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Evaluation of the Indigenous Guardians Initiative

Executive Summary

October 2025



Ce document est disponible en français.

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CAT. NO R62-585/2022E-PDF
ISBN 978-0-660-45037-7

“I show up on this beach and this is a place of learning and cultural exchanges and it's a grocery store – it's a source of food. . . especially important for this work is the prioritization of food sovereignty and having returned access to food systems that have been lost for a whole generation.

I think it's really meaningful to have all of those components in this work, and I feel honored and inspired that I get to be part of it.”

-Pauquachin First Nation Marine Guardian

Evaluation of the Indigenous Guardians Initiative

Scope and Methods

The evaluation of the Indigenous Guardians Initiative (IGI) sought to examine the relevance, effectiveness, sustainability, and relationship-building capacity of the IGI as well as understand the impacts of IGI-supported programs on Indigenous communities.

To reflect both elements, the evaluation was divided into two components:

- An internally-focused evaluation, led by Parks Canada, assessing the IGI's implementation and,
- A study of the impacts of Indigenous Guardians programs led externally by a specialist in Indigenous evaluation.

Research methods for the internal review included a literature review on the impacts of Guardian programs in Canada and internationally, analysis of financial information and contribution agreements, and key informant interviews with Parks Canada staff.

Engagements with Guardian programs were led by a specialist in Indigenous evaluation, facilitated in the initial stage with introductory letters shared widely by Parks Canada staff. Participants selected their preferred means of providing feedback, including written comments, and virtual or in-person interviews.

The Indigenous Guardians Initiative

Funding for the Parks Canada Indigenous Guardians Initiative was allocated under Budget 2021 as part of a \$173 million government-wide plan to support Indigenous Guardians programs in partnership with multiple federal entities. Within that, Parks Canada received \$61.7 million to be invested between 2021-22 and 2025-26.

The main objective of the IGI was to support the development of new and enhanced partner-led programs linked to Parks Canada-administered places. Goals of each individual program were to be determined by partners according to their interests and priorities.

As of the beginning of 2025, roughly 40 new or enhanced Indigenous Guardian programs were in operation across Canada.

Most new programs followed a phased development approach, beginning with explorations of community needs and possibilities, followed by capacity building activities, program implementation, and finally a review of results with an eye to future planning.

Pre-existing programs, such as the Haida Gwaii Watchmen and the West Coast Trail Guardians were provided additional resources to stabilize and strengthen their operations through training, equipment purchases, facility improvements, or strategic program development.

Funds from the IGI were primarily distributed to partners through contribution agreements, leveraging Parks Canada's funding authorities for Indigenous recipients, which allow for flexibilities around redirecting funds, as well as lighter administrative and reporting requirements.



Key Findings

Internal Review

This part of the evaluation focused on how Parks Canada structured and supported the IGI, including its relevance, the effectiveness of its processes, its focus on relationship building, and its sustainability.

Relevance

Document reviews and interviews confirmed alignment of the IGI's goals and partner-led approach with key principles of Parks Canada's Indigenous Stewardship Policy, including commitments to support cultural continuity and build healthy and respectful relationships.

Effectiveness

A review of program results found that the IGI was on track to surpass its objectives of supporting the implementation of over 30 new Indigenous Guardian programs across Canada.

IGI administrative structures, such as application and approval processes, were described as simple when compared to other similar funding programs. Approval levels for disbursing funds were also seen as effective and efficient.

Relationship Building

Relationships were seen as central to the IGI, both as a means of creating strong, locally relevant programs, and as key outcomes of the Initiative itself. In that sense, Guardians programs were often perceived by staff as catalysts, capable of creating meaningful changes in the dynamics between Parks Canada and Indigenous communities.

Along these lines, Parks Canada staff noted the importance of maintaining clear communications with partners, such as ensuring that information about the IGI is shared with all interested parties equitably. IGI regional coordinators also highlighted the need to communicate and reinforce to Parks Canada staff the aims of the Initiative, including the prioritization of partners' needs and interests.

Other challenges to relationship building, as reported by Parks Canada staff, were financial processes described as not yet adaptable to Indigenous cultural norms. These included means of compensating individuals, Elders in particular, for their contributions to projects.

Sustainability

While commitments to the sustainability of Guardians programs were among the IGI's goals, strategies to support new or enhanced IGP over the long term were limited at the time of report writing. Key risks related to the end of external IGI funding included damaging new and long-standing relationships with Indigenous partners and missed opportunities to further Indigenous stewardship.

Commitments to the development of Indigenous Stewardship plans within all Parks Canada directorates and field units, as required by the recently-adopted Indigenous Stewardship Policy (2024), may help in addressing some of the challenges identified in this evaluation.

Literature Review

While the Parks Canada Indigenous Guardians Initiative is a relatively recent development, the programs it supports fit within a broader movement towards shared governance and Indigenous-led conservation in protected areas.

Reported Impacts

Research on Indigenous Guardians in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States over the past 15 years have identified multiple positive outcomes for individuals and communities, including economic, environmental, and cultural impacts.

