

Caring for our Common Ground:

Insights from the Common
Ground Project 2021-2022



The Common Ground Partnership

The pilot phase of Common Ground ran from April 2021 to November 2022. It was an exploratory partnership between Community Forests International, the Nova Scotia Family Forest Network, and the Ulnooweg Development Group that began as an effort to empower climate action in forest-dependent communities throughout the Maritimes. Over time, Common Ground expanded into a project of increasing partnership and solidarity among settler and Indigenous community groups, conservation organizations, and family forest owners. This project has allowed our organizations and participants to learn more about Indigenous leadership, knowledge, and rights in caring for the endangered Wabanaki forest.

Community Forests International

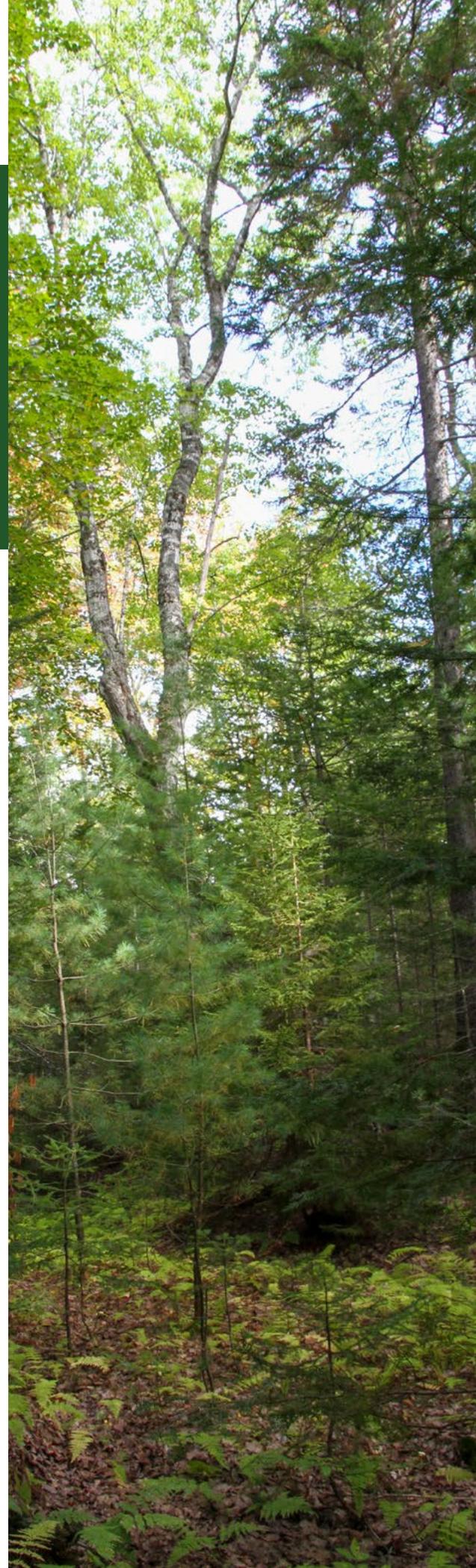
Operating in Canada and abroad, Community Forests International believes that the most exciting climate solutions can be found wherever people live and work closely with forests. In Atlantic Canada, this work includes developing knowledge and tools to promote climate change adaptation; training and supporting citizens to enhance the ecological values of their forests; and directly protecting and restoring forests through old forest conservation and tree planting.

Ulnooweg Development Group

The Ulnooweg Development Group is founded on the beliefs, customs, and values of the Mi'kmaq Nation and serves Indigenous communities across Atlantic Canada. In addition to providing business support and loans to Indigenous entrepreneurs, Ulnooweg has also created groundbreaking initiatives to inspire and empower the next generation of Indigenous leaders. Most recently, Ulnooweg launched the Ulnooweg Indigenous Communities Foundation—a federally incorporated charity whose members and directors include chiefs and leaders of Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik communities in the Atlantic region.

