

The Uapishka Station and Reconciliation: Working Together



A Reflection Paper for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO
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Photo credit: Striking Balance

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About the Authors

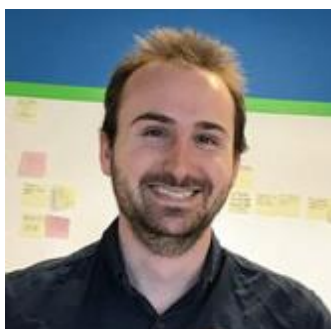


Jean-Philippe Messier is the founder and director general of the Manicouagan-Uapishka World Biosphere Reserve (MUWBR), and cofounder of the Uapishka Station. He is known for being an excellent facilitator and for his tactfulness in interest conciliation efforts. He is a skilled representative both of local communities and of high-ranking officials, and has a keen ability to develop organized ideas and conclude the necessary partnerships for implementing his ideas. Among other things, in 2011, he piloted the MUWBR's shift toward its current social economy model.

Jean-Philippe holds a bachelor's degree in biology and a post-graduate diploma in eco-advisory. He is one of Canada's foremost influencers with relation to the UNESCO's biosphere reserves program. He has chaired the Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association (CBRA) and is involved in several national and international networks.



Raymond Rousselot was an elected member of the Pessamit Innu Council from 2012 to 2018 and is the cofounder of the Uapishka Station. He was born in the 1950s to a hunting family. He learned Innu Aitun (Innu culture) from his grandfather, who lived according to the traditional way of life until age 90. Raymond studied wildlife management and has dedicated the last 40 years of his life to Indigenous entrepreneurship and community development. He is among the most inspiring elders in the Pessamit community; in fact, he was the initiator of the Uetshu program, a socio-professional integration program at the Uapishka Station intended for Innu youth.



Guillaume Proulx, Deputy Advisor at the MUWBR, holds a master's degree in spatial planning and regional development and is involved in research on Indigenous and northern communities in Quebec. He was a student member of the "Living in Northern Quebec" research partnership, which involved Quebec's Innu and Inuit communities, while simultaneously working with Laval University's Chaire de leadership en enseignement en foresterie autochtone [Indigenous forestry education leadership chair].

Acronyms used in this article

CBRA	Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association
MFFP	Ministère des Forêts, de la Faune et des Parcs du Québec [Quebec department of forests, wildlife and parks]
BR	Biosphere reserve
MUWBR	Manicouagan-Uapishka World Biosphere Reserve
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

About the Manicouagan-Uapishka World Biosphere Reserve

The Manicouagan-Uapishka World Biosphere Reserve (MUWBR) was so designated by UNESCO on September 18, 2007, and is a site for studying, experimenting and disseminating sustainable development know-how. It is part of a global network of 686 sites spread out over 122 countries. Canada has eighteen such sites; Quebec has four. Biosphere reserves (BRs) are sites designated by governments and recognized by UNESCO under its Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme.

The status of BR is one of the primary international tools for deliberation on sustainable development and its application. It includes the human dimension and also underpins regional development and wealth creation. BR status covers three aspects: natural heritage conservation, social and economic development and logistical support for research, monitoring, training and educational activities.

The MUWBR covers most of the Pessamit Nitassinan, the traditional lands of the Innu.

