



Aboriginal Housing Management Association
Over 25 years of Indigenous housing expertise.

Environmental Scan: Land-Based Healing



Aboriginal Housing Management Association

Purpose

The purpose of this environmental scan is to provide information to better understand Land-Based Healing programs and principles.

Summary

Indigenous land-based healing programs draw from diverse cultures, spiritual foundations, and relationships ingrained with profound wisdom in Indigenous healing practices. Acknowledging, listening to, and learning from this knowledge becomes essential for Canadian health and social services systems to develop culturally sensitive interventions rooted in strengths, aiding in breaking cycles of trauma and poor health. Additionally, directed funding for land-based healing initiatives led by Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers, and organizations becomes imperative for better health outcomes and enhanced culturally safe services to Indigenous people. These initiatives align with the mandates of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), marking a crucial step in decolonization and fostering reconciliation in Canada.

Methodology

A scoping review was selected to explore and evaluate scholarly writings and alternative non-academic resources, aiming to present the current understanding of Indigenous land-based healing program design and implementation. Desktop research was completed to inform the majority of the scan. In addition, community members in British Columbia (BC) were consulted through a survey with a variety of questions about land-based healing, developed by the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA).



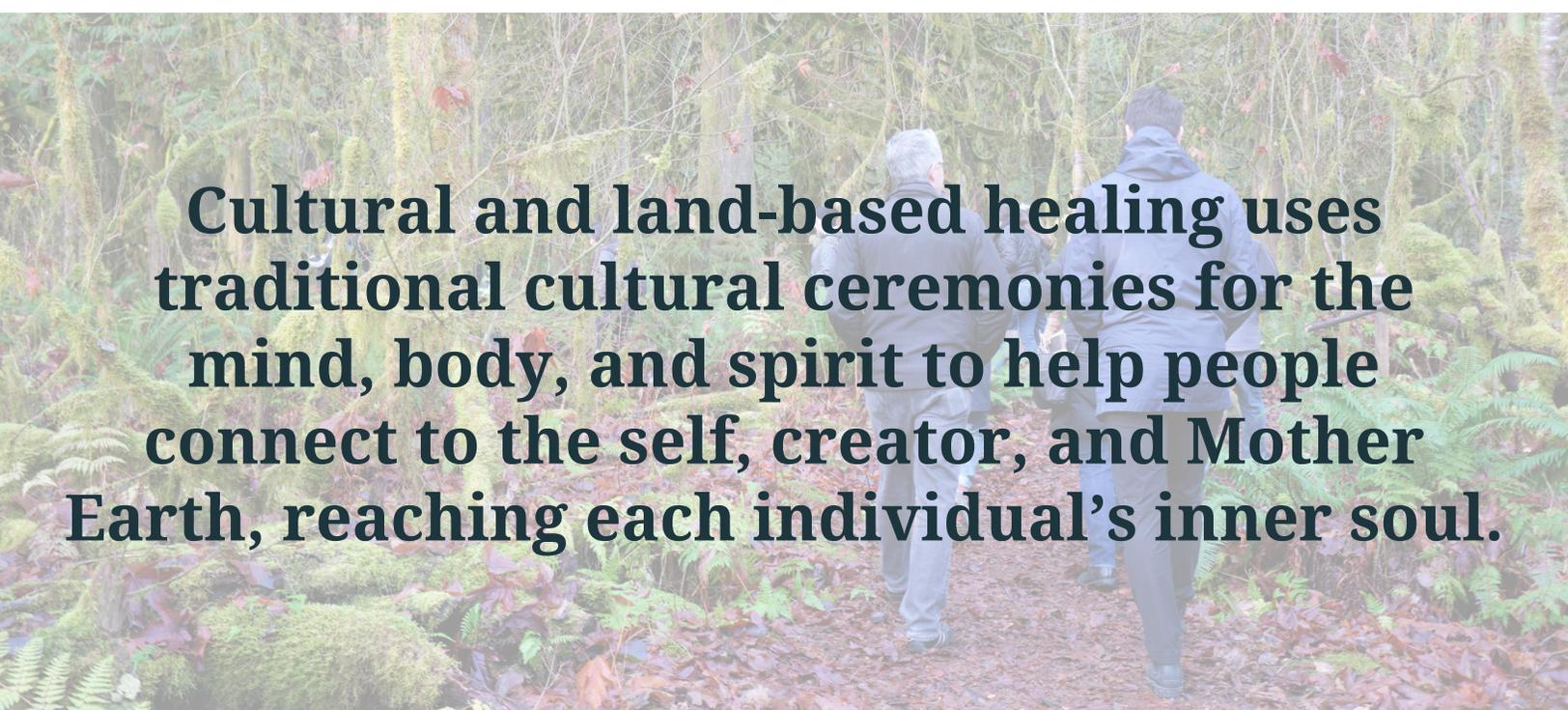
Definitions of Land-Based Healing¹⁴

“A health or healing program or service that takes place in a non-urban, rural or remote location on a land base that has been intentionally spiritually cultivated to ensure the land is honoured and respected. The land is understood to be an active host and partner to the people engaged in the healing process. The cultivation of a land base under the stewardship of First Nation people is usually done through the development of an intimate spirit-based relationship through ceremony, offerings, expression of gratitude and requests for permission from the land to enter and use it for healing purposes.”¹¹

Redvers offered a similar definition of land-based healing as a “set of culturally-defined healing practices in a non-urban location” where “the land is a host and partner” to healing and the focus is on “renewing a person’s relationship and connection with the land.”¹⁷

Walsh et al. defined land-based healing as interventions that address the “essential connection” between Indigenous peoples and the land as part of their mental health and healing.²⁰

