

Courage My Friends Podcast Series III – Episode 9
COP15 and 30x30 Part II: Indigenous-Led Conservation and Saving the Greenbelt

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: I was already worried about my job, food and housing. So now I have to worry about healthcare as well?

STREET VOICE 2: Seems like we wanna jump back to normalcy so bad that we're not even trying to be careful at this point.

STREET VOICE 3: This is a 911 kind of situation for global climate crisis. This planet is our only home and billionaires space-race is not a solution. The earth is crying for survival. It is time for action.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: What are the principles of Indigenous-led conservation? What is the significance of Ontario's Greenbelt for First Nations, and what is the relationship between conservation and reconciliation?

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

In the second part of this two-part episode of the Courage My Friends' podcast *COP15 and 30x30: Indigenous-Led Conservation and Saving the Greenbelt*, Manager at Springwater Provincial Park and former Chief of the Beausoleil First Nation, Jeff Monague, discusses the meaning of Indigenous approaches to conservation and the dangers facing Ontario's Greenbelt.

Jeff. Welcome. Thank you so much for joining us.

JEFF: I'm honored to be here. Thank you.

RESH: So when it comes to the current health of our global ecosystems and biodiversity, the news is not good. Climate scientists are reporting approximately a million plant and animal species on the verge of extinction. Land, wetland and marine ecosystems are in serious decline. As the Manager of Ontario's Springwater Provincial Park, and as a member and former Chief of the Beausoleil First Nation on Christian Island on Georgian Bay, you have sort of a front row seat to the state of Canada's biodiversity. So Jeff, what are you seeing?

JEFF: Well, what I'm seeing is really a continuation of what I was seeing when I was growing up as a child. So I live on Christian Island in Georgian Bay. Christian Island in Georgia Bay it's like a canary. We are the ones that experience and feel things - whatever's happening on the mainland, development of any kind. We tend to see it in the water. So we see the changes happening. And so becoming a part of the inland, the mainland in this partnership that we have with the province of Ontario.

I don't work for the Ontario government. I work for the Beausoleil First Nation, which is my home community on Christian Island. I'm a co-manager with the Ontario government. But we basically, make a lot of decisions through consultation, concerning the property itself. And so we're helping to maintain this 477 acres which is five minutes north of one of the largest urban centers in Ontario, Barrie.

RESH: Right, meaning the 477 acres of Springwater Provincial Park.

JEFF: It is a different world in the sense that the island where I come from has a much greater biodiversity than this little plot of land,

When I first got there, one of the first things I did was to begin to walk the land to, to read the land, to get a feel of what the land was about. It wasn't in its most healthy state, and it probably hadn't been for some time. There were still birds, still leaves in the trees and things like that. But people tend to think that that's fine. That everything seems to be okay. But underneath all of that, underneath all of that, you don't have a lot of the smaller things that are needed to be there. So in my language, when we say insect, we say Medosug (?) And that literally means the little spirits. So the medosug are not there. So the little spirits are not there to do their work. And that's one of the things I noticed in just walking the land.

There's a good variety of what could be anywhere, in the sense that there's a wetland. There's conifers, and then there's the desiduous population of trees. There's different sands, mud, the deep dark soil from the wetlands. And then there's the dry sandy soils.

And then there's the acidic soils. Because the province of Ontario had turned this piece of property into a tree nursery. So what they grew primarily were Evergreens. So what that does is that changes the soil. It changes the soil into an acidic soil. So a lot of the things that probably were there, a lot of the plants, flowers and everything else that were indigenous to that area were no longer there.

It would take some remediation in order to get back to that place of where that land was healthier. And that wasn't happening.

I guess it wasn't really surprising. It was more of a surprise in the sense of how far all of these experts would've let the land go.

