

MESSAGE FROM THE YXE CREE SPEAKERS SOCIETY

Thank you to everyone who attended the 2023 Keep Our Language Alive Conference, hosted at Dakota Dunes Resort, located on traditional Whitecap Dakota Unceded Territory.

The Conference was part of pimācihitātān nēhiyawēwin, a two-year Indigenous language project to develop and retain the Plains Cree Language in our communities, funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage.

The project began with an exercise to consult with fluent Plains Cree Language speakers to create an inventory of research, projects, reports, conferences, and lessons learned that currently exist when it comes to retaining the Plains Cree Language. A survey was also conducted with Indigenous peoples aged 18-30 who are interested in learning the Plains Cree Language and/or have taken Cree classes in the past. These individuals were asked what supports they require to help them continue to develop their own Cree Language practice.

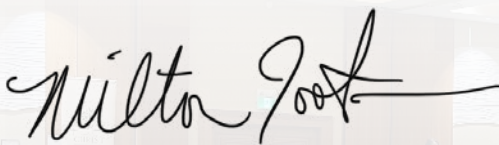
The Keep Our Language Conference was held to bring together anyone interested in developing and retaining the Plains Cree Language in our communities. With almost 200 participants, the conference was a great success, and we are looking forward to hosting a second conference in 2024.

This report provides a summary of what was learned from the conference speakers, as well as what we learned from those who participated. This feedback showed us there is a lot of interest in the work we are doing, and in fact, people see it as vital to our success as Indigenous People. In addition to the conference survey, we heard from numerous participants about the dire situation that exists in some communities when it comes to language retention, and the lack of leadership when it comes to addressing this challenge. There is a clear desire for having Cree language outcomes connecting to provincial curriculum and for the involvement of youth as we move forward.

We are now looking forward to hosting a second conference in 2024, part of which could focus on providing participants with mentorship to set up language networks, conduct their own research and perhaps even hold a language conference in their own communities so that more people can become engaged in this movement.

Thank you to everyone who attended the conference, and to the organizations who sponsored the conference. We are so grateful for your support and for helping us to Keep Our Language Alive!

ēkosi pitamā,



Milton Tootoosis

THE 2023 CONFERENCE AGENDA

The conference began with a pipe ceremony and opening remarks and included four plenary sessions: “The Spirit of the Language” featuring: Mary Lee, Ira Swindler, Bernie Makokis and Ralph Morin, and nēhiyawak: askiy, nēhiyawēwin êkwa tânitê ê-kê-ohci-ohctohtê The Saskatchewan Cree: The Land, the Language, and the History featuring: Dr. Belinda Daniels, Using Plains Indian Sign Language as an Innovation Tool with Dr. Lanny Real Bird, and Indigenous Language Teacher Education Programming with Dr. Kevin Lewis.

Breakout Sessions included:

- **nēhiyawak Language Experience with Dr. Belinda kakiyosēw Daniels** focused on the land-based camp which she created in 2003. The camp, where attendees learn and practice speaking the language, takes place on various First Nations communities across Saskatchewan.
- **Nēhiyâwiwin Language and Culture Program with Pete Chief Jr.** provided a bilingual learning strategy that focuses on creating a language and culture-rich classroom environment for students to learn conversational Cree in the “Y” dialect. Cultural activities are an important part of the program.
- **Reviving Plains Indian Sign Language with Floyd Favel** centered on the importance of preserving Plains Indian Sign Language and its value as a learning tool that is different from conventional methods now being taught in universities and in schools.
- **sôskwâc itôtamok: nēhiyawêk/Just do it: Speak Cree with Dorothy Thunder** showcased how as a Plains Cree first language speaker she makes the learning experience rewarding and enjoyable in her role as a language professor at the University of Alberta.
- **awasisak ka nēhiyaw kiskinahamasocik: When Children Learn the Cree Language with Norine Tourangeau** focused on methodologies used in an Indigenous language classroom including relationship building and teaching strategies to support students and their complex needs.
- **Cree Language Preservation & Revitalization with Falynn Baptiste** shared Falynn's journey as a Cree language educator, singer/songwriter and advocate for Cree language preservation and revitalization.
- **nēhiyawēwin awâsi-masinahikanis: A Plains Cree Little Book for Children with AJ Felix & Pat Dieter** follows suggested content from the Saskatchewan Curriculum Guide for Kindergarten to Grade 12 on Aboriginal languages. The book provides learners with an ability to understand basic words, rules, and phrases in the Plains Cree language and allows them to be able to make themselves understood by Plains Cree speakers.
- **Using Innovation to Keep Our Language Alive with Jessica McNaughton** discussed how we can use innovative tools to keep our language alive, through the use of her app memoryKPR.
- **kâniyâsihk Culture Camps with Dr. Kevin Lewis** provided information on the kâniyâsihk Culture Camps that have been taking place at Ministikwan Lake Cree Nation for the past two decades. The camps have evolved from fall culture camps where participants take part in fishing and hide tanning to all season camps for anyone who wants to learn nehiyo (Cree) culture. The camps include land-based learning that involves connecting with Elders, knowledge keepers, land keepers, medicine keepers, and berry pickers in their community.