At the individual level, documented benefits include a stronger sense of pride and identity, connection to culture and territory, increased

income, meaningful employment opportunities, and benefits to physical and mental health.

Community outcomes include benefits to culture and language transmission, preservation of cultural heritage, and a greater sense of intergenerational connection.

Case studies from across Canada also provide evidence of economic and environmental benefits, with Guardians contributing more ecological data to support decision-making and monitoring programs reporting positive impacts on species conservation (Popp et al., 2020; EPI, 2022). These findings fit within a wider body of evidence on the environmental benefits of Indigenous-led conservation, based on measures of biodiversity and resistance to both deforestation and environmental degradation (Artelle et al., 2019).

Economic benefits documented in a study of Coastal Guardian Watchmen programs went beyond the direct positive impacts of additional employment and financial capital inflows, finding that for every \$1 dollar invested in a Guardian program, Nations received the equivalent of \$10 in total benefits (see: Valuing Coastal Guardian Watchmen: A Business Case, 2016).



Narrative Study

This second part of the evaluation focused on community impacts and partners' experiences with the Indigenous Guardians Initiative. In total, eleven Nations, representing ten Indigenous Guardian programs (see table on pg. 9) chose to participate in the evaluation.

IGI programs were found to share a common set of goals, i.e., to braid western and Indigenous approaches into land management practices operating for the benefit of community well-being.

Impacts

In terms of impacts, participants shared multiple positive outcomes, including economic development, the sharing and preserving traditional teachings, and making meaningful connections to land and sea.

Economic benefits included employment, training and careers advancement for community members and program staff, support for local fisheries, mills, and building tourism infrastructures like camp sites and boardwalks. Guardian programs also added capacity for much needed transport services that help community members work outside of their territories.

By funding First Nations, these programs contribute to development and the maintenance of socio-economic health by creating accessible and rewarding jobs for community members.”

-Nitassinan Guardian

Sharing of traditional teachings, celebrations and stories

with park visitors, Elders and youth, was described as helping to raise awareness about ecosystems and marine life while also preserving traditional ways of knowing and doing for future generations.

Finally, **meaningful connections to land and sea** were fostered through monitoring programs, cultural activities, gatherings and information sharing with other Nations, language revitalization, food sovereignty efforts, and being present on their traditional lands and waters.

“Our project is unique because we will be operating off-reserve, and it provides a way for us to truly be back on the land that we’ve been removed from for the past 150 years or so.”

-Blackfoot Guardian

Barriers

Asked about challenges, participating Guardian programs frequently highlighted a need for better communication between Parks Canada staff and Guardians on activities like their respective monitoring efforts, which would foster more consistent collaboration and knowledge sharing.

However, the biggest identified barrier to the success of Guardians programming was the lack of sustainable funding. Along with minimizing the challenges of short-term agreements, such as delays in receiving transfers, participants shared how long-term funding would allow their Nations to improve their Guardian program and extend its benefits by hiring more staff and building the infrastructure required to support programming now and in the future.

Final Observations

Although they were conducted and analysed separately, results from both the internal review and the narrative study were ultimately well aligned and mutually supportive.

This included the many positive cultural, economic, and relationship-building outcomes documented in each report, as well as the key remaining challenges of bettering communications between Parks Canada teams and Indigenous Guardians and, most importantly, finding pathways towards long-term sustainability.

From different viewpoints, both reports also provide evidence of the value of the IGI's Indigenous partner-led approach. Examples include the internal review's finding that the IGI surpassed its objective of helping to implement over 30 new programs, the uptake being a good sign of the IGI's relevance, and the narrative study highlighting Guardians' strong beliefs in their programs' capacities to create collective impact, share knowledge, and protect lands and waters for future generations.

“I think the importance with the Guardians is the hybridization of the knowledge shared. You have Indigenous knowledge that's offered up that created abundance in the past and that could potentially create abundance in the future. And then the [western] science.

If we can marry those two together, then that's going to be beneficial to the world overall. That's what I think is important about the Guardians.”

-Gulf Islands Guardian

Annex: Narrative Study Participants

Nations	Program Names	Location
Biigtigong First Nation	Biigtigong Guardian Program in Pukaskwa	Pukaskwa National Park, Ontario
Chippewas of Rama First Nation	Stewardship Guild	Orillia, Ontario
Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal Council	Blackfoot Guardianship of the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies	Calgary, Alberta`
Innu First Nation of Ekuanitshit	Nitassinan Guardians program	Ekuanitshit, Quebec
Huu-Ay-Aht First Nation	West Coast Trail Guardians	Vancouver Island, British Columbia
Ditidaht First Nation		
W̱sáneć	Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians Program	Brentwood Bay, British Columbia
Pauquachin First Nation	Pauquachin Marine Program	Vancouver Island, British Columbia
Tseshaht First Nation	Broken Group Islands Beachkeepers	Vancouver Island / Broken Group Islands
Gulf Islands National Park Reserve	Southern Resident Killer Whale Recovery program	Sidney, British Columbia
Cowichan Tribes	S-hwuhwa'us Thi'lut Kw'atl'kwa (Thunderbird Protecting the Ocean) Program	Duncan, British Columbia