Because it was governed by the province, who of course threw scientists in there and they made decisions on the property. They were growing trees that were not indigenous to the property itself or even to the territory. So there are trees in there that are from South Carolina, and even further down into the United States. There's a tulip tree on the property as well. And I'm probably pretty lucky in the sense that those trees didn't become an invasive species on their own. They probably took, but I don't think they reproduced. Trees are just like us. We can grow anywhere, but we're happiest in certain places.

RESH: When I went onto the Christian island website, the first thing I see is they're talking about the loss of the forked three-awned grass, otherwise known as ice-age grass, which is found throughout the island and right now is on the Species-at-Risk list.

JEFF: Yes. So that would be everywhere else in Ontario, that that grass is no longer there. But when we were growing up, it was a part of our land there.

But I remember we were told biologists discovered that we had this grass or it was unique and it should remain untouched. Well, it always had been. But they actually told us that we should not touch it in any way. But I remember growing up as a kid and seeing that particular area that they talked about not touching as being part of our regular spring fires.

It was a normal thing for people that they would burn the grasslands and allow for things to regenerate. So those grasses have been burned over time, and then they regenerated. And that's what the old ones, the old people before me had been doing continuously for decades.

That's one of the things that I was able to see that's different.

So we would become restricted in our own territory and what we would do with this property, even though it was us who had maintained it up to that point. And everywhere else in Ontario, it's not there anymore. The thinking, it just boggles my mind.

RESH: Right, so Indigenous Peoples restricted and their conservation practices essentially prohibited by conservation measures enacted by the province of Ontario.

As Park Manager of Springwater Provincial Park, and working on behalf of Beausoleil First Nation. Jeff, tell us a bit more about your work and approach.

JEFF: We look after the provincial park in partnership with the Province of Ontario. And that's an agreement that's began in 2015. We've just recently revisited and re-upped that agreement to another six years. But the reason why we went there, the reason why it was important for us to go there, was that this piece of property was important to our history.

So we used that property. We actually have old trail systems that run through that property as part of our portage between Lake Simcoe and Nottawasaga Bay to Georgian Bay. So we came through that property for thousands of years. The old trail would still be there. Artifacts are still pretty prominent there. I don't tell people where they're, because I don't want them to be raided. But we have discovered them along the way. So it was also known to be a ceremonial area for us because of the water. And we did ceremony in that area for generations.

So one of the first things that I did when I got there was I invited our traditional people, people who follow our traditional teachings to come in and to do ceremony on the land. So they did that. And they also brought in Seers. This is where we take a different leap again from the larger society. And we asked them to give us a view of what they saw on the land.

They were able to see that a lot of the things that were once represented there were no longer represented there. But the strong view that they came away with was that the spirituality or the spiritual part of the land was still there and it was calling for us to do ceremony.

So we do that. We now have five sweat-lodges on the property. And I've been out there on days doing sweats when all of them are operating at once. So there's a lot of really good things that are happening on the property itself in the sense that we're doing all of this consultation with our own Creator to help us to understand and then see what needs to be done in the future.

This partnership, anyway, it came about because the province was looking to close this little park around 2012. And we started to talk to them at that point in time.

A perfect storm happened where Idle No More became a huge movement throughout Canada. So a few of our members went in and occupied the park. Ontario wouldn't talk to us until we had them cleared out. And we didn't wanna do that.

I come from a background of teaching. I was a teacher at Georgian College and I always was looking for a place where we could establish a school and teach about our ways and our understanding of the land.

And I saw that this could be part of that vision. So in talking with Elders we decided that we would speak with protestors and do it in a good way. So they agreed with us. We would make a presentation to Ontario and ask for that property. We would ask for that property back because it once belonged to our people. And we wanted to join

back up with the spiritual part of the land and to create ceremony and to begin to do teachings there. So it was an educational vision, a vision of education that we had.

So we made that proposal to Ontario. They agreed.

It wasn't that easy because the local population also didn't want us there as Indigenous people.

