

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

News Release

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UN International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019 shines a spotlight on the fight to save and preserve Indigenous languages in BC and across Canada

Coast Salish Traditional Territory/Vancouver: Today, representatives from the First Nations Leadership Council and the First Peoples' Cultural Council attended the official global launch of the Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL2019) at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France. The event gathered high-level governmental officials, Indigenous peoples, civil society, academia, media, information and memory organizations, United Nations agencies, public language harmonization and documentation institutions and private sector bodies to celebrate under the theme: *"Indigenous languages matter for sustainable development, peace building and reconciliation."*

The First Nations Leadership Council strongly supports the designation of this year as the International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL2019) and will be actively involved in celebrating IYIL throughout 2019. The preservation of Indigenous languages is a top priority for B.C.'s First Nations. Efforts to support Indigenous language revitalization in B.C. are being led by the First Peoples' Cultural Council, in partnership with First Nations communities, and with significant support from the Province of B.C. through \$50 million in funding in 2018.

Quotes:

Grand Chief Edward John, member of the First Nations Summit Political Executive and Co-chair of the UNESCO IYIL2019 Steering Committee

"Indigenous Languages are the essence and fabric of Indigenous cultures and are fundamental to our survival, dignity and well-being as Indigenous peoples. Language is our inherent right and is central to our cultural and spiritual identities as First Nations. Furthermore, language plays a fundamental part in indigenous peoples' identity by connecting individuals to communities, therefore providing cultural and spiritual context in the daily lives of Indigenous peoples. The designation of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages will shine a light on our collective struggles to preserve and protect indigenous languages in B.C. and across Canada and will hopefully assist in efforts preventing them from being more at risk of extinction."

Regional Chief Terry Teegee, BC Assembly of First Nations

"This is an exciting time as many individuals and groups are creating and building a wave of growth and activity, a "renaissance," in Indigenous languages and culture. In particular, our youth are inspiring all of us with their creativity and use of technology in their drive to find new ways to communicate with others using their ancestral languages."



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Kukpi7 Judy Wilson, Secretary-Treasurer of the UBCIC

“Canada has gone to great lengths to destroy our inherent connection to our Indigenous Languages. With the destruction of our languages we lose a critical connection to our cultures, our world-views and the lived-experiences of our ancestors. Our languages hold the keys to the rebuilding of our Indigenous Nations, to healing the damages of colonialism, and to re-establishing our Indigenous legal orders and jurisdiction to our lands, territories and resources. The UBCIC fully supports UN’s launch of the International Year of Indigenous Languages. States are culpable for the destruction of Indigenous languages around the globe and it is States who must be held accountable for their resurgence.”

Tracey Herbert, CEO, First Peoples’ Cultural Council

“Canada, and in particular British Columbia, is blessed with a rich diversity of Indigenous languages. All of the B.C. languages are severely endangered, and time is of the essence to revitalize them. Despite the challenges these languages face, I am optimistic for their future, thanks to the success we are having creating new speakers through immersion; collaborating with communities to develop language revitalization plans; and using technology to support language documentation, which is curated and controlled by First Nations. The UN International Year for Indigenous Languages is a key opportunity to bring international attention to the issues facing Indigenous languages globally and to showcase the successful strategies that are making the reclamation of our languages possible. We raise our hands to B.C.’s language leaders, language learners and to the Government of B.C., whose commitment to languages has been a game changer and an example of true reconciliation to be celebrated in this important year.”

Scott Fraser, B.C. Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation

“For too long Indigenous language revitalization was neglected. Our government is supporting the important work of the First Peoples’ Cultural Council so that Indigenous communities can deepen connections to language and culture. As a result of new provincial funding, the First Peoples’ Cultural Council has been able to partner with First Nations over the past year to expand community grants, language documentation, community outreach and programs that connect language learners and mentors. This work is key to reconciliation.”

