

The Blueberry Patch

To First Nations, Blueberries mean so much more than a country food rich in flavor and antioxidants.

The Blueberry patch is where First Nation people from far and wide met and meet year after year, generation after generation, generation to generation. It provides Country foods, satisfies and provides for spiritual needs. Over hundreds of years Friendships, love and children are conceived here, born here cultured and nourished here by parents and grandparents, uncles and aunties. People dance, sing and give thanks, celebrate and cry here. Culture is passed word by word generation to generation. Heritage remembered. I know this by the small tear that forms in an elder's eye at mention of "blueberry". It's a tear of love, longing, remembrance, and joy, a tear of the future and for the future of past years and for past years.

The word "Blueberries" from the lips of an Elder means so much more than the "first of the year burst of succulence" all peoples recognize. To a First Nation spirit "Blueberries" are spring summer and fall, May to October, twenty-eight medicines and herbs. "Blueberries" mean high-bush cranberries, bog cranberries, strawberries, heart berries, Cranberry bark, Ginseng, Seneca root, mushrooms, a mothers comfort, a grandfathers teaching, aunties stories, past, present and future, a connection to Mother Earth.

When Chief Charlie Boucher says "What about the Blueberries?" all of this and so much more floods from his heart. When Chief Boucher says "What about the Fishery?" "What about my crops?" even more. The people of Pine Creek hear and feel and understand this flood from the heart this yearly connection to the past and what used to be hope for the future.

BLUE BERRY HARVESTING- Councilor Nancy McKay, PCFN

Under the Treaty No. 4, the indigenous inhabitants are guaranteed their Constitutional right to pursue their avocation to hunt, fish, trap and gather. Under the Natural Resources Transfer Act, 1930, the term "avocation" was removed because hunting by aboriginal peoples should not be considered as a form of "employment", or a "source of income". However, the provinces are to guarantee the aboriginal peoples the Constitutional Right to Hunt, Fish and Trap and Gather for food at all seasons.

The Province of Manitoba, to include the traditional blueberry picking grounds within the Swan Pelican Provincial Park and surrounding area is considered (by the Members of PCFN) to be made up entirely of lands reserved by Canada for the purposes of establishing treaties. The "traditional blueberry picking areas and Swan Pelican Provincial Park are within "unoccupied Crown lands." The interpretation of the term "un-occupied" is vital.

These blueberry picking grounds have been used traditionally by the Members of the PCFN as a form of providing a good healthy source of food as part of their regular diet to include, but not limited to, meat and fish. The blueberry was used in such foods as pies, muffins and jams and/or preservatives (mostly - dried). Blueberry, and other berries combined with a diet of various wild meats and fish made for a healthy wholesome diet as opposed to the processed foods of today.

Eating foods provided for by Mother Earth enabled the aboriginal person to lead a long, healthy and natural life free of most forms of diabetes, cancers, and high blood pressure brought on the eating of processed foods available.

In year's pasts, whole families would leave their homes in Pine Creek, and travel the day long journey by horse and wagon to their traditional picking areas, some as far as 30 miles, depending on the route travelled. Once there, these families lived in tent camps, and throughout these years, the Members knew where to find certain families, because traditionally, families would use the same camp site year after year. It was like an "un-mapped community".

Today, those camp sites are gone, but the tradition of picking blueberries is as strong and vibrant as ever. Modern day travel includes ½ ton truck and ATV and accommodations are via "pull-behind" camper trailers. So it is not uncommon for families to go out for the day and return home every day after a full day of picking berries.

Today, the traditional blueberry picker (parent or elder), as they travel along the trails, would as a form of teaching and maintaining the culture would educate their children or Youth by making comments such as "this is where John's family use to camp, or this is where Mary's camp used to be." Remnants of some of these camps are still visible, some fifty years later. Some are totally gone, but any direct descendent of those traditional blueberry picking families will almost always take you to the exact spot of where their tents physically stood and how their camps would be set up, it is during these times of teaching and re-collection, that emotions will take over and tears will sometimes flow.

The blueberry picking grounds are still there and will continue to provide a good and reliable food source for the Members of the PCFN. The resource has never been depleted to the point where "there are just no more berries". The only thing that affects the bounty of this, or any other resource, is the willful destruction or effect of it, by whatever "un-natural" means.

Recent developments to include "man-made" developments in the construction of access roadways, ditches and the installation of culverts at some river crossings, and the neglect thereof by the province, has lead to other forms of destruction in the form of flooding and a natural means of escape for the traditional and other resource harvesters in times of natural disasters such as the windstorm of 2011.

In years past, forest fires have raged through the blueberry patches, frost has frozen the plants, long periods of hot and dry weather has "cooked" the plants, and the berries have been gathered and most recently a violent windstorm in 2011, left the blueberry picking area in a state of destruction. Acres and acres of trees were blown down across access trails, river crossings, and the blueberry plants themselves. In spite of all those natural effects, the blueberry plants and the berries are still there, to be enjoyed by all for as long as we allow it to continue.

More needs to be done by the province to ensure the health of, not only the blueberry, but other resources as well, and the health and safety of the traditional picker and other resource harvesters by providing for good access, good river crossings, and safe escape routes during times of natural

disasters. If given the opportunity to try to improve the state of these devastated and neglected areas, the Members of the PCFN could stand to use the fallen trees, the neglected river crossings, and other forms of natural destruction, through the development of a sound resource management plan with the province, as not only as a source of income so that they may be given the opportunity to provide for their families, provide for a source of heat for their homes, but as a form of contributing to the continued process of allowing the blueberry to continue to provide.

Blueberry picking is as traditional as hunting, fishing and trapping is for the Members of the PCFN. It is what is done, it is what is taught, and it is what is handed-down, from generation to generation.

-Nancy McKay

FIRST NATION GATHERING IN TRADITIONAL LANDS

Kettle Hills, Swan Lake and Pelican Lake was always our Traditional Lands, our ancestor's used this land way before the White man were here. It played a very important role in their every day livelihood. Hunting for food all year long, gathering of their medicines. In the summer they picked many types of berries (cranberries, pin cherries, goose berries, moss berries, saskatoon's) Blue berries was the many berries they picked because they could sell them. All types of berries where used to make jams. And in the winter they trapped. Some of the fur and hides where used for clothing, the rest was sold for their livelihood.

Kettle Hills was mainly used by our people for survival and their livelihood; they never abused the land or the lakes. People travelled miles and miles by horse and wagon to get to Kettle Hills, the Government made roads that will destroy our land. Now is the time to speak up and protect our Traditional Lands for our children and future children from the Government and their policies. If we let them destroy our Traditional Lands, we as the people have failed our children and future children and we were put here by the Creator to protect our children and our Traditional Lands.

Yours in Nationhood
Northern White Bear
Loon Clan
A.K.A George Munro