The following definition was derived from input received from members of the Indigenous Collaboration Table (ICT) led by AHMA. The ICT is a table for leaders of the Indigenous-led Complex Care Housing (CCH) sites in BC to gather and share knowledge and information regarding the implementation, challenges, and successes of the respective sites. Members of this table have a wealth of knowledge and experience within community and service delivery.

A photograph showing two people from behind, walking along a dirt path in a lush, mossy forest. The path is covered in fallen leaves and ferns. The background is filled with tall, thin trees and dense foliage. Overlaid on the bottom half of the image is a large, bold, black text block.

Cultural and land-based healing uses traditional cultural ceremonies for the mind, body, and spirit to help people connect to the self, creator, and Mother Earth, reaching each individual’s inner soul.

Background and Historical Context

The concept of land-based healing has deep historical roots across diverse cultures. Indigenous traditions worldwide have long recognized the healing power of nature, using the land as a source of both physical and spiritual healing. In recent times, the modern understanding of land-based healing has been influenced by eco-psychology. This field emerged in the late 20th century, posing that the disconnection from the natural world is a source of psychological distress.

“There is no greater disservice than to view land as simply a geographic space; instead, it is a profound, powerful source of connection, which shapes us and is a foundational determinant of Indigenous health.”¹⁰ The connection that Indigenous communities have with their land stands at the core of their well-being, cultural revival, language preservation, and ceremonial practices. As the rightful stewards of Turtle Island, their bond with the land holds deep spiritual significance. However, this very connection has become the target of colonial agendas, leading to division, separation, and manipulation by external forces. Consequently, this interference has caused displacement from their ancestral lands, triggering far-reaching repercussions across every aspect of Indigenous health and prosperity.

The quest for Western dominance led to a devastating series of destructive actions, including the genocide of Indigenous Peoples and the systematic erosion of their culture, territories, and ways of life. Virtually nothing remains untouched or unclaimed from Indigenous Peoples. Within the history of interactions between Indigenous and settler communities, the recurring theme of forcibly separating children from their mothers manifests in various profound ways.