We received a lot of racism. We had our windows broken, buildings spray-painted. We had our teaching-lodges and sweat-lodges spray-painted as well. You know, people telling us in not so good terms to, get out, go back where we came from, ironically.

We also had our tepes burned. Things like that.

But one of the things that I wanted to do was to have my staff not fight back. They were angry. . But I said we would treat people with kindness and that we would eventually, hopefully win people over. And we've sort of done that. We have people that come by and have been coming by for years to that park. And they're part of the local community. We know them now. We know them quite well and, they understand that we're no longer a threat and we have partners in the community.

We offer programs to the local school boards. So they come in and we provide their students with an experience, an Indigenous experience on the land.

They get off their bus, we bring them out and we take them on a medicine walk. We show them what the land can give you, at any time of the year it doesn't matter, even in the winter or when it rains, whenever - that you can subsist on that land. And we show them all the plants and the trees and anything else that you might be able to subsist on.

So we take them on medicine walk. And then we show them how to live on the land, how we would build a shelter from nothing. We don't use tools. We use everything that's available on the ground. We don't cut trees. And it's a real teaching tool to have people understand that you can treat the land in a better way. That you don't have to cut a tree if you want a house. You don't have to take down swaths of trees if you want a house. And if people would understand that they can just live in the forest rather than clear the forest to live there. That it would be a much better way of doing things.

And that comes from the knowledge that our people had. And it's something that we have always had a struggle with. So the federal government had for years been wanting to clear cut and to build subdivisions. We always struggled against that.

Over the years they denied funding if we didn't do it. So they put us in these positions where that's what we had to do and it's a sad way of having to live.

We show the students how to build a fire. Again, we don't use any tools. We don't use matches, lighters, anything. We do everything from scratch. And then they get to go home on the bus, but they go home with a whole new understanding of how they are part of everything. How they're part of that land. No different from a tree because we all had the same needs as any of those trees. We need the water, we need the sun. We need the wind. We need the air, we need the earth. We need all of those things in order to survive. So we teach them how all of that matters and how all of that needs to be respected and protected.

RESH: So instead of an approach to conservation that aims to keep people away, the Indigenous approach is more about encouraging people to connect and to coexist with the natural world.

And you know the recent COP15 Global Gathering on Biological Diversity in Montreal last December led to the unanimous approval of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework with a number of targets aimed at halting and reversing nature loss.

Two of the major outcomes are the 30x30 target, that all countries commit to reaching 30% conservation of land and water by the year 2030. And that Indigenous-led conservation is essential in getting us to this target. So in terms of what you were talking about, the disrespect, the racism that these approaches were facing, it seems that now this is the approach we need in order to really reverse this tide of extinction and biodiversity loss.

So could you speak a bit more to what are the principles or key principles of Indigenous-led conservation?

JEFF: The key principle I think is to have the land returned back to its natural state.

All of these protocols .. Everything is quantified.

In my world we don't do that. . We don't say, this is what it's gonna cost me to return this forest back to what it was. We just say, this is how we're gonna do this. We're going to not use this land for what it had been used for. And we're just gonna allow the natural things to come back.

In some cases, which is what we did at Springwater Provincial Park, we began to plant some of the Indigenous species into that land once again. And it resulted in the return of a lot of the insects that weren't there, which led to the return of a lot of the snakes that weren't there, which led to a return of a lot of the rodents that weren't there, and so on and so on.

But the other side of it is that we did that without funding. We just did it on our own. In the larger society everything is quantified and people become afraid of it. People become afraid. So they stop these initiatives because they put a price tag on it. Then they become a political football because of the fact that there's a price tag on it.

Rather than just saying that if we want the land to regenerate, then we let the land regenerate. We let the land do it itself. And we can help it in certain parts, in certain ways. And we could probably do that by allowing people who have an interest in that sort of thing to help to regenerate it. And I'm sure people would volunteer to do that.