The Family Forest Network of Nova Scotia

The Family Forest Network of Nova Scotia is a new collaborative initiative spearheaded by the Nova Scotia Woodlot Owners and Operators Association—an organization representing Nova Scotia's 30,000 forest landowners by promoting ecologically, economically and socially sustainable forest management since 1969. The initiative is delivered in partnership with the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources and several other forest service organizations, with the mission to implement recommendations of the 2018 Independent Review of Forest Practices in Nova Scotia (aka the "Lahey Report") and to promote ecological forest management on private woodlots.



The Land We Share

The Common Ground Project seeks to inspire thoughtful forest care across Wabanakik in the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. The forest in this region grows nowhere else on Earth; it has many names—including the Acadian forest—but its original name is the Wabanaki forest. The Wabanaki forest roughly spans the traditional territories of the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik, Pestomuhkati, Penawapskewi, and Abenaki Nations.

In the 18th century, the British Crown signed a series of Peace and Friendship Treaties with the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik and Pestomuhkati First Nations. These agreements outlined promises, mutual obligations, and benefits for the Crown and the First Nations. First Nations did not surrender their rights to the lands and resources they had traditionally occupied and used, yet the Crown severely limited First Nations' access to their territories.

To incentivize European settlement in the region, the Crown transferred millions of hectares of forest to individuals and corporations, removing the First Peoples from their lands, prohibiting access to traditional livelihoods and practices, and severely limiting access to natural resources for the region's Indigenous population. The repercussions of these policies still shape the Wabanaki forest today. There are almost 90,000 families of settler descent who own forestland across the region. The management of these settler family forestlands influences the health and integrity of the Wabanaki forest as a whole.

Today, the dominance of intensive forest management on private and Crown lands in the Wabanaki forest affects Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and the lands for which we care. Convening settlers and Indigenous peoples in solidarity and amplifying Indigenous rights, knowledge, and opportunities as they relate to safeguarding the region's forests, communities and the climate is critical to our collective resilience.



The Wabanaki Forest

This unique forest type spans the Maritime Provinces, the Gaspé Peninsula, and parts of New England. With 32 native tree species, the Wabanaki forest is naturally diverse and resilient to natural disturbances. It is a transition zone between two forest types, boasting tree species found in both the boreal forest to the north, and the hardwood forest, to the south.





Finding Our Common Ground

Common Ground has been a project of collaboration and learning among Community Forests International, the Ulnooweg Development Group, and the Nova Scotia Family Forest Network.

Recognizing the responsibilities and complex colonial history of the conservation movement has been an organization-wide project for Community Forests International in recent years. As we worked to develop the Common Ground project and connect with partners in the field, we took a great deal of inspiration from Métis author [Chelsea Vowel's](#) discussion of the relationships between rural settler and Indigenous communities:

“Rural Canada personifies ‘the two solitudes’ of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in a way that is difficult to understand from urban settings. These two solitudes exist on lands that supply the bulk of resources extracted to support the urban south, meaning they also experience the effects of resource extraction in ways urban residents do not.”

Having worked since our founding with rural communities in the Maritime Provinces of Canada, Vowel's statement reflects the primary issues impacting these communities and their vulnerability to climate change. Jocelyn Marshall at Ulnooweg echoes these statements, “To build a common ground, all must put their differences aside to look at the world around us and agree on a path forward towards climate action.” The Common Ground project represents a first step on that shared path with trusted partners and collaborators.

Family forest owners in the region are at risk from the negative impacts that climate change is causing for both rural livelihoods and the forests that underpin them. This same community faces multiple obstacles when striving to transition to alternative forestry methods which improve climate adaptation, carbon sequestration, and rural economic development outcomes. In a different but parallel struggle, the First Nations that have cared for the Wabanaki forest for time immemorial face yet more barriers to practicing forest livelihoods and caring for their homelands due to severely limited access to their rightful and ancestral forests.





