

RESEARCH VIDEO

The Search for Wellness Through Ancestral Languages

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This video combines visual storytelling and orature to present the findings of a study examining the relationship between speaking Ancestral Languages and individual and communal well-being. The study was conducted by a team of four Indigenous researchers and one non-Indigenous research associate (Dr. Davina Rousell, Crystal

Wood, Dr. Velvalee Georges, Sherryl Sewepagaham, and Joline Bull) from the Supporting Indigenous Languages Research (SILR) project housed in the University of Alberta Office of the Vice-Provost, Indigenous Programming and Research. We sought to learn about the ways in which knowing and speaking one's Ancestral Language(s) fosters well-being in mind, body, spirit, and emotions.

The project began in 2022 with a systematic literature review. However, it became clear that the answers we were seeking did not reside in the literature, most of which reflected Western knowledge and ways of knowing, but with the Ancestral Language Speakers who were the keepers of this knowledge. We also realized that this work required a relational approach grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems and methodologies, and the members of SILR's Indigenous Advisory Council—Elder Dr. Elmer Ghostkeeper, Language Keeper Doreen Frencheater, Elder Molly Chisaakay, and Elder Mary Cardinal-Collins—gifted the research team with the principles and tools for a relational approach to this research.

To begin, they advised us to undertake a searching journey in which we considered how best to move away from the colonial connotations of "research." They urged us to honour relationality and ensure that we were building relationships with participants based on accountability, respect, and reciprocity, and they directed us to honour orature and visual representation. Finally, they highlighted the importance of Indigenous data sovereignty, of making sure that the participants in the study retained control of the knowledge they shared in perpetuity. Of particular importance was their directive, at the beginning of our searching journey, not to use Roman orthography or written text. Reflecting upon this guidance, we decided to use visuals throughout our process to document and understand what was shared during each visiting with an Ancestral Language Keeper. For the same reason, we did not create a transcript of the research findings video we later created. This practice provided a more authentic way of documenting the findings, one in which the voices of the research participants were preserved.

The team secured ethics approval from the University of Alberta's research ethics board and conducted a "human literature review" through a series of visits with twenty-three Ancestral Language Keepers speaking Nehiyawewin, Michif, Dene Tha', and Anishinaabe. The participants included the members of our advisory team, Elder Dr. Elmer Ghostkeeper, Language Keeper Doreen Frencheater, Elder Molly Chisaakay, and Elder Mary Cardinal-Collins, who guided us on who else we should sit down with for a visiting. Other participants included Elder Earl Wood, Lawrence Berland, Carla Chisaakay, Sharlene Alook, and Tabilaah. The video does not include fourteen participants who preferred not to be included in the video or for their names not to be shared.

These visits were all recorded in the spring and summer of 2023. After viewing the raw data recordings, the research participants engaged in talking circles, during which the research team produced hand-drawn visuals representing the core themes and teachings shared in the visits. Indigenous graphic recorder Michelle Buchholz created a pictograph based on these visuals that synthesizes the study's research findings, which was reviewed by each Ancestral Language Speaker and Knowledge Holder before being used as the basis for this research findings video. The final version of the research findings video (which includes footage from only the nine named participants listed above in accordance with the wishes of the participants) went through the same review process and was approved by research participants in May 2024. Rather than the external anonymous peer review process that scholarship usually undergoes in a conventional Western research model, we determined that this was the appropriate mode of review because the participants are the knowledge holders to whom we are accountable and who can assess if we accurately and responsibly represented the knowledge shared.

In certain knowledge systems, there are protocols around sharing knowledge, and in this case the research participants directed us on what parts of our research were appropriate to share publicly. The visual presentation of the findings as a pictograph and video intentionally moves the findings away from traditional academic presentations of research findings and instead invites each viewer on a journey of searching and reflection that is neither determinative nor prescriptive. This is important because this research findings video showcases how understanding the relationship between Ancestral Languages and well-being is a lifelong process and journey that does not have a particular answer, path, or destination.