There's enough people that have this understanding of their place as a human being on this earth that they would be willing to help the land to come back to what it was, to regenerate. But it's not gonna happen if you continue to have development all around areas.

RESH: And so when we're talking about Indigenous conservation, we know that globally, Indigenous Peoples account for 6% of the global population, their lands are 20% of the earth, which contains 80% of the world's biodiversity.

So do we see the same pattern in Canada that even though Indigenous Peoples aren't numerically a large population, that a great deal of biodiversity is on their territories?

JEFF: Yeah, it is a very similar pattern. We live on these small parcels of land and the community I come from, we have the richest biodiversity anywhere in the area around us, throughout the county.

There are plants, birds, and other species that you don't find over here on the mainland. I've been invited to visit, towns, shorelines, to read the land and to try to figure out what they need in order to revitalize their shorelines. And I'm able to see very quickly that they lack the shoreline species of plants and insects. And it really starts in the water. So if the water is missing a lot of the chain, the little spirits that are supposed to be there in the water, if it's missing any of that, then you're not gonna have the kind of biodiversity that you're looking for.

And that chain goes all the way into the water, but it also goes all the way up on the land as well. It really makes a difference. If your water is not clean, then your land is not going to have what it's supposed to have.

We do so much damage on our shorelines. If you go to my community, you know 40 years ago, we didn't have beachfront properties. The only people that lived on the beachfront were the cottagers. And that was a government program where they brought in leases, cottage leases, and they put the cottages all along the shoreline.

Whereas if you looked at our village area, nobody is living on the shoreline properties. We still went to the water everyday, but we didn't live there. We respected that area. We also respected the elements and we stayed inland.

When you start to develop these shorelines and the way that they are, and they're paved all the way down to the water - they've even paved into the water to get folks into the water. You start to change everything, you change the natural things that are supposed to be there. You're creating pollution. You're killing a lot of the species that

are there. We need to look at, to a greater degree, how we're affecting things. How we're affecting the plants and the animals as we're making changes within our own environment.

To make us more comfortable; we're making everybody else uncomfortable.

RESH: This approach to conservation, Indigenous approaches to conservation, again, as you're saying, is very rooted within Indigenous cultures, philosophy, practice, which is deeply interconnected with the land and nature.

We see this also echoed within Land Acknowledgements, that Indigenous relationships to the land are more grounded in the idea of stewardship rather than ownership.

JEFF: We are part of the land. And the larger society doesn't have that understanding. It's like their understanding of Indigenous people. That has been removed from them. That part of it has been erased from their sight. That part of understanding of how we are connected to all of this is no longer there.

And I always assumed that it was, I always assumed that people grew up like I did, and they understood the impacts of what they do when they build highways through wetlands or things like that. I found that's not really the case.

When I became a teacher in Simcoe County, I taught my language and I taught grades, junior kindergarten all the way up to high school. And then later on I went to teach at Georgian College. But every level that I taught, I guess when I started, I assumed that they were like me, that they knew these things. And I had quickly learned that no, these kids don't know anything.

So I brought that into the teaching. So I started taking kids out of the classroom. I went out into properties that had trees. Even if they had a few trees on that property, I went out and I would teach them about their connection to it all. I did this over and over.

A lot of principals didn't understand what I was doing. Now it's called outdoor education. But it's that understanding of who we are. You give that kid that little connection. And you know, maybe in 20 years they'll be the ones that are thinking twice. I'm not gonna drive down the 400 and see entire swaths of land cleared and then a building put in the center of all of that. That bothers me. That bothers me to no end. And if it doesn't bother you, then there's something wrong.

One of the saddest things that I experience when I'm out here in the larger society, is to see that kind of thing and to see the disconnection.

In my background, I was also a Chief of my community. So I was with an Elder one time in a taxi in Ottawa. We were meeting with some government officials. And as we got out of the vehicle, the Elder put his feet on the pavement and he said, "See,

this is what's wrong here." I said, "What's that?" And he said, " They don't feel the land cuz all of this is in the way. They don't feel it anymore. So they don't care about it."