Initially, this separation stemmed from coerced land relocations, the establishment of reserves, environmental devastation, pollution, and the denial of land sovereignty over ancestral territories, severely impacting Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. This separation severed our connection from our original, nurturing earth, resulting in a deep sense of "spiritual homelessness."¹⁰

The profound effects of this detachment continue to be explored as we grapple with the immeasurable scope of generations of suffering and loss. As the earth represents our primary home and maternal figure, the assault on this connection has led to spiritual maternal deprivation, perpetuating the ongoing impact on the overall well-being of Indigenous Peoples. Although the term "maternal deprivation" originates from Western psychology, its emphasis on the vital parent-child bond and the myriad of negative consequences from its absence resonates with Indigenous experiences of displacement and uprooting. English, unfortunately, lacks the adequate capacity to convey the magnitude of losses and ramifications stemming from land displacement and genocidal actions. Similar to profound and intricate trauma, the essence of this experience transcends the confines of language. Nonetheless, through examining our relationship with the land as an intrinsic human requirement, we may begin to comprehend the fundamental pain carried by Indigenous communities affected by relocation.



Theoretical Framework

Though the connection between land and healing is ingrained in many Indigenous cultures, the modern understanding of land-based healing is primarily based on eco-psychology. The following theoretical frameworks demonstrate the early ideas that set a foundation for the emergence of this field in academia.

Biophilia Hypothesis:

Proposed by E.O. Wilson, this theory suggests that humans possess an innate biological affinity for nature, and exposure to natural environments can have restorative effects on mental and physical health.^{9,12}

Attention Restoration Theory (ART):

Developed by Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, ART posits that natural environments facilitate the restoration of cognitive functions and reduce mental fatigue compared to urban settings.^{6,12}

Nature Connectedness:

The concept of feeling connected to nature, as advocated by Richard Louv, emphasizes the emotional and spiritual connection between individuals and the land. Greater nature connectedness is associated with improved well-being.³



Empirical Evidence

Indigenous cultures teach us that the land helps to heal the spirit, mind, and body. Modern research on land-based healing has shown promising results supporting Indigenous knowledge. Through peer-reviewed articles and scientific studies, the positive effect of land-based healing is evident on physical, mental, and emotional health.

Stress Reduction:

Numerous studies have reported reduced levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol, following exposure to natural environments. This suggests that contact with nature can mitigate the effects of chronic stress.^{2,4}

Mental Health Benefits:

Meta-analyses and longitudinal studies have linked nature exposure to improved mental health outcomes, including reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorders.^{1,12}

Physical Health:

Research has indicated that land-based healing can enhance physical health through increased physical activity, improved immune function, improved sleep, and lower blood pressure.¹²

Enhanced Cognitive Function:

Spending time in natural settings has been associated with improved cognitive function and brain activity, as well as reduced symptoms of cognitive fatigue.¹²



Wise Practices in Land-Based Healing Programs

Wise practices refer to actions, tools, principles, or decisions that are specifically suitable for a particular region or community and substantially aid in creating sustainable and fair circumstances. The following wise practices were identified from a scoping review of land-based healing programs across Canada.¹⁴ In addition, members of the ICT agreed with all of the following wise practices.

1. Ground the program in culture and spirit.
2. Give Elders leadership roles.
3. Ensure cultural and personal safety.
4. Blend mainstream and traditional approaches, privileging Indigenous ways.
5. Have activities to build skills and facilitate experiential learning.
6. Focus on fostering healthy relationships.
7. Allow the community to drive and direct the program.
8. Conduct program evaluation.
9. Collaborate with families of clients.
10. Develop partnerships across various service sectors.
11. Offer traditional foods.
12. Consult with the community to develop the program.



In addition to the above, the following wise practices were identified by members of the ICT.

1. Indigenous led.
2. Elder and Youth knowledge transfer programs.
3. Revitalization of ceremonial practices.
4. Creating opportunities for individuals to take responsibility of stewardship.

