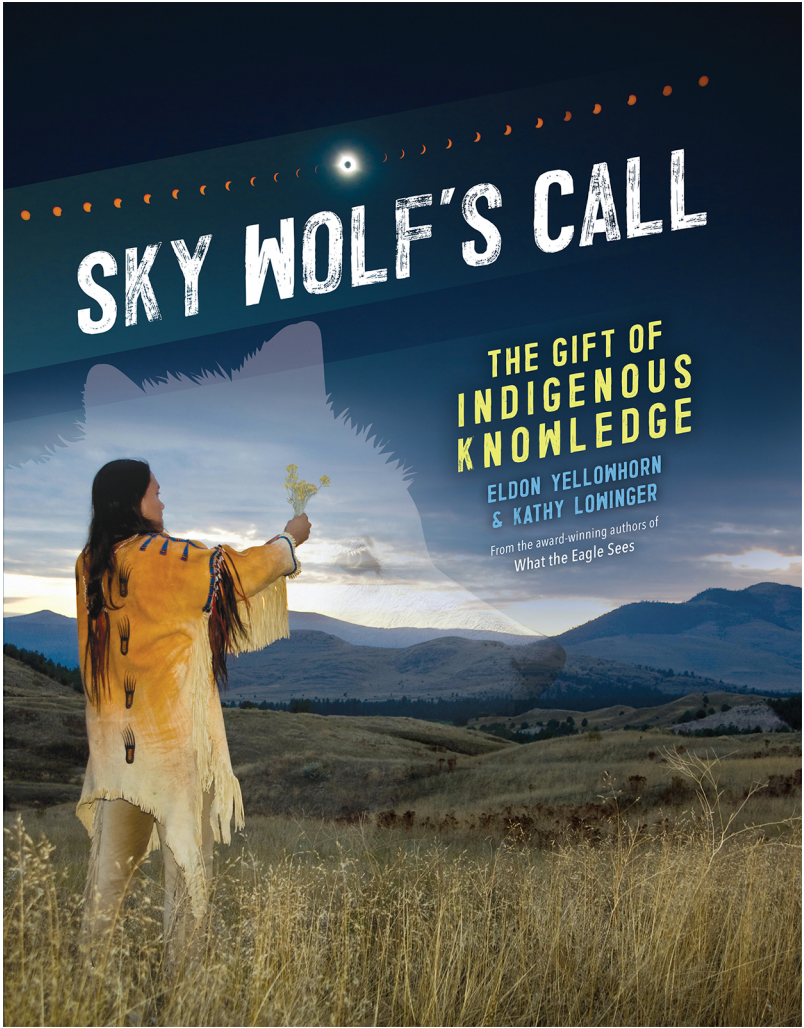




SKY WOLF'S CALL

THE GIFT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

ELDON YELLOWHORN & KATHY LOWINGER



To Peter Kalman, and in memory of Susan Juhasz and Vecsei Mari —KL

To Eva, and all my relations —EY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Indigenous people are the subjects of this book. Although everyone has a name for their own culture, we use this phrase to be inclusive. In the past, writers used names such as Indian, Native, First Nations, and Aboriginal. Canadian law still uses the term “Indian” in the Indian Act, so we have left this name intact. “Canada” and “the United States” and the current names of towns and rivers overshadow the borders, place names, and geography that Indigenous people once knew. Although they are recent we use modern maps here to help you locate the places we describe.

You’ll see we use the terms “nation”, “band”, and “tribe.” Here’s what they mean. Nation refers to a group of people who are identified with a particular territory. A band is a small, self-governing group that bases its membership on family connections. In Canada a band has a legal meaning as a political unit occupying an “Indian reserve,” though we now call them First Nations. Tribe describes a collection of bands connected by kinship, politics, and language. The United States has a legal definition for a political unit associated with an “Indian reservation.”

Blackfoot and Blackfeet are political names. We call ourselves *Niitsitapi* and our language is *Niitsi’poyisin*, but Canadians know us and our language by the name “Blackfoot.” “Blackfeet” is the name used in Montana. Today Blackfoot, which comes from the word *siksika* (it means “black foot”), is a language in danger of falling silent, but it is our mother tongue whether we are called Blackfoot or Blackfeet.

Sky Wolf's Call

The Gift of Indigenous Knowledge





Heiltsuk First Nation students from the Bella Bella Community School SEAS program explore the estuary of a nearby salmon stream.

THE SKY WOLF'S CALL:

The Gift of Indigenous Knowledge

The United States recognizes 573 tribes, and Canada shares the land with about 600 First Nations. We practice diverse cultures, and we speak many languages.

