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ABORIGINAL MAPLE SYRUP VALUES SUMMARY

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Introduction

This summary is drawn from a larger report that explores the values Aboriginal people associate with the production of maple syrup, and related maple syrup practices. The examination is based on interviews that were conducted by research assistant Melanie Smits throughout the summer of 2013. In all, fifteen interviews with sixteen Aboriginal people were conducted throughout the province of Ontario, and one producer from Quebec. Interviewees included producers and Elders with knowledge of maple syrup practices and beliefs from both First Nations and Metis people.

The collected data was used to develop a model based on the Medicine Wheel. This model (see attached) was initiated by Elder Charles Restoule, and adapted by Annette Chretien, and Brenda Murphy. It reflects the information that was shared, and Indigenous ways of knowing including Indigenous Knowledge (IK). The model also serves as a framework for presenting the information that was shared in the interviews emphasizing the cyclical and relational aspects of maple syrup practices in Aboriginal contexts. Five different aspects were identified using this approach: 1) Openings: Sunrise; 2) Harvesting Practices (Production); 3) Sharing Ways of Knowing (Knowledge Transmission & Mobilization); 4) Closings: Sunset; and 5) All My Relations (Aboriginal Values).

1) Openings: Sunrise

Many of the Aboriginal producers who were interviewed consider maple syrup production and related practices as part of a 'cycle'. This belief means there is no clear differentiation between beginnings and endings per se. For example, for some producers the maple season begins with mid-winter ceremonies aimed at praying for 'new babies' in the spring including maple sap and strawberries. Alternately, Anishnaabe beliefs divide the year into thirteen moons; *Zhiishbak Geezis* is Sugar Moon (in March). Spring, ceremonies, spiritual beliefs, and the new year were all terms that were repeated by many of the Aboriginal producers who were interviewed. Maple

sap and syrup making is seen as a cultural practice, and a cultural marker for the broader cycle of life and death.

Questions dealing specifically with opening ceremonies, first tap, and ‘waking up the earth’ provided detailed information about the values associated with the opening of the maple syrup cycle in some Aboriginal communities. Stories about ceremonies that related directly to the opening of the season were diverse and specific to the culture of each producer and their beliefs. As a group, there was a wide range of practices including more formal traditional ceremonies stemming from a community belief, and more personal casual ceremonies.

2) Harvesting Practices (Production)

A wide range of harvesting practices was described in the interviews, many of them directly related to the size of the bush and the purpose of the production. For example, some producers described community activities that were very personal in nature even down to tapping five trees, and producing only enough syrup for one breakfast. Most were making syrup for family use or within the community. For these producers the technology remained fairly simple, most using cauldrons and outdoor fire either with wood or oil for boiling. Some producers refused to use more recent technologies such as lines/tubes, vacuums and reverse osmosis because they felt these harvesting practices were harmful to the trees. And, some actually believed that the medicinal values of the sap and syrup would be harmed by using these technologies.

A number of experimental harvesting practices were also revealed. For example, some producers tap different types of trees such as black maple to explore the differences in quantity and quality between species. One commercial producer combines state of the art harvesting technologies such as lines and vacuum with a few buckets and spigots that serve as a monitor to assess and gauge when to stop collecting sap for that year. When the sap gets milky in the buckets he knows it is time to stop harvesting the sap. In his opinion, because the lines are a closed system, it runs the risk of drying out the trees.

3) Sharing Ways of Knowing (Knowledge Transmission & Mobilization)

With regards to how and when the producers learned how to make maple syrup, a number of different experiences and strategies were recounted. Some recalled seeing maple syrup being made and/or participating in the activities as children. Many of the producers we interviewed remembered collecting sap or making syrup as children, some with great grandparents, other producers with grandparents. Notably, at that time it was for ceremonial uses not for commercial production.

Sharing knowledge within and between families was very common in our interviews. What was interesting was the belief that the trees were also ‘social beings’ who constituted and had families of their own. One producer referred to them as having uncles and aunties and even their own nations. In sharing their sap, the trees were visiting and teaching the communities.

4) Sunset: Closings

Little information was provided about the end of the season. Given that maple syrup production is seen as a cycle, many of the activities connected to closing the season are also related to beginning the next season. It was mentioned that maple practices are about values, and the whole

process is like the chicken or the egg. Which one comes first? More information about the closing of the season is currently being pursued.

5) Aboriginal Values: All My Relations

Almost all the producers who were interviewed considered maple sap and syrup to have medicinal qualities and uses. Because it is considered to be ‘medicine’ as well as food there is a healing that accompanies the process of making it, using it, and sharing it. One of the common associations with drinking sap water was made with the value of sap to women, especially pregnant women. Many of the producers harvested the sap specifically for this purpose.

One producer defined spiritual, environmental, cultural and ceremonial values as all-encompassing. In his opinion, all of these values, beliefs, and ways of knowing were part of a lived experience. We are embedded in nature, and a holistic, experiential way of being in the world was the best way he could find to describe his values.

