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## BRIEFING NOTE

**Prepared for:** State-Tribal Relations Interim Committee - STRC

**Panel Presentation by:** Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal personnel in partnership with the American Bison Society

**Presentation Title:** *Innii Initiative: "Blackfoot and Buffalo" – Ecosystem Restoration and Cultural Repatriation*

**Meeting Date:** July 23, 2014

Date: July 9, 2014

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### **Purpose:**

Provide the STRC with an opportunity to become familiar with the work that has been established through the Innii Initiative. "Innii" refers to buffalo in the Blackfoot language and has been the central focus of dialogues, workshops and summits among the Blackfoot Confederacy Tribes; in partnership with and support from the Wildlife Conservation Society and in particular, the American Bison Society going back to 2009. Sharing learnings, in particular from the elders, and providing an opportunity to create strategic dialogue with the STRC may enhance existing approaches to challenges that are on-going, especially issues that are rooted in social licensing, among other constraints, and explore pathways for STRC to support the Innii Initiative.

### **Intent:**

Engage with the STRC and core team members of the Innii Initiative to begin dialoging common issues that lead to practical solutions through innovative approaches. Provide a status update to allow STRC members with an opportunity to determine level of interest and potential strategies to support including timelines.

### **Background:**

Location: The Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park was identified as a hotspot that could support bison reintroduction. The Wildlife Conservation Society took the approach based on its analysis to begin conversations with adjacent jurisdictions including tribal, state and federal officials. It became clear to the various agencies potential directly and indirectly affected that a successful approach would be one that included the Blackfeet Tribe (in Montana) and the Blood Tribe (in Alberta) as taking ownership of and thereby, leadership of such an undertaking.

Relationship Building: WCS then began working directly with the four Blackfoot Confederacy Tribes and hosting a series of dialogues in each community. Workshops

were developed to provide greater focus on areas such as: economics, education, health, and summits to allow for greater audiences and potential support among the non-government community and within the communities of each tribe.

Capacity Building: Through multiple concurrent projects with support by WCS, each tribe has been able to increase capacity by directly participating in developing important products relevant to the initiative. It serves as a foundational model for potential planning, management and monitoring of a free ranging bison herd by First Nations/Native Americans in a cultural context and in co-operation with appropriate tribal, federal, state, and provincial agencies.

Product Generation: Maps have been generated with involvement from Blood Tribe Land Management staff, are recognized as leaders in Canada in First Nations GIS and Environmental capabilities. Other important products include: curriculum material that the Native Science Field Center developed and continue to adapt and apply in classroom and after school programming. Their work with partners such as NASA have given the initiative a firm foundation for designing learning objectives rooted in the Blackfoot culture in science curriculum.

WCS has provided on-going support in developing a brochure ( see *linnii Initiative Brochure* attached) that highlights the vision and key components that have been strategically mapped on a wheel to keep the initiative grounded in Blackfoot/Blackfeet values and principles. Harmony Walkers Inc., a Blackfoot owned environmental consulting company based out of the Piikani Nation, provided guidance and advice on the production of a video that provides a high level scope of the Innii initiative (visit [wcs.org](http://wcs.org) or use the following link: <http://youtu.be/6LJfPMoGMAg>). Other contributions from Piikani Nation include development of outreach tools such as social media.

### **Teachings from our Elder Dialogues, translated and paraphrased**

The following comprise a translation of information provided by elders in each community where dialogues were conducted in the Blackfoot/Blackfeet language:

***"We are the buffalo, We are Inniiwa..."***

***"We don't just want them we need them to be strong again..."***

***"Because we had our ties severed, we need to include important healing elements when they are returning to us. The land itself will need to be prepared, societies and clans will make preparations; but if we wait and try and include them, afterward, after the management plan and decisions are made they are not fulfilling the role that they have been entrusted with..."***

***"Things like respect, when and how to harvest, are tied to songs and sweats. Pipes will be offered, elders will pray in ways that field staff have not any experience. It is not a religious aspect; it is the ways in which relationships endure, with the proper protocols, and the proper songs and the ones that have the rites to sing them. It is based on ancient treaties, where everyone has a role..."***

***"Many of our young men who ought to be hunting are not being properly guided, a meaningful approach to herd management that includes targeting youth so that the young warriors understand and have a proper place in our modern culture. Our communities have high rates of suicide and gang violence."***

***"With simply placing a herd in a location without the intent to provide a direct link to cultural repatriation will fail...the herd will become subject to the same issues as other herds are experiencing...we won't participate in that."***

***"Our young women are becoming mothers and not able to pass on the values that come with cultural practices; they are the ones who have the deep connection with Inniwa, and their role is vital to bringing back the buffalo."***

***"We pray that we will have them in our lives again"***

***"This is more than buying in, this is about Believing in Inniwa; it is about believing in ourselves"***

***"We need the support of many individuals and organizations to be able to accomplish our collective VISION"***

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Understanding the appropriate role of elders cannot be overstated. They bring a wealth of knowledge and have taken time to consider the implications of a loss of a way of life, and that is a difficult task. Despite this, they have provided guidance in regaining a sense of culture in the face of many barriers. The Innii Initiative considers the elders as the founders of the way in which it has emerged strategically and tactically. Their on-going support and participation will continue to carve out ways forward for the betterment of future generations.