Dwayne Lasas presented a session entitled: Balance, Harmony & Cree

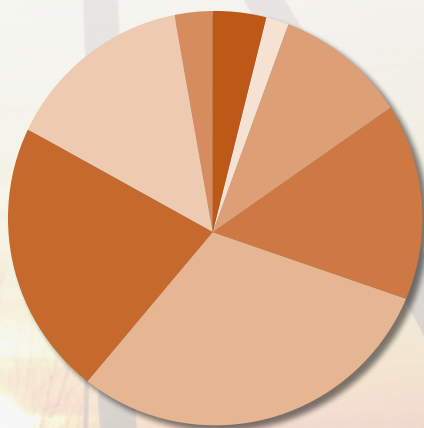
- **Balance, Harmony & Cree with Dwayne Lasas** focused on Language learning using effective tools and techniques such as empowering nations and showing students how our ways of life and Language, is connected to everything around us and how mathematics, music, universal connection, and a host of other unique teachings can be used within the Nēhīyaw Language.
- **Teaching Plains Indian Sign Language with Dr. Lanny Real Bird** provided the basics in using traditional Plains Indian Sign Language to teach and learn the Plains Cree language.



Ralph Morin, Bernie Makokis, Ira Swindler with Elder Mary Lee

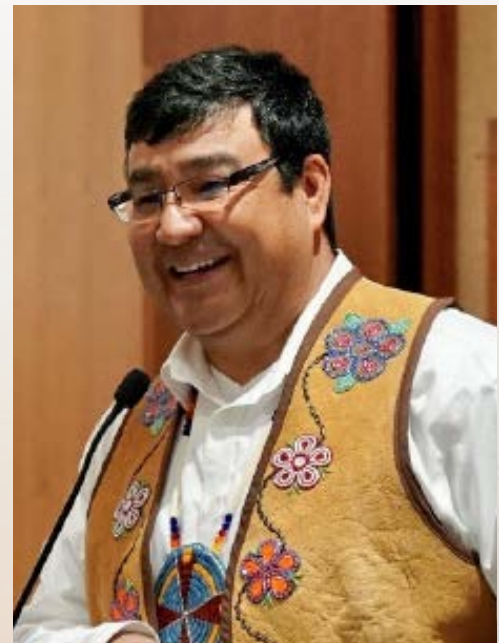
CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

The conference attracted 197 people of all ages, and 115 people completed our survey evaluation. Of those who completed the survey, ages ranged from over 80 years (3%) to 15-24 years (4%). Most participants (about 30%) were aged 50-69 with the next largest age group being 60-69 years at 21.9%.



Age of Conference Participants

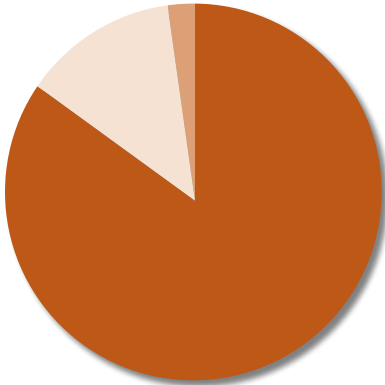
15-24	5 or 4%
25-30	2 or 1.7%
31-39	11 or 9.6%
40-49	17 or 14.9%
50-59	35 or 30.7%
60-69	25 or 21.9%
70-79	16 or 14.0%
80+	3 or 2.6%



Dr. Kevin Lewis speaking to conference participants about kâniyâsihk Culture Camps

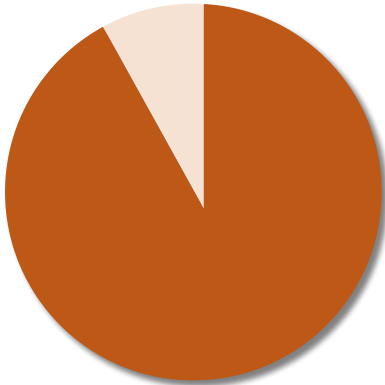
CONFERENCE VALUE

Almost 85% of the conference participants said the conference was either “very valuable” or “valuable” in advancing their knowledge of how we can develop and retain the Plains Cree Language in our communities. Another 13% said it was “somewhat valuable”. The conference speakers were also ranked highly with 92% of participants rating the knowledge and experience of the speakers as “very knowledgeable” or “knowledgeable.”



