Since time immemorial

by **Valoree S. Gagnon, Bizhikiins Dylan Jennings, Michael Waasegiizhig Price,** and **Evelyn H. Ravindran**

Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin (the Great Lakes) is a physically dynamic land and water system and a diversely complex political landscape. But what do we really know about the region's diversity? Beyond recognition of two countries, eight states and one province, 163 Indigenous nations, and hundreds of municipalities, what understandings do we have about Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin?

For 2021, IAGLR conference organizers embraced their responsibilities to share more about Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin and the rich and diverse history of place, people, and life. These intentions are reflected both in the 2021 conference theme, *Bridging: Knowledges • Seven Generations • Land-to-Lake*, and in our acknowledgement statement in the box at right. In this article, we explain the significance of acknowledgement and provide an Indigenous understanding of sovereign nations and the First Treaty of Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin. We also illustrate relevance for today's governance and stewardship and conclude with thoughts on knowledge and practice for seven generations.

IAGLR 2021 Acknowledgement

IAGLR 2021 planners acknowledge that Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin (the Great Lakes) bioregion is the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands and waters of numerous Indigenous nations. We acknowledge Indigenous Peoples as the region's original caretakers and knowledge keepers, and recognize their contributions to the stewardship and governance of the world's largest system of freshwater. We extend our gratitude to members and staff of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority, Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, and the 1854 Treaty Authority for their commitment to the planning and organization of the 2021 conference. Such partnerships are critical to bridging diverse knowledges, seven generations care, and sustaining land-to-lake relations in Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin. Finally, we remember that the teachings and practices we carry today were built and shared by many who came before us, including our human ancestors and many relatives with fins, wings, legs, and roots.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement is more than a collection of articulated words; it is a mindset that provides a lens into the journey of relearning. Acknowledgement conveys personal understanding of the obligations to Indigenous place, people, and life. The IAGLR 2021 statement acknowledges that U.S. and Canadian citizens share lands, waters, and responsibilities with Indigenous Nations who have cared for Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin since time immemorial, practicing stewardship principles informed by trusted Indigenous Knowledge Systems passed from one generation to the next, and through mutual respect and reciprocity for balanced relationships with living beings of many kinds. These are not mystical knowledge systems and practices—we use Traditional Knowledge Systems and approaches alongside science tools and approaches to work in partnership with other governments every day. Acknowledging the sources of knowledge is common practice, and for Indigenous Peoples, our teachings are gained from relationships, observations, and interactions with our non-human relatives. Plant beings, for example, are known as some of our wisest teachers on Earth.

Indigenous sovereignty and the First Treaty

Sovereignty is often described in terms of authority and power. Indigenous Nations' sovereignty centers on autonomy, often articulated as self-determination and self-governance. It is also about collective strength in sustaining diplomacy with other sovereigns.

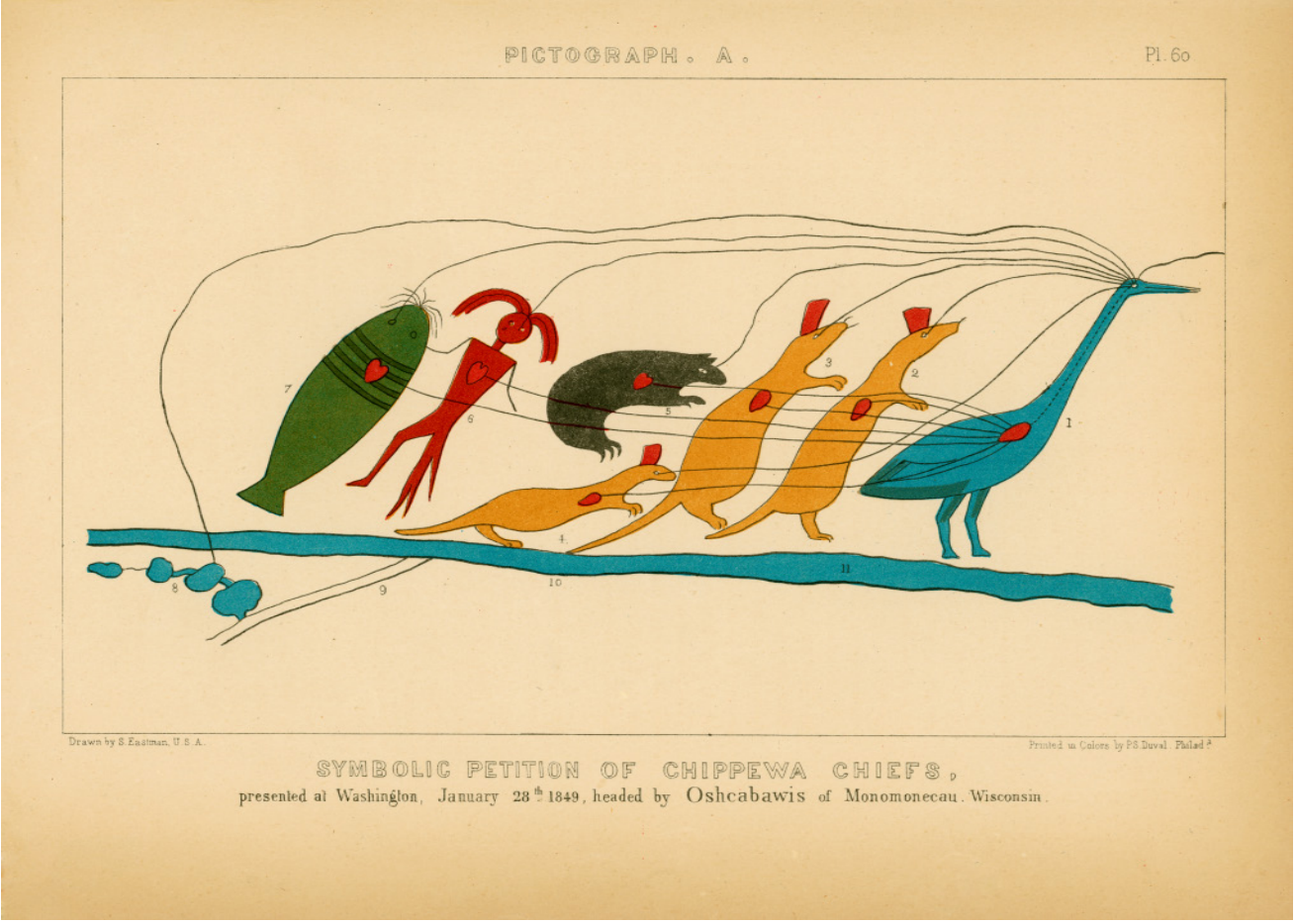
Indigenous agreements between Nations were common practice prior to the establishment of the U.S. and Canada. In Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin, the Haudenosaunee Six Nations Confederacy includes Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Nations; and the Anishinaabeg Three Fires Confederacy includes Ojibwa, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples.