Notable Accomplishments

The Common Ground initiative has quickly gained momentum and continues to generate exciting results and insights summarized throughout this reflection document. Notable highlights include:

- The creation of eight short films including *The Borer and the Basket*, which has received official selection in multiple film festivals including the 2022 Atlantic International Film Festival.
- Eighteen workshops and outdoor events for forest landowners, forest professionals, Indigenous youth, and nature enthusiasts on topics ranging from climate-adaptive silviculture and forest carbon management to *Etuaptmumk* and land-access among Indigenous communities.
- More widespread use of the original Wabanaki forest name among settler forest professionals and in mainstream media coverage.

The three partners conceived Common Ground as a project of solidarity to enhance the integration of Indigenous place-based knowledge and rights into forest care and climate action alongside rural, settler family forest owners across the region. Together, we are trying to embody the principle of *Etuaptmumk* (two-eyed-seeing) in all of our work with these communities and on the land.

With generous funding from the Catherine Donnelly Foundation, the Chawkers Foundation, Environment and Climate Change Canada, and the New Brunswick Environmental Trust Fund, we launched the pilot phase of Common Ground in April 2021.

Over the project's 18 months, the three partners have hosted 18 forest days, illustrating the diversity of the Wabanaki forest and the hard work of those who care for it. We have held eight technical workshops to educate participants on topics from tree planting and carbon accounting to traditional maple harvesting and the history of early Mi'kmaq spear-throwing in the Wabanaki forest. Video, podcast, and webinar series have shared the stories of Indigenous and settler practitioners in the forest, illustrating how climate-focused forestry knowledge and Indigenous forest knowledge are mutually supportive tools. In addition to these and many more outcomes, the project has cemented a partnership between the three settler and Indigenous groups to continue enacting what reconciliation, allyship, and forest care can mean in our region.

This is just the first phase of what will be a continuation of this partnership and this work. We will continue to work together to build pathways toward land-based reconciliation and directly support Indigenous-led conservation ventures.





Project Successes

From storytelling outputs, including videos and podcasts, to on-the-ground capacity-building events such as working woodlot tours and partnership gatherings, the first phase of the Common Ground Project brought dozens of organizations and individuals together around forest conservation, management, rights, and access.

In May 2022, Community Forests International joined Wabanaki Maple and the Nashwaak Watershed Association for a day of tree planting along the Nashwaak River with youth from Neqotkuk (Tobique First Nation) and Perth-Andover, New Brunswick.

325

Event
Participants

50

Educational Videos
on Social Media

8

Technical
Workshops

6

Podcast
Episodes

12

Organizations
Engaged

8

Short
Films

18

Forest
Days



Storytelling Highlight

Asitu'lisk: A Land Back Story in Mi'gma'gi

In the spring of 2022, we were invited to film a ceremony in which Jim and Margaret Drescher returned Windhorse Farm—a 200-acre farm, forest, and gathering place on the south shore of Nova Scotia—to the care of Mi'kmaq communities.

Thousands of people have experienced the old-growth forest, lush permaculture gardens, and vibrant community that surrounds Windhorse. For the last two centuries, Windhorse was cared for by settler families who understood how precious the land was and practiced sustainable forestry and agriculture—protecting the land for future generations to discover and enjoy.

In 1990, the Drescher family and supportive friends purchased the land to prevent the forest from being clearcut. After 30 years of legal ownership, they returned the forest and fields to the Mi'kmaq in the spirit of reconciliation. Through a combination of purchase and gift, the Dreschers transferred the land to the Ulnooweg Education Centre. Ulnooweg renamed the area Asitu'lisk, meaning “that which gives you balance.” Asitu'lisk will become a center for healing and land-based education for Mi'kmaq youth—continuing to do what it does best. Ulnooweg hosted several Common Ground events at Asitu'lisk, sharing its cultural and forest benefits with participants.