Value of Conference

- 85% Very valuable or valuable
- 13% Somewhat valuable
- 2% Other response



Knowledge & Experience of Conference Speakers

- 92% Very knowledgeable or knowledgeable
- 8% Other response



Nate Polsfut, Morris Cook, Calinda Duquette & Falynn Baptiste participating in sôskwâc itôtamok: nêhiyawêk/Just do it: Speak Cree with Dorothy Thunder

AWARENESS OF THE CONFERENCE

Most participants (62%) reported they heard about the conference from a friend or associate, and another 32% saw the conference on Facebook. Some, but very few, also learned about it on LinkedIn, MBC Radio and Rawlco Radio.

CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

Participants were asked what was the most interesting or most useful thing they learned at the conference. The most mentioned topics have been collated into the themes below:

- New and innovative ways to teach the Plains Cree Language (Plains Indian Sign Language, traditional hand signals, technologies like apps, games, etc., and using humour in teaching)
- Cree Language Camps
- Cree Language history/cultural and ceremonial teachings from Elders
- The importance of retaining the Cree language – brings us together/connects us (unity), connection between language and trauma, key to prosperity, language is medicine and part of the circle of life.



Language book display by Turning the Tide Bookstore. Books from Turning the Tide were also handed out as door prizes.

USING THE CONFERENCE INFORMATION IN THE FUTURE

Participants were asked how they will use the information shared at the conference to help develop and retain the Plains Cree Language in their community. The responses are summarized into the following points:

- **Use of resources presented:**
 - Will use resources to develop curriculum and teach our children and youth (primary, elementary, and high school students) the Cree language - games, poems, puppets, songs and art, sign language, smartboard, kahoot, hands on methods and activities, flashcards, new technologies.
- **Will strengthen our own language app.**
 - Hold Cree Language Camps and Youth Cultural Camps in our community.
- **Sharing of information learned:**
 - Will share the history of our Cree language with others.
 - Will present the conference modules at schools and teacher meetings in the area.

- Will teach and share with my community.
- Will encourage others (youth, etc.) to learn the language.
- Will bring more awareness to our communities and encourage everyone to participate.
- Teach the spirit and culture/history of the language.
- Honour it in prayer and ceremony.

• **Planning:**

- Would like to develop a strategic plan to implement in stages.
 - Conduct a community language assessment.
 - Set up learning stations and create mini language societies based on location so communities can help each other.
 - Implement more land-based activities to learn Cree, consider hosting similar conferences and/or workshops in our communities.
 - Create mother/child groups and other meaningful, authentic, and relaxed methods of teaching.
 - Use modern technology, visual, emotion, listening, hearing and thinking in our language.
 - Include Elders more.
 - Create Cree speaking leaders who work with a group of students.
- Many participants said they would personally try to speak Cree more often at home and to our children, and in our classrooms (language should be used everywhere, not only in our classrooms), and get more involved in working to revitalize the Cree language in their community, but also in urban areas.



Milton Tootosis and grandson Silas Lerat participating in Teaching Plains Indian Sign Language with Dr. Lanny Real Bird

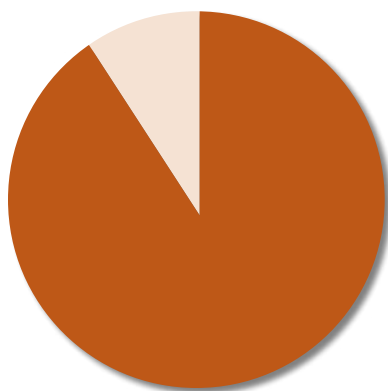
SUGGESTED FUTURE CONFERENCE TOPICS

Participants said if a second Cree Language Conference were to be held, they would like to see the following information presented:

- More of what was included in the 2023 conference (hands-on learning, methods for classroom teaching, materials, and cultural teaching methods being used to teach language, history of the Cree language, recognize past language trail blazers Abel Charles & Clarence Iron).
- Focus on how young learners can better learn and retain the language and become more involved in the development of educational tools.
- Authentic methods of teaching Cree (land-based, ceremonies, hand games, blanket exercise, storytelling presenters, songs, drama, plays, incorporate physical, mental, spiritual, emotional & spiritual growth).
- Sessions that teach participants how to say various Cree words (videos of young people speaking Cree and of our Elders).
- Include other languages and dialects (Plains Cree, Woodland Cree, Nakoda).
- Conference sessions targeted at youth (elementary & high school).
- Practical learning like how to prepare a lesson plan and outcomes, how to teach conversational Cree.
- Total Physical Response training.
- Creating an assessment strategy and models on how to set up in the community.
- How to create a strategic plan for a school and create a fluent Cree lesson plan.
- Include the Cree creation story and syllabics.
- Share the plethora of books available for Cree teachers.
- How to bring traditional practices into the western perspective.

