whether it is for knowledge, education, or conservation and restoration projects).”

- While funders recognize the need for collaboration, the amount of funding and the restrictive nature of funding does not appear to recognize the increased demand for the environmental or other social sector services.
- There are also increasing requests for education and outreach from all ages (from kindergarten to senior citizens)

“The aging populations worried about what is going to happen to the land (Nature) they love.”

- There is huge challenge in getting people to relate to the big picture such as with Climate Change, and to think of the longer term (next generations).

“We are innovating and integrating: for instance, we are incorporating ecology into art lessons at public schools”

“It is important to form personal relationships in your community by speaking to schools, clubs, seniors, community centers, so can they understand they have a role to play as well.”

“We create the demand”

“Nowadays, you need to find a way to stand out from the crowd. We need messages that resonate”

“We need to remind people why an area is special and why they want to protect it; that is the challenge. Rather than chase dollars, I would rather be working to get the message out.”

“We need to showcase a symbol of a pristine environment; a touchstone for people, like a Night Sky.”

“Knowledge is power and the more knowledge we get out in the public continually, the more they are going to recognize these species are unique and they have managed to stay here for this long, and it is up to us to make should they stay here.”

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## 4.0.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Limited capacity with high levels of competition for funds and resources; exacerbated by changing and restrictive parameters/rules for funding and the need to adhere to funder’s metrics over more organic or alternative frameworks that may be more aligned with the organization’s mandate and culture

Perhaps organizational preservationist or self-interest arising from this competition as opposed to collaboration: Collaboration requiring additional coordination and management skills, and with inherent risks in work planning, delivery, reputation, and risk management.

Hard to access new and next generations in areas of volunteerism and/or long term commitments

Demand is constant; and increasing development pressures in the region, along with pressures and issues of Climate Change, we are seeing the increased demand for services from the social sector (yet more restrictive funding parameters and not as much funding overall).

With the already high burn-out rates, and limited remuneration or resources in the sector, the situation can be said to give rise to the need for more innovative solutions in the sector, but too, perhaps to more strain and dampening of the sector.

While pressures are forcing the sector to innovate and meet new challenges, the need to monetize and also market the intangible and spiritual values of culture and nature in order to reach modern audiences of urban stakeholders and youth, threatens to consume the essence and vitality of the sector and its leadership.