“We hope [the Dreschers] inspire others in the region and across the country to follow their lead in what real reconciliation and constructive new relationships look like.”

- Chris Googoo, COO, Ulnooweg

Learn more about Asitu'lisk in a video from the opening ceremony in July 2022 →



Project partners hosted workshops for forest professionals, woodlot tours, and educational events for the public across the Maritimes. Left, Megan de Graaf (Community Forests International) speaks to a group of forest professionals in Nova Scotia about the effect of climate change on the Wabanaki forest at a Common Ground event hosted by the Family Forest Network at the Otter Ponds Demonstration Forest.



Storytelling Highlight

Cecelia Brooks: Preserving Wolastoqey Knowledge and Values

Through this project, we got to know Cecelia Brooks from Sitansisk (St. Mary's First Nation), in New Brunswick. Cecelia is the Water Grandmother at the Canadian Rivers Institute and previously served as Science Director for the Maliseet Nation Conservation Council. She is also an entrepreneur dedicated to sharing traditional Wolastoqey medicines and plant knowledge with the Fredericton community. Cecelia and her son Anthony practice and share their knowledge through public and business ventures that promote the preservation and advancement of Indigenous knowledge and values through medicine walks, workshops, and culinary experiences.

“My purpose at this stage in my life is for me to pass on the knowledge to as many of our young people as I can. I want to teach them how to use the land and respect the land.”

- Cecelia Brooks, Sitansisk (St. Mary's First Nation)

Listen to Cecelia's story in *Npisun*, a video by Desmond Simon →



Event Highlight

The Legend of Maple Syrup: Sweet Water Harvesting in Unama'ki

In March 2022, Ulnooweg hosted a workshop with Mary Louise Bernard of Wagmatcook First Nation, who shared the Mi'kmaw legend of maple syrup with participants. Mary Louise is the author of the book “Sismioqnapui'skwe'j – Sweet Water Maiden: The Legend of Maple Syrup,” which she compiled from her communities' oral traditions of sweet water and maple syrup making. During the workshop, participants learned about traditional harvesting practices and the ceremonies that go along with them. They discussed the benefits of sweet water and how it has changed over time and with a changing environment. The event had 47 participants, many of whom were Mi'kmaw Grandmothers. Following the presentation, Mary Louise, Judy Bernard, and Joe Googoo facilitated a demonstration of sweet water harvesting and accompanying ceremonies at Waycobah First Nation.

Common Ground Principles

This partnership taught our organizations a lot about reconciliation and allyship. Together, we identified six principles critical to building common ground between communities from diverse backgrounds.

Build trusting relationships

Building common ground is fundamentally about building trust, and there is a special relationship between trust and communication. The more we communicate our unique perspectives and experiences between different communities—whether in weekly convenings, open forest days, or shared storytelling—the more understanding and trust grow. And the more trust grows between diverse collaborators, the easier it becomes to communicate, which helps us move this shared work forward.

Put reconciliation into action

It's not enough to talk about the importance of reconciliation—truth needs to be accompanied by action and reciprocity.

“I hope Windhorse Farm [being returned to its original Mi’kmaw caretakers] becomes a model of what participating in reconciliation actually looks like. We want to move away from talking about reconciliation as a noun and move towards using it as a verb.”

- Chris Googoo, COO, Ulnooweg

Learn the story of the land through Indigenous languages

The original inhabitants of this land have passed down language, including place names and the names of flora and fauna, since time immemorial. The way that Indigenous languages describe the Wabanaki forest reveals the history of colonization and the challenge of climate change. For example, there is often no Indigenous word for an invasive species. There is so much we can learn about the land through language.

“The descriptive nature of the Mi’kmaw language holds valuable lessons for all of us about the interconnectedness of nature and our place within it. We can learn more about underlying Indigenous rights through sharing the language, stories and histories of the forests we steward.”