Indigenous Nations remain rights holders, affirmed by a series of 18th- and 19th-century treaties negotiated with federal governments. In exchange for millions of acres of ceded territory, Indigenous Peoples reserved existing rights to hunt, fish, and gather, and secured "usual privileges of occupancy" throughout the land cession. Indigenous sovereignty is inherent—sovereignty was not granted to Indigenous Nations by the U.S. or Canada. In fact, these governments recognized the sovereignty of these Indigenous Nations, as treaties can only be established between sovereigns.

Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin is and has always been governed by law. The foundation for sovereignty is rooted in the First Treaty, also called Sacred Law, Original Instructions, and the Great Laws of Nature. The First Treaty is the long-standing agreement between the Creator and all orders of creation that all beings are relatives of one another, will be interdependent upon one another, and honor, respect, and care for each other.

These relationships and obligations are timeless across generations. They are also depicted in the pictograph on the next page, the Symbolic Petition of Chippewa Chiefs. In 1849, a Chippewa delegation journeyed to Washington with

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this pictograph sketched on birch bark to petition Congress and the president to protect their residence in Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin. The figures symbolize the clan memberships of the Chippewa delegation, with all of their hearts and minds connected while also being connected to the region's lakes. Soon after, the 1854 Treaty With the Chippewa established reservations as permanent homelands throughout the region.

As represented in the pictograph, human nations are one sovereign among many sovereigns—fish nations, plants and tree nations, and many other wildlife beings are sovereigns as well. Being sovereign requires diplomacy between nations, and that is Sacred Law, that nations acknowledge and have respect for one another's autonomy.

Seven generations

Significantly, U.S. treaties and the Constitution are recognized as "supreme Law of the Land," and as such, take priority over all other laws (Article VI, Clause 2). For several decades, U.S. statutes and resolutions have reaffirmed treaty law. We underscore the following: U.S. citizens greatly value constitutional rights after more than 230 years, and similarly, Indigenous Nations value treaty rights as supreme law.

Revitalizing shared Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin governance and stewardship has been the work of Indigenous Peoples. Today, it is an ongoing commitment to ensure that Indigenous rights and responsibilities are protected for seven generations to come, and simultaneously, to honor the past seven generations, including our treaty makers.

To learn more about Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin places, peoples, and life, visit the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission Public Information Office and the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Natural Resource Department Knowledge Center.

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Kitche Manitou then made The Great Laws of Nature for the well-being and harmony of all things and all creatures. The Great Laws govern the place and movement of sun, moon, Earth and stars; govern the powers of wind, water, fire, and rock; govern the rhythm and continuity of life, birth, growth, and decay. All things live and work by these laws.

Excerpted from "The Creation Story of Kitche Manitou (The Great Spirit) of the Ojibwe." Adapted from Basil Johnston's Ojibway Heritage: The ceremonies, rituals, songs, dances, prayers and legends of the Ojibway. *McClelland and Stewart 1976, reprinted 1998; Toronto.*