And that's always stayed with me. He was right. And he's no longer with us. But that has stayed with me. So that is what drives me to to try to get people to understand that. Just that simple part of it.

RESH: Indigenous approaches to conservation obviously are not new, right? So this is part and parcel of Indigenous worldviews cultures. But it is only recently that the government of Canada recognized and began funding this approach to conservation through IPCAs or Indigenous Protected Conservation Areas, which are natural areas that are managed by Indigenous government and knowledge systems.

Before that, conservation was under State management. What are some of the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous or State approaches to conservation?

JEFF: The difference is that we would just leave the land alone. Conservation means that you're just allowing that land to live and breathe just like we do.

Now for us today, that means a different thing because encroachment is still a huge thing. The Beausoleil First Nation is made up of not only Christian Island, but also Hope Island and Beckwith Island. Two of those islands are uninhabited. But we see a lot of depletion of the forest from our visitors. So we have people that come to those beaches. Up until we started to really enforce things on that land, it was a wild west. We had people come in and they would cut down trees and they would just leave garbage everywhere. And they were really wrecking those properties and not respecting our ownership of it.

So we sent our bylaw officers or police over. It was gonna be a battle with the tourist. So we had to do things a little bit differently - have the larger society understand things in their way.

So for the first time ever, we started to put our own rules into place. Laws into place. Some of them are still being disrespected because people don't want to respect an Indigenous person's law to preserve the land. So we did start to meet up with a lot of pushback.

People wrote to their provincial members of parliament and they also wrote to their federal members of parliament asking that something be done about us. Cause we're not allowing them on our land. So those are the kinds of resistance we meet. But those lands had been there for hundreds of thousands of years and when nobody was on them, they were very healthy .

RESH: And it's interesting that studies have found that Indigenous protected lands and areas actually have greater conservation success than non-Indigenous

conservation areas. Could you speak a bit to this and perhaps give another example of an Indigenous-led conservation area?

JEFF: One of the things you said was 80% of biodiversity occurs on these lands in Canada and then Canada has a target of 30x30, right? The math doesn't work, but it's a start.

I've been around long enough to know that one government might have a target for these things, but the next government might come in and erase that and push us back again. And that happens constantly. So that's part of the big problem in Canada and Ontario.

There are instances of Indigenous-led conservation. On the west coast of Canada, you have the Guardian program, it was the Haida who began that.

So what they did was they wanted to look after their properties. Because again, it's the same thing was happening to them, the encroachment. So what they did was they allowed their people to go onto their land and they would be the guardians of that land.

So they would be the eyes and ears of that territory. They would furnish buildings for them. They would let them go and sleep over for however long they wanted to. And people did that. Families did that. They became the eyes and ears of their territory.

Those are the things that we are looking at as well. We're looking at doing that to make sure that we're protecting our property and protecting it from that encroachment that still is happening. That started back in the 1800s.

RESH: More and more are speaking of the connection between conservation and reconciliation. For you, Jeff, how is conservation connected to reconciliation?

JEFF: Reconciliation has become the buzzword and it's been used improperly in a lot of these cases. Because whenever a politician wants to make a point on something, that they're helping somehow, they're always going to say reconciliation. But if you look at the 94 calls to action, how does that fit into everything? So if you wanna talk about reconciliation, you have to fit into any of the 94 calls to action, and they're there.

RESH: And these are the 94 Calls to Action that came out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, right?

JEFF: That's right. You know, 94 calls to action you have everything from child welfare, education, language, culture, health, justice. But we're not really talking about the environment in those cases. So for people to be using reconciliation as part of that, we might have missed the boat on it.

It should be a natural part of your life. It doesn't have to be something that is mandated. It should be a part of your natural life in that when you're out on in the forest and you're walking with your coffee cup and you're done with your coffee cup, you carried it out there, you should be able to carry it back.