- Christie Verstraten, Program Director, Nova Scotia Woodlot Owners and Operators Association

Use two-eyed-seeing as a guide, but practice it with care.

Two-eyed seeing—*Etuaptmumk* in Mi'kmaw—incorporates Indigenous and Western knowledge, bridging scientific methods and research with millennia-old Indigenous practices. It provides an exciting pathway for systematically solving social and environmental challenges, and many people are eager to learn and apply these concepts. It is important to note, however, that sharing Indigenous knowledge must be done with care and consent; it can be sacred and is not meant to be applied by everyone.

Suzanne Greenlaw, a Ph.D. candidate and member of the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, explained on the Common Ground podcast that some of the issues that can arise when settlers try to apply Indigenous knowledge, using sweetgrass harvesting as an example:

“A lot of people are interested in going out and identifying sweetgrass and picking it. And that concerns a lot of native people because you’re not taking the ethics of their values with you. You don’t have that long history or the relationship and, potentially, the sort of internal governance that comes with the ethics and the values that you’ve been told all your life. You’re not carrying the cultural teachings with you.”

Challenge concepts of ownership

Many family forest owners take great pride in their history of land ownership; however, land ownership is a Western concept, and to build common ground, we have to recognize and respect the long history of Indigenous peoples’ connections to the land in this region. One of the ways we can do this is by shifting our language away from terms like “landowner” or “woodlot owner” to more inclusive words like “forest caretaker” or “forest keeper.”

“What we’re asking and requiring of non-Indigenous people is to think more openly and broadly about their perspective on land ownership and the history of stewardship and roles and responsibilities towards land.”

- shalan joudry, Mi'kmaw ecologist and narrative artist

Credit Indigenous methods of ecological forestry

There is a deep history of people interacting with the Wabanaki forest in regenerative ways that reach far beyond the last 300 years of colonization. So many of the tools and methods that we rely on to better care for this forest today are echoes of the same methods that the region’s first peoples use. Settler forest professionals should be mindful of this when describing ecological forestry practices.



In August 2022, Community Forests International staff led a forest walk for members of Open Sky Co-operative, a charity in Sackville, New Brunswick, that provides support to adults who experience barriers due to social or mental health challenges.



Tune in to Below the Canopy

As part of the Common Ground Project, Community Forests International produced a podcast called Below the Canopy, in which host and forest ecologist Megan de Graaf interviews inspiring individuals about their relationships to the land.

[Listen to Below the Canopy →](#)



Acknowledgements

The first phase of the Common Ground Project would not have been possible without the strategic direction and support of the following individuals and organizations:

Christie Verstraten

Anne Herteis

Chris Googoo

Jen MacGillivray

Jocelyn Marshall

Dani Miller

Andy Kekacs

Funders

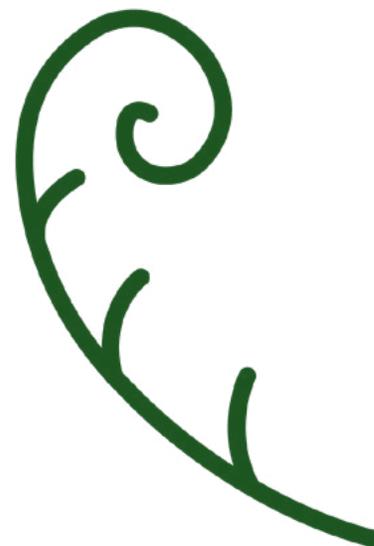
The Catherine Donnelly Foundation

The Chawkers Foundation

Environment and Climate Change Canada

New Brunswick Environmental Trust Fund

We would also like to extend our sincerest thanks to the forest caretakers, forest professionals, knowledge keepers, elders, and creative professionals who generously shared their time, expertise, and experiences with us through this project.



Artwork by Emma Hassencahl-Perley

Graphic Design by Erin Goodine