Indigenous knowledge comes from years of practices, experiences, and ideas gathered by people who have a long history with the natural world. Indigenous knowledge comes from many distinct communities, but it braids together these ideas:

Everything is connected.

The world is a gift.

The sacred is a vital part of knowing.

We are always learning.

How do these ideas, or principles, turn into action?



Tree of Life, by Donald Chrétien (Anishinaabe), acrylic on canvas

Everything Is Connected

Humankind has not woven the web of life.
We are but one thread within it.
Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.
All things are bound together.
All things connect.

—Chief Seattle, Suquamish and Duwamish
Chief, Washington State, 1786-1866



Everything is connected: Plants grow from the soil and support all creatures whether they are two-legged or four-legged, or have wings or crawl on the ground. They are all braided together into the web of life.

Let's follow one of countless threads of connection—the one that joins pecans and squirrels. Squirrels love pecans, even though they have hard shells. Pecans are rich in protein, fat, and vitamins and are perfect winter food for hungry squirrels. In some years, pecan trees produce lots of nuts, and in other years, very few. If a squirrel spends a lot of time on a tree branch gnawing through the pecan shell, it is easy prey for a hawk. Storing pecans softens the shells, and the squirrel can safely feed on them in its nest.

The pecans help squirrels, and by storing the nuts, squirrels help pecan trees. If every pecan were to begin a new tree, they would crowd each other and none would survive. Those pecans left on the forest floor after squirrels have gathered what they need will have plenty of room to start healthy new trees that will produce more pecans. By following this one thread, we can see that the well-being of the trees, the forest, and the squirrels are intertwined.



This World Is a Great Gift

The Potawatomi people, who live on the Great Plains, the upper Mississippi River, and the Western Great Lakes, call the land *emingoyak*, which means “that which has been given us” in their language. Indigenous knowledge teaches us that the world is a gift.

You know how to act when someone gives you a gift. You say, “Thank you.” You take special care of it. And the time comes for you to give a gift in return. That is how we should act when we receive the earth’s gifts: with thanks, with care, and by giving back. This is the belief that preserves the Menominee Forest.



Potawatomi Gathering is hosted each year by one of the nine bands of Potawatomi, providing an opportunity for members of all bands to come together and celebrate their Potawatomi heritage.

The lands of the Menominee Nation once covered 4 million hectares (10 million acres) in what is Wisconsin and Upper Michigan today. Now the people live on the 95,100-hectare (235,000-acre) Menominee Reservation in northeastern Wisconsin. At the heart of the reservation is a forest. In 1854, the Menominee bought a small sawmill to cut and process lumber.

The Menominee take good care of the forest. They allow some trees to reach full maturity before they are cut down for the sawmill. Other trees are never cut down so that thriving stands of old-growth white pine and sugar maple remain. Some white pine stands are more than two centuries old, and the hemlocks are even older. The

Menominee make sure that the forest is diverse. At least thirty different kinds of trees, including white pine, hemlock, Canada yew, sugar maple, aspen, oak, and hickory, grow there. And they never chop down more trees than necessary, so future generations will always have a supply of timber.

By taking care of the trees, the Menominee are taking care of the animals and the water, too. Dozens of species of plants and animals, including bears, otters, and birds, thrive in their forest home.

The result: The forest gives the Menominee income from the sawmill, and with the Menominee taking care of the forest, there are more trees now than when the sawmill started operating. And the forest will continue to flourish so that the next seven generations will also benefit.

The Importance of the Sacred

When Blackfoot speakers say *naato*, it means “sacred” or “holy.” We use words like “spiritual” or “sacred” to express our belief that there is a power greater than ourselves.

THE SEVENTH GENERATION PRINCIPLE

The Seventh Generation Principle means thinking about how our actions will affect future generations.



Loggers use sustainable harvesting techniques to preserve the forest. Menominee Tribal Enterprises employs careful precision to sustainably harvest the Menominee Forest.

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Cliff Palace, located in Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, was built by ancient Pueblo people, and is the largest cliff dwelling in North America.

The sacred is braided into every kind of Indigenous knowledge, even our homes. For example, the doors to our tipis must always face east to greet the rising sun with our prayers. However, there is a practical reason for this, too, since our tipis protect us from the prevailing westerly winds.

In the Southwest, Pueblo engineers, architects, and craftspeople built four- and five-story dwellings—the first apartments in the world—where thousands of people lived. They also built circular, underground ceremonial rooms called kivas for their religious ceremonies. The buildings were so well constructed that a thousand years later, people in Taos Pueblo still live in them.