PLANNING FOR A FUTURE LANGUAGE CONFERENCE

All participants said they would attend or may attend a second Cree Language conference if one were to be held; 91% of those said yes, and 9% said they may attend.



Desire to Attend Second Conference

- 91% Yes
- 9% Maybe

In terms of logistics, 55% of participants said they would prefer a second conference to be held during the week, on weekdays only. 15% prefer a weekend conference and the remainder said a mix of a weekday/weekend. A comment was made that more teachers would be able to attend if the conference were held on a weekend.

Other suggestions for a future conference included:

- Would like to hear more Cree language spoken in the presentations.
- Have more Elders involved to share.
- More networking with our Cree people.
- Expand the conference from two to three days.
- Have singing and entertainment in the evening.
- Provide funding to attend the conference.
- Invite more Cree language teachers to the conference.
- Provide gift bags, a take-away Language Information Kit.

MEDIA INTEREST IN THE CONFERENCE

'Just listen!' Cree speakers weigh in on revitalizing language

The following article was written by Rawlco Radio.

Specialists in Cree are weighing in on ways to revitalize the language in Saskatchewan.

Milton Tootoosis, a member of Poundmaker Cree Nation and founder of the YXE Cree Speakers Society, said the province's communities are already in a crisis when it comes to a lack of speakers of the Cree language.

According to a presentation from Dr. Manley A. Begay Jr. from Northern Arizona University, 99 percent of Indigenous languages in North America are in danger of extinction, and it is estimated that an Indigenous language disappears every two weeks.

"I would say that even some Cree communities in the Treaty 4 territory, (for) example, are already facing a crisis where there are just a small handful of Cree speakers or fluent Cree speakers left in those communities," Tootoosis explained.

Still, Tootoosis said the language spoken by the widest number of Indigenous people is the Cree language. There are five dialects of that language in Saskatchewan alone, he explained, and in northern Saskatchewan retention rates for the Cree language are higher than in southern areas.

The Cree Language Conference took place in Saskatoon last week, hosted by the YXE Cree Speakers Society, with the goal of bringing awareness to the decline in Cree language knowledge and speakers.

Tootoosis, the main organizer of the event, said the conversation around keeping the language alive was long overdue, and the conference focused specifically on the Plains Cree or "Y" dialect.

"The response was really really positive," he said, adding different methods of learning and retaining the language were discussed.

Some methods that are used to immerse individuals in the Cree language are cultural camps and the Plains Indian Sign Language System, Tootoosis explained. He said there are also methods used by scholars and academics at universities to teach the language through linguistic systems.

But learning the Cree language in a conversational way is more than just memorizing a linguistic component, he said.

“Our language cannot be taught in a classroom. It is what we’re hearing time and time again,” he said, adding time in the classroom does not provide enough hours to create enough fluency in the language.

Tootoosis’ advice for those looking to learn the Cree language was to just listen to Cree speakers.

“When you get around Cree speakers, just listen without interjecting,” he said, adding that books written in the language are also an effective way of learning.

“You have to immerse yourself in the language. It can’t be just a four- or five-day summer camp. You have to get around the speakers and to get around the ceremonies and just listen,” he said, adding that students should start with basic, practical words that can be used daily.

He noted that if speakers incorporate the Plains Indian Sign Language System, they can memorize the words faster.

Dr. Belinda Daniels, an assistant professor for Indigenous education at the University of Victoria and keynote speaker at the conference, also said the methods of teaching the Cree language might not work in a classroom. She said an important part of learning Cree is connecting with the land.

“It’s community work. It’s believing the language is alive. The spirit is very sacred, and ceremony needs to happen in order for the language spirit to come into the minds and hearts of people,” she said.

Tootoosis said in order to help the language survive and thrive, there needs to be more investment in the culture and in the language, as well as more resources to assist those learning it.



Belinda Daniels, assistant professor of Indigenous education at the University of Victoria, and Milton Tootoosis, founder of the YXE Cree Speakers Society, at the Cree Language Conference. (Mia Holowaychuk/650 CKOM)

