

## **Opening Address**

### **Ben Michel Innu Nation**

I'd like to begin by thanking you all for coming to this workshop, and for the opportunity to speak to you this morning. I believe in speaking frankly, and there are a few things that need to be said.

The first issue I'd like to address is the purpose of this workshop. We are here today to talk about the science, about local knowledge, and about the ways in which some of the commitments that have been made to implement an ecosystem based approach to forest management might be realized.

But this workshop must also be understood in its larger context. Most of you know me, and you know that for nearly 30 years, I've been talking about Innu rights, and about what those rights must come to mean in order for there to be justice for our people. For the last ten or more years, I've been sitting at negotiation tables, representing the Innu Nation in comprehensive land rights negotiations with the Governments of Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador.

There are many issues at those tables, which is why the process takes so very long. Forest management is but one of a number of issues that we are attempting to address in the best way we can. If we are successful in bringing those negotiations to a close, which is something that I hope that we can accomplish in the next few years, our role in this region will radically transform. The Innu Nation will become a government.

As a government we will have the power to determine how our lands will be used and how our resources will be developed. As a government we will have the tools to begin to solve some of our social problems. As a government, we will assume our rightful place as leaders in this region, and we will work with our neighbors to build strong and prosperous future for Labrador.

Let me put it to you this way. It won't be business as usual. Instead of the uncertainties that now attend every new resource development, there will finally be clarity about what will have to be done in order to make it happen. I can tell you today that when Innu are satisfied that our lands, our rights and our way of life are protected, we will be the leaders in bringing new investment and new opportunities to Labrador. And as we prosper, so will you.

But quite frankly, up until recently, I didn't think that for many of our neighbours shared this vision. All too often, Innu found ourselves on different sides of the issues when it came to development. It wasn't too long ago when we were the ones protesting outside.

I often wished that it wasn't that way. As neighbours, we should be finding ways to promote dialogue, and to find ways to work together across our differences. Which is why this Forest Management Plan is so important. To me, it is an unprecedented example of what we can do as people of Labrador when we set out with a common purpose and a collective vision.

We set out, together, as the Government, as the Innu Nation, as the industry, and as members of the public – to create an ecosystem-based forest management plan. We agreed on a common vision – and went on to try to develop a Plan which would protect ecological and cultural integrity, and the productive capacity, resiliency and biodiversity of our forests, while at the same

time advancing economic opportunities for the sustainable development of forest-based industries.

Did we achieve what we set out to do?

I think that to try to answer that question would be premature. Although some people might think we finished that Plan back in the spring, in reality, we are only at the beginning of the process. The plan itself is only a few months old. The Innu nation and the Government are still working out many of the issues that we will need to overcome in order to make forest management a true partnership. And I know that for many people in the public, there are still many unanswered questions and unresolved concerns about how the Plan will unfold.

I acknowledge all of these issues, but I firmly believe that we are heading in the right direction. Even with these obstacles in our way, and we should not lose sight of how far we've come.

As people who live in this place...whether you know it as Nitassinan, or as Labrador...we have both tremendous opportunity and tremendous responsibility. A recent United Nations survey found that only 20% of the world's original forests are still intact, and much of what remains will disappear in the next twenty years.

Our forests are one of the last places on Earth which is still largely intact. The kind of forest that we have here is an increasingly rare commodity, and a commodity that will increase in value over time – not as timber, but as healthy, functioning forest. I think that we can all take pride in the fact that our Plan recognizes this fact.

We've also recognized that despite our many differences, the people of Labrador share many cultural values and practices. For most of us, the land is an important part of our way of life, and many of us return to the land as often as we can to continue to practice the skills and traditions of our ancestors.

This is why we have all put so much priority on protection in this plan. I know of no other forest management plan in Canada – or anywhere else in the world – where millions of hectares – more than ½ of the planning area – are protected within an ecologically and culturally-based protected area network. In most places, they are trying to claw back land which has already been designated for other uses, or they are fighting over what few fragments of intact forest remain. In our Plan, we were able to think big, and put the principles of conservation into practice at a large landscape scale.

But our plan is not just about protection. It is also about opportunities for development. We all spent a lot of time in the public sessions talking about forest development, and about the threats and the opportunities that it presents. We all recognized that while the industry in this area is in its infancy and requires some special consideration, the ongoing export of roundwood to the Island represents lost opportunities for the people of this region, and cannot be allowed to continue. This is what we put in place in the Plan which will make future allocations contingent on having local capacity in place to harvest and process the majority of the wood harvested here.

It is important, however, to recognize that the Plan is intended to ensure that the forest landbase is protected and developed in an ecologically and culturally appropriate and sustainable manner. While the Plan determines the conditions for development, and identifies measures which will

support, promote and facilitate the development of a local wood product industry, the actual development of the industry outside the scope of the Plan.

As people of Labrador, we must all work together to get the most from our resources. Last year, Innu Nation and the Central Labrador Economic Development Board commissioned a study by AGFOR Associates, which identified significant opportunities for growth in the local, value-added wood products sector, but also noted the many challenges that must be met before we can get the wood off the barge and into local mills. Doing it right will require significant investment, careful planning, good marketing, and the right product mix, but we believe that it can be done right, that it will be done, and that the Innu will play a leading role in making it happen.

But our first priority must be to be stewards of our forests, and to protect our land and our way of life. This only can be done by planning ahead, and making choices for the long-term. What makes sense today might turn out to be a disaster for future generations. This is why monitoring is so vitally important – it will help us to determine whether or not the decision we make today are actually helping to achieve the goals that we've set.

I believe that our Plan is a map which can help us find our way to a prosperous and sustainable future. But like most of you know, in the forest, it is a really good idea to pay attention to what is going on around you, and not just to what is on the map.

In nature, everything is change, and as human beings, we must adapt ourselves to what is actually going on in the world around us.

This is where monitoring comes in – it will help us and to continually reorient ourselves to the reality of our situation, instead of pushing ahead blindly, convinced that we know what is really going on around us.

Our Plan proposes an ambitious monitoring program, and we all – whether we represent the interests of the Innu, the government, the industry, or the public – must work together to achieve it. This is our challenge, and it is what brings us together here today.

I'd like to thank you all for being here, and I would especially like to acknowledge that Elders and the many noted scientists who have so generously agreed to share of their time and expertise with us. We will all be richer for it. I look forward to the discussions, and to sharing this time with you today.

Thank you.