Common Guiding Principles⁸

- Focuses on culturally safe models of care.
- Views Indigenous languages as foundational.
- It is controlled locally, and fosters collaborations.
- Improves the quality of life of individuals, families, and communities.
- Honours local strengths and resources, building the expertise at home.
- Targets multiple determinants of health, e.g., self-determination, language acquisition, cultural values, life skills, human-nature relations, ethics, and social cohesion.
- It is viewed as an essential element of a quality health system.
- Fosters connection to our traditional territories and land-based values.
- Integrates the First Nations Wellness Model.



Characteristics of Land-Based Healing Model⁵ :

1. Connection to the land and culture.
2. Harm reduction.
3. Goals for treatment.
4. Accessibility.
5. Case management.
6. Mitigation of risk.
7. Continuous service planning.
8. Quality assurance.

Examples of Land-Based Healing Initiatives⁸

- Culture and language camps.
- Traditional food harvesting projects with education around nutrition and wellness while supporting community berry picking, fishing, hunting, trapping, etc.
- Cultural activities for people struggling with substance use, helping them to spend time on the land doing these.
- Programs for Elder and youth knowledge transfer of traditional land uses such as the revitalization of ceremonial practices, rites-of-passage activities, reconnection to land/history/ teachings, traditional medicine gathering, etc.
- Programs for teaching traditional birthing and parenting practices.
- Programs for integrating local Indigenous healers into existing land-based activities.
- Programs for revitalizing local Indigenous ceremonies and celebrations on the land.

Successful Programs

Carrier First Nations Addiction Recovery Program (Vanderhoof, BC)

Indigenous communities in Canada, like many others worldwide, face common challenges contributing to health disparities. Operating within Canada's Northwest, Carrier Sekani Family Services caters to 11 First Nations. For nearly a quarter-century, this organization has conducted a residential addiction recovery program grounded in traditional culture on ancestral lands. Cultural and land-based practices in this program include nature walks, smudging and prayer, speaking with elders, ceremonies, hunting and fishing, sweats, traditional crafts, and many more. Recently, the agency engaged in a national research initiative investigating the therapeutic advantages of integrating traditional culture into addiction treatment. The findings affirm that healing through cultural practices proves to be an impactful treatment approach.⁷

Cree Nation of Chisasibi (Quebec)

Above all, the Land-Based Healing Model mirrors the Cree lifestyle and wisdom, echoing insights shared by consulted elders. Emphasizing the importance of land and cultural customs, these elders assert that land and culture possess a healing influence, aiding individuals in coping with anguish and self-inflicted harm. Additionally, these land-based initiatives fortify and facilitate the transfer of intergenerational knowledge, fostering a positive sense of identity, increased self-worth, and nurturing pride in Cree cultural heritage. By interconnecting culture, families, and the community, Cree methodologies in health and social services, such as the Land-Based Healing Model, offer complementary and comprehensive frameworks for health and overall well-being.⁵

Tsow-Tun Le Lum Society (Vancouver Island, BC)

The mission of this society is to create a safe and loving environment where people can heal through connection to community, culture, self, and spirit. The programs offered are grounded in culture and tradition, offering a holistic approach to healing, including land-based activities. Elders share knowledge and brushing and cleansing ceremonies, and culture is deeply rooted in the teachings.²²

Successful Programs

Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness (Vancouver Island, BC)

The Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness (ACEH) provides housing, harm reduction, and cultural programs to create a climate of love and care for members of the Aboriginal Street Community to gain connection, cultural support, and housing stability. ACEH stands true to the belief that “We are all One” and continues to be a leader in providing culturally safe housing and building community through the Dual Model of Housing Care that provides access to land-based healing and decolonized harm reduction programs. The Family-based model includes Elder support, medicine keepers, cultural mentors, native medicine gardens, traditional foods, and cultural programming.²¹

Circle of Eagles Lodge Society (Vancouver, BC)