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The First Nations Leadership Council is comprised of the political executives of the BC Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit, and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

For further comment, please contact:

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BACKGROUND

The UN Secretary General stated on May 16, 2011, at the opening of the 10th Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues that an Indigenous language dies every two weeks. Additionally, the report of the 15th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues stated that Indigenous languages form the bedrock of continuity for the survival and well-being of indigenous cultures from one generation to the next. The report further stated there is a growing crisis globally of indigenous language loss and in many cases an urgent, even desperate, need to preserve and revitalize languages. It is estimated that more than half of the world's Indigenous languages will become extinct by 2100.

Indigenous languages in B.C. are an integral part of Indigenous identity and culture and of Canadian heritage. B.C. is home to the greatest diversity of Indigenous languages in Canada (more than 50 per cent of all Indigenous languages in the country), with 34 unique First Nations languages and more than 90 dialects. Unfortunately, all of these languages are critically endangered due to Canada's colonial history of assimilation (including the residential school system), which led to the erosion of Indigenous languages and culture.

As noted by National Geographic, B.C. has been identified as a world Indigenous language "hotspot" where First Nations languages are literally "racing to extinction". According to the First Peoples' Cultural Council's *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages 2018*, only three per cent of Indigenous people in B.C. (fewer than 4,200 people) identified themselves as being fluent in their mother tongue language, a decrease since the 2014 report.

However, despite these statistics, language experts are optimistic about the future of B.C.'s First Nations languages thanks to a growing interest in Indigenous language revitalization among First Nations communities and an increasing number of people, especially younger individuals, who are learning and speaking these languages.

Though just over half (52 percent) of fluent speakers are aged 65 and over, the vast majority (78 percent) of all language learners are young (between the ages of 0 and 24). There are also a considerable number of adult learners, including young adults and Elders. These positive trends are attributed to the growth of community-based language revitalization projects across the province.

While the number of language learners continues to increase across the province, there are still serious threats to language vitality with the ongoing loss of aging fluent speakers. Access to curriculum and other language resources for teaching remains limited for most languages. Though the B.C. government made a significant investment towards language revitalization in the 2018 B.C. Budget, sustained funding is urgently required to document and provide support to ensure that each of B.C.'s unique First Nations languages and dialects are maintained for future generations.

Article 13 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* [the Declaration] calls upon nations to take effective measures to protect the right of Indigenous peoples:

to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Furthermore, knowing and being able to speak one's language is recognized as a human right for Indigenous peoples. Article 25 of the Declaration states:

"Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain their distinctive spiritual relationships with their...lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities

IYIL2019

An International Year is an important cooperation mechanism dedicated to raising awareness of a particular topic or theme of global interest or concern and mobilizing different players for coordinated action around the world.

In 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL2019), based on a recommendation by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

At the time, the Forum said that 40 per cent of the estimated 6,700 languages spoken around the world were in danger of disappearing. The fact that most of these are indigenous languages puts the cultures and knowledge systems to which they belong at risk.

In addition, indigenous peoples are often isolated both politically and socially in the countries they live in, by the geographical location of their communities, their separate histories, cultures, languages and traditions.

And yet, they are not only leaders in protecting the environment, but their languages represent complex systems of knowledge and communication and should be recognized as a strategic national resource for development, peace building and reconciliation.

They also foster and promote unique local cultures, customs and values which have endured for thousands of years. Indigenous languages add to the rich tapestry of global cultural diversity. Without them, the world would be a poorer place.

Celebrating IYIL2019 will help promote and protect indigenous languages and improve the lives of those who speak them. It will contribute to achieving the objectives set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

The celebration is also expected to strengthen and reinforce the many standard-setting tools adopted by the international community which include specific provisions to promote and protect languages.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is acting as the lead UN agency for the International Year.

More information on IYIL2019 can be found at en.iyil2019.org.

A copy of the IYIL2019 Action Plan can be downloaded at en.iyil2019.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/N1804802.pdf