One of the things that I see on the trails constantly are people who discard their coffee cups and just throw them off to the side and we're constantly picking them up. Just the refuse that people don't think about.

We can't think about conservation if we don't live or try to live that conservation. It's not part of our mindset. Those very simple things would help to get to that point that you want to get to. We're not doing that enough. In Canada, the government needs to do more. If it is reconciliation that they're talking about, then they need to do more.

You know, We talk about 30x30. It's possible if, if all of your partners are being treated equally. If all of your partners are being included. Reconciliation won't happen if all of your partners are not included.

Let's say we're gonna spend \$30 million on a project and then we'll give 1% of that to First Nations. That's not reconciliation. That's not being equal. And that happens a lot.

RESH: And yet in 2010, Canada signed on to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, after the holding out for about three years.

And within the UN Declaration FPIC, that free, prior and informed consent must be given by Indigenous Peoples to any operation impacting their territories, is recognized as an inherent right. And likewise, the Duty to Consult is an entrenched right of Indigenous Peoples within the Canadian Constitution.

And as you're saying, Canada has perhaps not been honoring this right as it should. And you've certainly written about what has been happening in Ontario in terms of the Duty to Consult, especially around this new housing bill, Bill-23.

JEFF: First of all, I just wanna talk about the adoption of UNDRIP by Canada.

What they did was they took UNDRIP and they've watered it down. They turned it into CANDRIP.. Is what some people are calling it. It's a watered down version of what the UN declaration was. They're picking and choosing what they wanna look at and recognize. So it's really just speaking into the wind. You're not gonna help anything.

If you don't adopt the declaration as a whole and you're picking and choosing what you want to. This is how things like Bill-23 happen. If the federal government's not gonna take you seriously, your provinces aren't gonna take you seriously.

Even if the Supreme Court rule that free, prior, informed consent has to take place, people don't do it because there's no enforcement of it. And if there's no enforcement, if there's no teeth behind UNDRIP or even CANDRIP, then you really don't have anything. You're just speaking words. You're just saying reconciliation again over and over, without having anything behind it. And that's what the problem is. And we're gonna continually ... we're gonna be in the same place in 30 years.

RESH: You have been a strong advocate, writing and speaking extensively about Ontario's Greenbelt. And I just wanna get a bit more into that focus. So first of all, could you speak to the importance of the Greenbelt?

JEFF: Well, it is an important thing to Canada or to Ontario because the Greenbelt still contains a lot of the wetlands that are vital to having things rejuvenate. It's a good starting point. The place we now call the Greenbelt, in the 1800s was just called the wildland.

It was considered to be still the forested areas of Ontario. And within the very short time has been reduced to just a swath of territory. It's not a connected territory. If we want to have that kind of diversity, biodiversity that we once had, then maybe we need to change the way we think. And I'm talking about the larger society. The way the larger society creates community, has to be rethought. And maybe you need to build in corridors where you're gonna have that biodiversity taking place. Everything from that little insect all the way to the hoofed creatures, to the animals that prey on them and have that natural thing happening.

Rather than having a disconnected, disjointed green space, you would have a connection all the way across Ontario and maybe even Canada. You're doing it in some ways because, I know that there's overpasses and underpasses that are being built for animals to be able to migrate past highways without getting killed.

This same thing could happen if we really rethought the way we were looking at things and respecting our animal spirits. And allowing them to live their life as well and giving them that territory that they need. And that to me is what a Greenbelt would be.

Right now the Greenbelts are too congested. They're endangered where they sit right now even as people are trying to protect them. They're still being choked off. So those wetlands are still being choked off. And then it doesn't help that you're planning to build highways through it.

Again, it goes back to how much do you understand? How much do you care for it? How connected are you to it?