Circle of Eagles Lodge Society (COELS) offers many programs including a brother’s lodge, sisters lodge, outreach, and peer support. Indigenous ways of learning, cultural support, Elders, ceremonies, and traditional protocols are integral to all programs offered. Traditional medicines are used in treatment and ceremony in a respectful and sacred manner. COELS offers Pipe Ceremonies, Sweat Lodge Ceremonies, Spirit Baths, and Pow Wow Nights to connect people with mind, body, and spirit.²³

Round Lake Healing Lodge (Armstrong, BC)

Round Lake adopts a holistic approach to healing, utilizing the medicine wheel to harmonize the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional facets of individuals' lives, embracing all cultures and nationalities. Their guiding philosophy is encapsulated in the phrase "Culture Is Treatment." Programs are rooted in cultural teachings and practices, led by Elders and staff. Respecting diverse belief systems, the spiritual aspects of the program aim to complement rather than interfere with clients' existing spiritual beliefs. They cultivate a welcoming, nonviolent, and collaborative environment focused on learning. Priority is given to ensuring clients' physical and emotional safety during their treatment experience. Committed to trauma-informed services, Round Lake adheres to core principles of trauma awareness, such as safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and the development of strengths and skills. Round Lake believes in the healing power of the circle to address the impact of trauma.²⁴

Roles in Land-Based Healing Programs

Land-based healing programs require a team of dedicated individuals to coordinate, facilitate, and support participants. The following table provided by a scoping review of land-based healing programs across Canada identifies the key roles in most land-based healing programs. This list is a guide and additional roles may be required on a case-by-case basis.

Table 3: Example roles within a land-based healing program.¹⁴

Role	Brief Description
Aftercare coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help clients develop aftercare plans • Liaise with support resources in community • Connect clients with community support • Follow-up with clients after program completion
Camp helpers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete daily camp tasks such as collecting firewood or cleaning
Clinical counselor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead clinical healing practices • Connect client with other health-care professionals as needed
Community outreach workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaise with community agencies to promote program and identify clients
Cook and cook assistants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan and prepare meals
Cultural worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with Elders to implement cultural activities
Elders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead program content and strategy • Design traditional healing plans • Provide wholistic counseling • Share traditional knowledge • Advise program coordinator
Healer/cultural counsellor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead traditional healing practices • Support client healing processes • Support client personal growth
Intake coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversee client referrals, assessment, and intake • Conduct client entry interviews • Support potential clients to become ready for the program
Night staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure camp security at night
Office manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process program registration • Data entry • Support program coordinator with other administrative tasks
Program coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversee organization and implementation of the program • Recruit and manage team • Facilitate orientation and debriefing sessions

Challenges

These challenges have been identified in collaboration with members of the ICT.

Many challenges exist when planning to implement a land-based healing program, especially in urban settings. However, ICT members noted that urban areas are where these programs are most needed for the restoration of Indigenous access to land and culture. These challenges include the lack of space, land, green space, plant medicines, and animals. In addition, transportation constraints exist when having to travel farther distances to access land and green spaces. Making connections with First Nations and Elders is also a heightened challenge in the urban setting. Finding Elders and Healers for these programs is necessary while making sure that the right cultural protocols and sacred healing practices are being followed.

Funding limitations continue to be a primary barrier to providing cultural and land-based healing programs. ICT members stated that many Indigenous-led organizations lack the capacity and resources to deliver these models. In turn, sometimes, these programs are delivered in a restrictive, colonized way. ICT members highlighted that land-based healing programs for Indigenous people need to be led by Indigenous people, and funding often prevents this from happening. True reconciliation starts with the funding for Indigenous people to lead their own programs.

Many Indigenous communities see the power that land-based healing has. Through conversations with members, AHMA recognizes and works to advocate for more land-based healing programs. However, a challenge exists regarding the formal evaluation of the effectiveness and success stories of these programs in addressing mental, physical, and spiritual health within Indigenous populations. Finding an avenue to present the effectiveness of these programs is a key factor in acquiring funding to deliver them.