Many of the important elements are contained in the language and become lost in translation. In addition, information pertaining to sensitive cultural information is not translated for broader consumption but is kept in archive for appropriate use.

## Current status and strategic alliances

Situation Analysis: Reports (see *Blackfeet Economic Summit Report* attached) and key action based strategies have been captured by WCS along with project based deliverables from participating agencies. Each step and milestone reached is based on a greater awareness of the challenges that lie ahead. From the first dialogue to the most recent tribal gathering in June, 2014, there is continued hesitancy to walk on any jurisdictional feet, thus a strategic front end approach that allows for better awareness along with forging alliances that compliment the strong belief from each tribe that this will be an unprecedented modern movement with the potential to bring together tribes on each side of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel to commit to working together on buffalo common ground.

## Out of Scope

Tribal Affairs: The Innii Initiative is grounded in Blackfoot principles that include dealing with ourselves (see strategic model on brochure). And are complimentary to modern statements from the Chiefs of the Blackfoot Confederacy, where there are collective matters of importance there is a strategic approach, and in-house matters are handled separately. Tribal matters remain separate and the initiative encourages individual integrity to realizing the vision.

Chiefs Strategy: The strategic approach led by the Blackfoot Confederacy Chiefs is out of scope for this presentation; based on cultural protocols and respecting tribal relations. The Blackfoot Confederacy Chiefs meet annually and have supported the on-going work of the initiative through direct in-kind support. They will meet this fall in a special session with the core team and followed by an announcement based on the **Strategic Framework for the Innii Initiative** (see attached brochure).

Outreach: An ongoing outreach campaign, inclusive of on the ground word of mouth throughout Indian Country powwows and social gatherings, directly one-on-one with Chiefs and their delegates, as well as on-line social media provide a broad reach that can be considered as an appropriate foundation for such an undertaking. These meetings and efforts are underway and thus won't be disclosed. (However, you can like us on Facebook....but it is a work in progress as the initiative moves from grassroots to international and virtually global.)

Treaty rights remain a separate matter for the initiative, however, it has remained as a critical motivator for any conceptual approach to cultural repatriation in conjunction with ecosystem restoration.

Given the timing of the Chiefs meeting, there are no intended outcomes for linking to

any specific hot button issues. However, going forward and following the strategic announcement, there may be unique opportunities to become engaged in ways that broaden the Blackfoot Buffalo Dialogue that include strategic approaches with STRC and other committees as deemed relevant. Tendencies to tie the dialogues to hot button issues may take the messages from the elders far from the purpose, spirit and intent they were given.

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### **Innovation and the importance of language**

Reflective of a unique approach to land management, the Innii Initiative is transboundary and includes the participation of multiple agencies aimed at large landscape restoration; with a motivation to consider ways that are innovative. Having a foundation that is rooted in key relationships (captured in the different plains languages) will provide a meaningful model for other jurisdictions that are interested in the outcomes of tribal led initiatives with key partnerships from multiple sectors of society. Cross culturally, dialogues will provide a basis for situating conversations that elevate the process beyond jurisdictions and agendas that may give way to practical solutions.

The STRC may be interested to engage in a process that is based on the principles expressed in this briefing document.

#### ***Innii core team panel:***

*Leroy Little Bear, JD, PhD*  
Special Advisor to the President  
The University of Lethbridge (UofL)

*Ervin Carlson, President*  
Inter-tribal Buffalo Council (ITBC)

*Terry Tatsey, President*  
Blackfeet Community College (BCC)

*Helen Augere, Director*  
Native Science Field Center

*Paulette Fox, MSc*  
Associate, Harmony Walkers Inc. (HWI)

*Keith Aune, Chair*  
American Bison Society (ABS)  
Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)

**Links mentioned in the briefing document include:**

1. [Innii Initiative Brochure.pdf](#) (attached)
2. [Blackfeet Economic Summit Report.pdf](#) (attached)
3. *Innii DVD*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LJfPMoGMAg&feature=youtu.be>

**Other relevant links:**

1. WCS.org
2. <http://www.scienceadvice.ca/en/assessments/completed/food-security.aspx>
3. <http://harmonywalkers.ca/>

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