RESH: You had written a beautiful article in Barry Today and you gave the Land of Ontario the ability to plea for itself. So it was Ontario's voice in the article. And what was interesting is that where the Greenbelt is often described as a purposely built up conservation area. you write of a naturally vibrant province that, as you were just saying, has actually been stripped down to a Greenbelt. And because it lacks that

contiguous nature, it seems more and more, it's more like a frayed belt in terms of this patchwork approach.

And you've said that Bill- 23 that was introduced by the government of Ontario will "accelerate the demise of Ontario".

JEFF: Well, the demise of the natural space that we want to enjoy in Ontario. Once all of that is gone, then you're going to be seeking other green spaces. And so where are those green spaces? Green spaces in the north, then you're continuing to push things back. Pretty soon what you have in Southern Ontario is gonna be in Northern Ontario. The encroachment is gonna go further cause you're gonna be looking for those kinds of things. We're naturally attracted to green space. We're naturally attracted to the trees and the lakes, because that's where we rejuvenate ourselves. That's where we like to go to feel good again after a few weeks of hard work. That's just a natural part of being a human being. That's where you go to plug in, to connect with the land.

And wouldn't that be much better if you had that in your own backyard? So you could just go and do that at any time you want. You don't have to drive 240 kilometers to relax. And then, you know, as you're trying to relax, you're thinking about driving that 240 kilometers back home already.

If you were looking after the land in a better way. And if you did that right from the start, then we wouldn't be here.

Somewhere along the line, we've lost our - and I keep saying this - but we've lost our connection to it, our understanding of what it means to us. How valuable it is to us, spiritually, mentally, physically - every part of us. And you should be able to have that in your own backyard. And I think that's what a lot of people are trying to get back to.

My comparison between where I come from, Christian Island, the biodiversity there and the biodiversity here in Simcoe County, it's a huge difference. And how we got here is just simply not respecting what's there, not respecting our place on the land.

RESH: Mm-hmm. And you said that it also poses "a danger to First Nations".

JEFF: Yeah, well, it's all about our encroachment. So we're feeling the effects of those green spaces being taken away. Those green spaces being changed, modified. People are looking for that.

So they'll come into our territory, what little that we have left. They come into our reserve lands what I talked about earlier. They'll come in to make a claim there, and then that's where they wanna go every year.

And that happens in my community. So we have people that regularly online will advertise their next big party at Beckwith Island and not consult us on it. Not just the

individual, but also companies will do it. Companies will advertise their weekend at Beckwith Island, come on and join us. But they don't ask us if we can come onto your territory.

I know Rama also faces it with Chief Simon. And they've started to put enforcement into place. And then it makes them the enemy. It makes us the enemy, to the non-native people around us.

So we become another pawn in all of this. And, then it becomes a game of how do we - and I'm talking about larger society - how do we get what we want on those lands? Do you have governments coming in and changing laws that would allow for their people to come into our territories? That's what I'm afraid of.

The Greenbelt didn't happen overnight. The reduction of the Greenbelt didn't happen overnight. The current Bill-23 didn't happen overnight. A whole lot of governments brought us to this point. And Bill-23 will just drive that a little bit further ahead, and then eventually somebody else will do the same thing again.

Because we're not being assertive enough as a people. And I'm talking about people of Ontario. We're not being assertive enough to say, okay, we gotta stop doing this now. We need to do things differently. We're the ones that elect you. So you have to listen to us now. And maybe there needs to be a free, prior and informed consent, to the average Ontarion; that's more inclusive of everyone. Then the consultation has to take place in a greater way, not only with First Nations people, but with the majority of people in Ontario.

It's not really enough that somebody gets in as a majority and then they can say, well, we can do whatever we want now. We're elected to do whatever we want cuz we have the majority. And that's what takes place. To me, that's people that are running rough-shod over democracy when that happens. Cause you're still not looking after the people that put you into that place. You're forgetting the people that put you into that place.