Community Perspectives and Cultural Significance

It is important to acknowledge the role of ceremony, connection to the spiritual world, connection to the physical world, and interconnectedness. Land-based healing is working from that philosophy of “Interconnectedness, All My Relations” space, where we guide the person to stand tall with humility, pride, and honour of oneself and one’s environment. It comes from a place of transforming trauma with ancient teachings of traditional meditations and Indigenous ways of healing. Indigenous people can carry intergenerational, vicarious, collective, and complex trauma. Many Indigenous people say that when discussing their stories, you are talking to layers of many generations. Because of this, it is crucial to approach healing from a space of interconnectedness, which is often not considered in modern treatment, recovery, or healing programs.

Cultural safety is a crucial component of any healing program. AHMA’s four pillars of cultural safety are Self-Agency, Relationship, Trauma-informed, and Reciprocity. **Reciprocity** is bringing food, medicines, gifts or honorariums with the intention of love and honour that comes from the heart. The members and community can feel those connections of **relationship** establishing, knowing that the giver comes from teachings of respect, kindness, and gentleness. Most mother tongues of nation-to-nation languages have expressed that the language did not have harsh words to say to a person when discussing issues with family or neighbours; we were already Indigenous, knowing and doing those **Trauma-Informed** approaches when engaging with one another. Language is and has been very important in our many nations. **Self-Agency** is assisting people with finding their strength-based approaches and understanding each role and responsibility.

The following statements are from members of the ICT, highlighting their perspectives on the importance of cultural and land-based healing.

“Land-based healing happens when people spend time on the land and reconnect with it. This supports Indigenous People reclaiming traditional wellness practices. Land is foundational to Indigenous identity and culture.”

“Land-based healing is important to make sure our relations are all connected. Connecting to the land and culture is key to recovery for all people.”

“Spending time on land grounds all of us. It is important for every member of society to energize themselves and to bring themselves to center.”

“It is important to bring traditional healing practices back to Indigenous people and other people's healing journey. Cultural and Land-based healing is a way to bring back Indigenous knowledge and heal past traumas simultaneously.”

Throughout all perspectives, the word connection continues to show up. Connection to land, connection to self, connection to culture, connection to spirit, and connection to each other. Connection is the heart of community and the heart of healing. Humans need connection, and the land helps facilitate this in many critical ways. If we are to help people heal in a meaningful and sustainable way, we must connect them with land, culture, and community.

Conclusion

Land-based healing programs are a crucial part of working towards reconciliation in Canada. Indigenous people in Canada have been displaced for generations, causing a separation between people and land. As a result of colonization and displacement, Indigenous people are disproportionately experiencing homelessness, poor mental and physical health, discrimination, substance use challenges, and, at the root of it all, trauma. Only true healing can address the overwhelming challenges that Indigenous people are facing today, and that starts with connection to self, community, spirit, and Earth.

Empirical evidence demonstrates the validity of land-based healing. Research tells us that these programs reduce stress,^{2,4} improve mental health outcomes,^{1,12} enhance physical health,¹² and improve cognitive function.¹² Further to the research, successful land-based healing programs throughout Canada prove this on a daily basis by helping people heal. Current programs do amazing work; however, they simply cannot meet the need. Many years ago, people in positions of power made a decision that caused pain, suffering, and trauma in an entire population. Now, different people in power must make decisions that empower that same population to lead their own healing. Indigenous people in Canada must have access to programs that support their healing, and in the current economy, that starts with funding programs that work.

Future Directions and Recommendations

In alignment with the mandates of UNDRIP and TRC, AHMA provides the following recommendations to the Government.

1. AHMA recommends that land-based healing programs be incorporated into Complex Care Housing (CCH) models.
2. AHMA supports the expansion of land-based healing programs in treatment centres.
3. AHMA recommends aligning work to integrate land-based healing programs into housing projects.



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