People climbed between the floors of their homes and in and out of kivas using rope and wood ladders. The ladders were made of pine and spruce brought from hundreds of miles away. In the desert country of the Southwest, wood was hard to come by. People had to travel great distances to cut it. Then they had to haul it home. Sometimes they might save themselves the work by trading for wood.

They did so because the ladders had spiritual meaning. Their oral tradition told them that humans first emerged from the underworld to this one by climbing a reed or notched piece of wood. When Pueblo people climbed the ladders from one floor to the next, they were connecting with the sacred way their ancient ancestors climbed out of the earth.

Blackfoot tipis in Alberta



We Are Always Learning

Indigenous knowledge is always growing and adapting. We have a long history of adopting new ideas and “repurposing” them. The Mi’kmaq call this practice *Etuapmumk*, or “two-eyed seeing.”

Adapting Ideas

Chocolate is a delicious example of how ideas were adopted and adapted.

Cacao trees come from the Amazon and Orinoco river basins in South America. People gathered the cacao pods, ate the sweet pulp, and threw away the seeds or beans. Around five thousand years ago people in the Yucatán Peninsula imported the trees. They removed the *kakawa* (cacao) beans, dried them in the sun, and then they roasted them. Finally they ground the beans into a dark paste that they formed into patties. It tasted bitter, so they mixed it with honey or vanilla or chili peppers. The result? A drink they loved. They especially liked froth and would stand on something high while pouring it to make as much froth as possible.

The taste for chocolate quickly spread north along trade routes. By one thousand years ago, 4,800 kilometers (3,000 miles) north of the nearest chocolate plantation, people in the pueblos of Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon were enjoying chocolate.

Repurposing Ideas

Indigenous knowledge is fluid—we know how to repurpose ideas when our needs change. In the far north, for centuries Inuit used a *qulliq*, which is a type of oil lamp made of soapstone and an arctic cotton and moss wick fueled by animal oil. A lit *qulliq* can heat a home, dry clothes, and cook food. Inuit no longer rely on the *qulliq* for those purposes, but they have not forgotten them. Now the *qulliq* is used as a teaching tool and as part of ceremonies where it is a sacred symbol of Inuit identity.



This 15th- or 16th-century Aztec statue of a man carrying a cacao pod is made of volcanic stone with traces of red pigment.



Inuit woman lights a *qulliq* to greet visitors to the High Arctic. The *qulliq* (Inuit lamp) symbolizes Inuit women's strength, care, and love. The *qulliq* represent the light and warmth provided at the hearth. The lamp is made for a woman as a gift from her husband. Then, as the owner, she becomes the flame keeper.



Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall

ELDERS AND KNOWLEDGE KEEPERS

The term “Elder” doesn’t necessarily mean that a person is old. It is given to an individual by their community because of the spiritual and cultural knowledge they hold.

Knowledge Keepers are people who have been taught by an Elder or a senior Knowledge Keeper within their community. This person holds and cares for traditional teachings, and shares their knowledge with others when the time is right.

Etuapmumk, Two-Eyed Seeing

Etuapmumk means “two-eyed seeing” in the Mi’kmaq language. One eye sees with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and the other eye sees a scientific worldview. *Etuapmumk* means learning to use both eyes together for the benefit of all.

Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall describes the practice: “When we braid Indigenous science with Western science, we acknowledge that both ways of knowing are legitimate forms of knowledge . . . The more something is shared, the greater becomes its value.”

Just one example: The Arctic will be the first place to experience the full impact of climate change. Inuit who live there have documented how sea ice conditions have changed. They observe how animals, birds, and fish have altered their migration patterns. They share this valuable knowledge with research scientists to show how the warmer conditions directly affect their lives.

Tatigat, an Inuk, cracks his whip to encourage his dog team over the ice near Igloodlik, Nunavut.



SKY WOLF'S CALL

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Indigenous knowledge is held in our stories, the teachings of our Elders and Knowledge Keepers, our practices, and our own experiences and observations. That's why you'll find examples of them all in this book.

Our stories are funny, serious, scary, and entertaining so that we will remember them.

On the prairies many of our stories are about a kindly cultural hero called Naapi, who is sometimes a troublemaker, a trickster, or foolish. He made a new world for us, but our early ancestors didn't always heed his vital lessons. How did they learn to live in the world? When Naapi was not around, a pack of wolves came down from the Sky Country. Their gift of knowledge taught us how to live together on the earth, so we have named our book after them. This is their story.

STORIES

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Every nation has its own stories and the right to use them. They can only be reproduced with permission from that nation. The traditional stories you find here are from my Piikani heritage.

Dressed in traditional clothing, three Blackfoot girls play hand drums and sing handed-down songs in Browning, Montana.







Long ago the sky and the earth were the same place. Humans and Star People lived next to each other.

