

Finding Resilience Through Indigenous Knowledge

AN INTERVIEW WITH
CHRIS GOOGOO

by SAPHO THOMPSON /// EAC Volunteer

A hemlock woolly adelgid infestation on the underside of an eastern hemlock tree.

PHOTO: iStock

Asitu'lisk is an Indigenous learning centre on Sin So'sepe'katik/Bridgewater. I spoke with Chris Googoo about Indigenous environmental knowledge, his experience in building the community of Asitu'lisk and how he approaches his work. Here are some highlights from our conversation.

Tell me about Asitu'lisk and the work you're doing there.

Asitu'lisk is a healing and education centre that is entering its third year of operation. Asitu'lisk is a verb in Mi'kmaq that means "to give you balance," and that is exactly what the old growth forests of our area do.

When we were looking at the property, known at the time as Windhorse Farm, there were these 500, 600-year-old hemlocks there, pre-contact, pre-colonial. So I saw a bit of a narrative to build on; when you go there, it's like you bring people back in time. We can view the trees as our elders who hold valuable knowledge that is important to transfer back to the people.

I'm a [man] of science, and Asitu'lisk is a place to build on this. Etuaptmumk, or two-eyed seeing, shows that the spiritual connection we have to the trees and our land can be physically explained. The trees are our relations, and that affects our bodies, health, mind and even spirit. So, this space is not only educational, but also healing.

When we were making our transition, I looked at it as a place where I can bring children and elders together. We set the intention to empower youth voices, so that once youth absorb the knowledge from our elders, they can express it in many different ways: books and poetry, but also videos, songs and performance.

How do you maintain a good relationship with the Earth?

It's a mental mindset. To look at a piece of wood as not just lumber, but an extension of the natural world. It helps to build a more direct relationship and appreciation for the Earth.

Once, when trying to implement more teachings of the Mi'kmaq language into our centre, one Elder spoke up and said, our language isn't important here. It's the language of the trees and the species that

TAKE ACTION

Consider the ways in which you engage with the environment and how you can incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into this. Learn more from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers in your community and be inclusive in discussions surrounding climate change. For more information about how you can support Asitu'lisk in their work, go to asitulsk.ca

you need to listen to. We like to believe our voices are important, but we need to listen to our relations too. To just sit there to listen and to feel forces us to listen more to our bodies and the world around us.

Tell me about your current project in saving the Hemlock trees.

Last year, we learned about how serious the issue was of the Hemlock woolly adelgid, an invasive species that kills Hemlock trees. I believe the forest called me and I had to answer their call.

We are doing what we can. We have made a \$100,000 commitment to save as many hemlocks as we can with that money. We plan to focus on saving the areas that are important for the land and the ecosystems, as well as areas that have specific spiritual significance.

We also present this process as a gathering of elders and youth. This project is about building community and increasing our knowledge in the forestry sector of climate change. We can educate people about the role they play in carbon sequestration and ecosystems, as well as the relation they have to us as human beings. We involve elders in these discussions, and they provide us with new knowledge and language we've never heard. It's an amazing process.

Sappho Thompson (she/her) is a community development and music major at Acadia University, nature lover and climate activist. She loves playing piano, climbing trees and her dog, Hazel.