

Wachiya, Good morning, Bonjour.

I would like to thank all of you who have agreed to participate in this important forum where we will be making our best efforts to devise innovative and creative programs and other initiatives designed to improve the standard of living for our hunters and trappers and to make the pursuit of the traditional Cree way of life a financially realistic and rewarding option.

Over the last 45 years, our Cree Nation has made extraordinary gains in terms of giving expression to our Treaty rights, our Indigenous rights and our human rights. We have set new standards to ensure that our communities and region have become very vibrant places to live, and we have taken steps to ensure our rightful place in the economic and political development of our region. We have used the tools available to us through the JBNQA to assert our rights, to develop our communities, and to contribute substantially to the economic development of our traditional territory. We have established important benchmarks and examples of what genuine reconciliation can look like. And, over the years, we have made the gains we have made because we have been able to argue that we have continued to occupy our traditional territory in its entirety. We have relied on the commitment of our hunters and trappers to maintain the traditional Cree way of life to make these arguments and to achieve our enormous successes. It is time now for us to give back to our hunters and trappers,

and to ensure that their commitment to the traditional Cree way of life remains a viable option—financially and socially.

We often say that our connection to our land—Eeyou Istchee—is “sacred”.

We say this because our connection to the land is the core and the heart of who we are as a culture and as a people. It is the land, and our connection to it, that has been the source of our survival, our cultural practices, our social relationships and our values. Our connection to the land is foundational and it is core to who we are.

Our Cree hunters and trappers represent the cultural bedrock of our Cree Nation. They are the true keepers of our culture and our values which derive from our deep relationship with the land. It is also our hunters and trappers who truly occupy the entirety of Eeyou Istchee and on whom we continue to rely to establish our Cree rights within the territory.

At the same time, we know that over the past 45 years the role of traditional pursuits, while it continues to be the cornerstone of our culture, is involving fewer of our people. Our Treaty—the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement*—is based on the reality of our traditional way of life, and the recognition that measures must be put in place to ensure its support and maintenance. The measures that were put in place in 1975 to support the traditional way of life were acceptable at that time, but we are now 45 years

later and it is time to review, to modify and to creatively reconfigure the ways in which we can support our hunters and trappers going forward.

I think it is fair to say that we have all acknowledged that there are very serious financial obstacles for our hunters to continue living on the land.

This was not the spirit or the intent of the JBNQA. Therefore, we must work together to put into place new initiatives to create more income for our hunters and trappers and bring their income levels up to a standard that is realistic and that genuinely honours their place in Cree society.

It is by supporting our hunters and trappers that we are ensuring that we have the basis for protecting the environment throughout Eeyou Istchee; it is our hunters and trappers who will be the primary protectors of our language; and ensuring their financial well-being is the key to the preservation of Cree culture. Therefore, I genuinely believe that we have both a moral responsibility and a social responsibility to do what we can to support them.

And that is why I am here, and this is the purpose of this gathering. I have asked all of you, in advance of this meeting, to come prepared with ideas, with suggestions and with real and workable initiatives that we can, in the first instance, bring to our hunters and trappers for their consideration.

Then, we must take our innovative ideas to governments and renegotiate

important sections of the JBNQA to ensure that the traditional way of life can be maintained.

I am personally anxious to get started on this meaningful challenge. I remain personally committed to the view that as we improve the standard of living in our communities, and as we make gains in ensuring that no development can take place within our traditional territory without our consent, and as we become more involved, ourselves, in the development of resources on our traditional territory, and as we develop important Nation-to-Nation relations with governments, we cannot leave anyone behind. In particular, we cannot leave our hunters behind. It is imperative that as we move forward in securing a solid economic foundation for our young Indigenous Nation, we must also honour and show respect for where we come from, and respect individual choices to pursue the traditional Cree way of life. By taking on this challenge we honour our hunters, and we also honour and give expression to a vital pillar of our Treaty.

In addressing this issue, we will of course need to find replacements for the income which historically was derived from the Fur Trade. It is within the memory of our current Elders that the furs that were harvested brought quite good prices and there was sufficient income for that to be a very viable undertaking by our people. However, the current reality, as we know, is very different and fur prices are not sufficient to maintain an adequate

annual income. To do this we will need to find economic activities which derive from, or are closely related to the traditional way of life, so that our people who choose to continue our Cree way of life can do so in relative comfort.

It is for these reasons that I have chosen to bring together our various Cree entities that can potentially play a very important role in our taking on this challenge. We have our Cree Native Arts and Crafts Association, we have our Cree Outfitters and Tourism Association, we have our Cree Nation Government's Industry and Commerce Department, and of course, we also have the experience and the skills to negotiate with other Governments.

And, of course, we will need to negotiate changes to the Income Security Program itself to eliminate the obstacles which currently prevent our hunters and trappers from engaging in economic activities which would support and enhance their choice of pursuing a traditional way of life. It is time to bring the Income Security Program into the 21st century and it is time that this Program reflects current Cree realities.

I very much look forward to hearing about the results of this Conference and I am looking forward to contributing as best I can to this very noble and worthwhile cause.

I should also mention that it is urgent that we work quickly to renew and renovate the support system currently in place to support our hunters. I have observed across the country how many of our Indigenous brothers and sisters are trying to pay honour to their traditional way of life, but in many cases unfortunately, after it is too late. In too many cases across the country, the traditional way of life has not been maintained and has been lost. There are, of course, good reasons for this having to do with the lack of resources and the absence of agreements that put the traditional way of life front-and-center, the erosion of traditional territories through resource development for which no consent has been obtained, and the absence of legal obligations on the part of governments.

Indigenous peoples in other parts of the country are, in fact, envious of our having maintained our traditional way of life and our language, and they wish they could be in our situation. We here in Eeyou Istchee, have a Treaty which has at its core an acknowledgment that our people have the right to choose to maintain a traditional way of life or to enter the modern economy. It is a Treaty right and an obligation on the part of governments to make that choice a real alternative and a viable reality.

We, here in Eeyou Istchee, have the financial resources, the negotiating experience, the Treaty, and the relationship with governments to ensure that the traditional way of life remains a viable option.

So, let us all roll up our sleeves and get to work on this very honourable and noble cause and let us show our Cree hunters and trappers the respect and the support they deserve.

Miigwetch.