And that's what's happened to us. We've been erased from being a part of all of this. So even though there's nice words and new protocols and the new agreements that have been put into place about consultation with First Nations; I'm afraid what's that's gonna mean is they will take information from us, put it into their reports, but not really give us credit for it.

And they won't even give us the money to make those changes. And then we just spin our wheels.

RESH: Under the new biodiversity agreements. I mean, Canada has signed onto it like all nations, and they've committed to this target of 30% land and water conservation by the year 2030.

Right now we're at about 14% and we've got seven years to go. Earlier you said the math doesn't work. Do you think we can meet this target?

JEFF: At the current rate no. At the current rate you need the people to ask for more. You need the people to be the drivers of this target.

If you think that the government is doing it for you, it's not happening. That's why we end up in these places. Because we give our authority over to them. You know, if we want change to happen, then we're the ones that are gonna have to make it happen. It's not your local representative because they're not gonna do it on their own without you being there to say, "Hey, this is what you promised. This is what we need to have happen."

RESH: So in terms of that, in terms of how we're going to make this happen. You are an Elder, a knowledge-keeper, educator, park manager, artist. I mean, in so many ways, your work involves imparting knowledge about this land. What knowledge and lessons do we need to take to heart now if we are going to meet our conservation commitments and halt and reverse this crisis of nature loss and extinction? What are some of the key lessons that we, as people of this province, of this country, really need to hold front and center?

JEFF: To me, I guess it's really simple. You need to look around and you need to say to yourself, "Why can't I live beside the wolf? Why can't I live beside the bear? Why can't they live beside me?" It has happened for thousands of thousands of years, but for some reason, we disconnect ourselves from all of that. And we have disconnected ourselves from being a part of them. They are part of us, and we need each other.

If we don't have any of those animals around us, then we're not well. And that's evident in in the Greenbelt. That's evident in our cities and towns. And those animals are trying to hang on. Well, I see those animals as being like Indigenous people. They're sort of forgotten, but they're trying to hang on. They're trying to survive in these places that you created. It's not what they prefer, but they'll try to hang on in these territories.

That's why we have a place like Springwater Provincial Park, where I work. It's 477 acres of property. Five minutes north of Barrie, one of the largest urban centers in Ontario.

You've got this little piece of land that is beginning to become more diverse again. We have coyotes in there. We have, foxes, we have wolves. We have bobcat's coming through. We have bears coming through. And this is five minutes north of Barrie. People don't know that, but we created this property for them.

Deer come in there, Deer come in, and I've noticed this now. That they come in during hunting season. So they hide out there. They know they're safe. And I welcome them. Because they're helping with they're walking on the land. Those

hoofs were created to help the land, to help the land to regenerate. To help those insects become a part of that land.

Every part of that animal was created to help the land itself. And that goes along with the bears and the wolves. They help to create the biodiversity that's created when you allow them to live. And that includes us. Cuz if we live in the normal way that we should, we'd have a rich, rich biodiversity in Canada again, and it wouldn't take long for it to do that.

If you allowed beavers back into the area. If you allowed beavers back into the Greenbelt, you would have, within a few short years you'd have things regenerating again.

But we're not ready for that, right? Because we wanna be able to control what these animals do. We wanna be able to control what the Indigenous people do.

And we want things to be what we think it should be. And that doesn't meet what their needs are. It doesn't meet our needs as human beings, if we don't help them.

RESH: So we need to shift our thinking and really shift our relationship with the natural world.

JEFF: Yes. That's really all it is. And it doesn't really cost a lot of money. Like I said before, when we quantify everything, it puts up the roadblocks that shouldn't even be there.

RESH: Jeff, I want to thank you. It has been a pleasure.

JEFF: You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

RESH: That was Jeff Monague, Manager of the Springwater Provincial Park and member and former Chief of the Beausoleil First Nation.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of The Courage My Friends podcast. Thanks for listening.

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