Then, some human children killed a Star Boy. Sun and the Star People decided that humans could not be trusted. They pulled the sky away from the earth. Then they sent a great storm to destroy the world with a flood.

Naapi was a Star Man who loved the humans he had befriended. Though he tried hard, he couldn't save them. He barely saved himself by climbing to a high mountaintop. Quickly, he built a raft from some logs he found. As he floated on his raft, some of his animal friends joined him.

Although he survived the flood, he did not want to join the Star People in their Sky Country. Sun, the Chief of the Star People, gave Naapi the power to create.

Naapi made a new world and he made people to live on it. He gave the people speech and language. He taught them how to gather food. He taught them how to build homes.

When Naapi was sure that his people could live on their own, he told them that he wanted to go and see the world he had created. His people assured him that they could take care of themselves.

But troubles began soon after Naapi left. The people did not cooperate for their hunting, so their hunting failed, and they had no food. Their children cried with hunger. Without the hides of animals, they could not make their clothes or build their tipis. Day by day their grief increased. They wished Naapi would come back to them.

Up in the Sky Country there lived a pack of wolves. The wolves had known Naapi from the time when the sky and earth were one place. The wolves saw that Naapi's people were in distress. They traveled down to Naapi's world to help.

The Sky Wolves lived among Naapi's people. They showed them how to cooperate when they hunted. They taught the people how to be good parents to their children. They taught the ways of living a good life. Once the Sky Wolves were sure the people could live on their own, they prepared to return to their home in the sky.



Before they traveled their Wolf Road back to the Sky Country, they had one last gift for the people. They left behind the gift of song. Singing together taught the people to enjoy the company of visitors. They learned to dance together—dancing encourages friendship.

To this day, Blackfoot people recall that gift when they bring out their drums to sing. We invite old and new friends to join us in our powwows, and we remember the Sky Wolves' lessons.

---

The Grand Entry of Dancers in full regalia at the Blackfoot Arts & Heritage Festival Pow Wow in Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta





Indigenous knowledge in the Blackfoot tradition began with the Sky Wolves' lessons. Today our task is to transform those principles into actions. We start with water. Lakota of North and South Dakota have a saying, "Water is life."

At Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park in Alberta, Mars can be seen to the left of the galactic center area of the Milky Way.



# Water Knowledge Ways





Every living thing is connected by the need for water. In dry lands, seeds can lie dormant for years until a storm brings rain. When rain wakes them up, flowers bloom again. No animal can survive without water. Water makes up roughly 60 percent of the human body. Though people can live for weeks without food, most of us would die if we went for more than three days without a drink. Water is so powerful that rivers, oceans, and streams carve out canyons and mountains. It is one of the forces shaping the earth itself.

## SACRED WATER

.....

On the Great Plains, my ancestors believed that there were three separate sacred realms: the earth, the sky, and water. Water was scarce and it needed special attention. Water is sacred because it is home to divine beings that instructed people to protect the water world. Killing and eating creatures that live in water was not a Piikani custom. Even today we oppose dams that disturb the flow of rivers, or pipelines that might pollute them.

The story of Beaver describes the connection between water, humans, and beavers.

Beaver dam construction  
near Hinton, Alberta





## The Beaver's Lesson

After the Star People had torn the sky from the earth and sent the storm that drowned the world, Sun invited Naapi to join the other Star People in Sky Country, but Naapi refused. So, Sun gave Naapi the power to remake the earth.

Naapi told his animal friends on the raft that he needed mud from the old world to make a new world. They agreed to dive down to retrieve the mud.

Muskrat dove first, but though he swam deep, he could find no mud. Loon tried next, and after him, Otter, but the water was too deep. At last, Beaver took his turn. He was gone for a long, long time—so long that he drowned. When his body floated to the surface, Naapi and the animals pulled it onto the raft. They found Beaver with a clump of mud clutched in his paw.

Naapi restored Beaver's life by sharing the spirit of breath. Then he took the mud, rolled it between his hands, and threw it back into the water. It did not sink. Instead, it grew larger and larger until they could step onto solid ground. That was the beginning of land. Grateful Naapi made Beaver the Chief of the Water People and gave him the power to control the flow of water.



The beaver, an animal that lives in the water and on the land, reminds us that the water and land are linked with each other. The story reminds us that animals and people are part of the same circle. If we take care of the water, we take care of ourselves and our animal relatives.

The story is also a practical lesson about how to conserve precious fresh water in a dry landscape. To this day, when beavers build their dams, they create homes for many other animals: muskrats, otters, and water birds. When they build dams on creeks and rivers, they create ponds of fresh water where plants grow and wildlife can thrive.



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