Our hope is that the pictograph and video are shared widely among Indigenous communities and invite Indigenous youth, adults, and Elders on a journey of connecting with and learning their Ancestral Language(s). This video is being published with the permission of all research participants, but they have asked that access to it be limited, to the extent possible, to Ancestral Language instructors, Indigenous organizations, schools with Indigenous students, and Ancestral Language learners. We ask that those who are watching and engaging with the knowledge shared in the research findings video and pictograph honour the request of the participants and that they do not download, screen record, screenshot, share on social media, or otherwise share or repurpose this video in ways that do not align with its intended usage. For this reason, the video is not licensed under a Creative Commons license. The findings video may be used for research, teaching, workshops, and events that support Indigenous language revitalization and preservation (by, for example, schools, Indigenous organizations, communities, and families). If you are unsure whether a potential use is appropriate, please reach out to davinarousell@gmail.com with your query.

Keywords: Indigenous; ancestral languages; well-being; orature; revitalization; healing

The Search for Wellness Through Ancestral Languages

Watch [The Search for Wellness Through Ancestral Languages](#).

Citation Guidelines

We ask that the knowledge shared within the video and pictograph be cited in this manner:

To cite the full video:

Georges, Velvalee, Davina Rousell, Crystal Wood, Sherryl Sewepagaham, Joline Bull, Elmer Ghostkeeper, Doreen Frencheater, Molly Chisaakay, Mary Cardinal-Collins, Earl Wood, Lawrence Berland, Carla Chisaakay, Sharlene Alook, and Tabilaah. 2025. "The Search for Wellness Through Ancestral Languages." *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 8 (1). <https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.329>.

In-text citation: (Georges et al. 2025)

To cite a specific section of the video:

[Name of Language Keeper.] 2025. [Role and Ancestral Language of Language Keeper.] [Time Stamp]. In "The Search for Wellness Through Ancestral Languages," by Velvalee Georges, Davina Rousell, Crystal Wood, Sherryl Sewepagaham, Joline Bull, Elmer Ghostkeeper, Doreen Frencheater, Molly Chisaakay, Mary Cardinal-Collins, Earl Wood, Lawrence Berland, Carla Chisaakay, Sharlene Alook, and Tabilaah. *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 8 (1). <https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.329>.

In-text citation: (Chisaakay, Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Dene Tha', 3:09-4:06, in Georges et al. 2025)

Citing Language Keepers by Time Stamp

3:09–4:06: Chisaakay, Molly. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Dene Tha'.

4:07–5:10: Alook, Sharlene. Ancestral Language Keeper, Cree.

5:25–5:59: Tabilaah. Dene Tha' and Cree Ancestral Language Learner.

6:00–10:07: Ghostkeeper, Elmer. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Northern Michif and Bushland Cree.

10:36–11:38: Wood, Earl. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Cree.

11:50–13:49: Cardinal-Collins, Mary. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Plains Cree.

14:12–15:00: Berland, Lawrence. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Sagaw Nehiyawewin.

15:01–16:22: Chisaakay, Carla. Ancestral Language Keeper, Dene Tha'.

16:43–19:48: Frencheater, Doreen. Ancestral Language Keeper, Cree and Anishinaabe.

20:02–20:17: Berland, Lawrence. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Sagaw Nehiyawewin.

20:18–21:02: Alook, Sharlene. Ancestral Language Keeper, Cree.

21:02–23:02: Wood, Earl. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Cree.

23:39–24:28: Alook, Sharlene. Ancestral Language Keeper, Cree.

24:29–26:52: Chisaakay, Molly. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Dene Tha'.

26:53–29:46: Ghostkeeper, Elmer. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Northern Michif and Bushland Cree.

29:47–30:35: Chisaakay, Molly. Elder and Ancestral Language Keeper, Dene Tha'.

Acknowledgements

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Competing Interests

The contributors have no competing interests to declare.

Ethics and Consent

This research received ethics approval from the University of Alberta's research ethics board (ID Pro00120720).

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