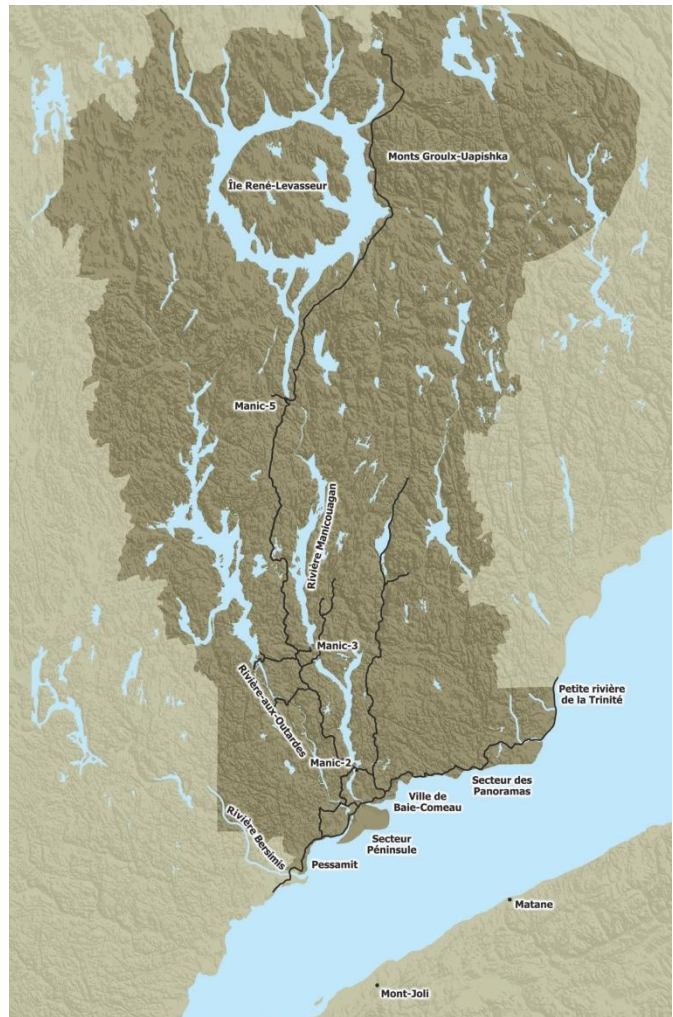


Figure 1: Location of the Manicouagan-Uapishka World Biosphere Reserve

The current occupation of the land

An account from Raymond Rousselot¹

Back then, in the 19th century, families portaged long distances on the Bersimis, aux Outardes and Manicouagan rivers far north, in the Uapishka² Mountains (the Monts Groulx), all the way to Touloustouc River—a distance of nearly 300 km. They would hike, loaded up with the bare essentials (flour, lard and tea); they brought victuals first and then went back for their families. Such trips could take up to a month. Generally, families travelled upstream in mid-August and downstream in March or April. Once they reached their final inland destination for the winter, they trapped for furs. They would eat beaver meat and fish, and return to the coast for the summer.



Figure 2: Innu people portaging on the Manicouagan River in the 19th century

But times have changed. Hunters no longer roam the land and need other ways to keep busy. In the past, the Innu made a living of the fur trade. But now, we must find new jobs for Indigenous people, and that's exactly what the goal of the Uapishka Station is. When they go to the woods, they tend to rediscover their ancestors. Some of them even set out snares, go fishing and begin to return to nature.

Reconnecting with nature and one's roots

When young Innu go out into the woods, they don't have a phone. That had an impact on me. When children play in the woods, they gain a renewed desire to live in the woods. If a young boy wants to go fishing, he must learn to paddle a canoe... this is the type of thing we want to bring back. They're going to be in nature, they're going to see animals... beavers, even. My niece is now a fisher and a trapper!

The Uetshu program (“Uetshu” is Innu for “having the tools”) is in the same spirit, with the Uapishka Station giving youth the opportunity to work, to try their hand at different things (cooking, aide-de-camp, guidance, etc.) on Pessamit's ancestral lands. This enables them to gain as much work experience as possible and figure out what interests them. Right now, Indigenous kids don't talk—they're not confident. They come and see me. I want to help them grow their self-confidence. Uetshu is an attempt at doing just that by letting them just be on the land and reconnect with their ancestors. When kids socialize with the clientele, when they speak with university researchers who visit the station, they also develop their curiosity. That's why the Uapishka Station is a point of pride for me and the Pessamit community.

¹ Former elected member of the Pessamit Innu Council and early collaborator to the Uapishka Station

² In Innu, this means “rocky peaks perpetually covered in snow.”

A relationship of trust

Before the Manicouagan was even designated a UNESCO BR, there were very few tangible projects between Pessamit and the non-Indigenous communities in the area. Pessamit was the very first founding partner of the MUWBR, which sought to underline the value of being a part of this world network from the outset. Related initiatives were then introduced, notably through youth involvement.

Since the BR was created, the participation of young Pessamiulnut in BR activities has been an MUWBR priority. Partnerships established with other Indigenous peoples living in Nordic countries have led to field missions and collaborative projects. Under the direction of the MUWBR, one Pessamit youth travelled to Sweden to meet with Sami people, another participated in the UNESCO Youth Forum in Paris, and several others participated in various scientific expeditions to the Arctic through Students on Ice. Additionally, Pessamit and the MUWBR have organized several local events that have over time enabled the Pessamit Innu to build bridges with non-Indigenous communities in the area.

Through these opportunities, the MUWBR has no doubt become the organization outside Pessamit that has contributed the most to fostering local understanding of the Innu and to establishing a climate of cooperation. In order to crystallize this exemplary commitment within its governing board, in 2012, the MUWBR made a proposal inspired by that of the Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Reserve: that the MUWBR be co-chaired by an Innu member. Though the idea was well received, the Innu community preferred a permanent collaboration with the MUWBR on the basis of tangible projects.



Figure 3: Noah and Corine, two students respectively from Pessamit and Baie-Comeau, who participated in the 2015 Students on Ice scientific expedition in the Arctic.

The trust that was built over time through these initiatives set the stage for the most significant step in this relationship: the joint establishment of the Uapishka Station.

The Uapishka Station

The project to establish a research station in the Manicouagan-Uapishka territory dates back to 2014. The Uapishka Station, cofounded in February 2016 by the MUWBR and the Pessamit Innu Council is a tangible example of how reconciliation is taking place within the BR. One of the more important aspects of the project, other than its collaborative governance model, relies on the combination, through an integrated approach, of tourism activities, scientific knowledge development and the current occupation of ancestral Innu lands.

Installations located at the foot of the Uapishka Mountains offer accommodation and restaurant services, ecotourism activities and logistical support for scientific research. More specifically, the Station's mission is to stimulate the acquisition, the sharing and the dissemination of scientific and traditional knowledge, foster the socio-professional integration of Indigenous people—especially youth—and promote the current occupation of the Nitassinan.

In that sense, the Uapishka Station is a new and important component in the BR's ability to take action with relation to the acquisition of fundamental knowledge and practices, the monitoring of central areas and buffer zones and the observation of natural and anthropogenic processes. The Côte-Nord's first station being implemented in a BR was an opportunity to develop a culture of research among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Establishing trusting relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people requires work and time. With Pessamit as a founding partner of the MUWBR, collaborations have taken on various forms in the last decade, such as community youth involvement in events, internship and foreign exchange opportunities and a multitude of other projects. The collaborations have been a prelude to the implementation of a tangible partnership which resulted in the Uapishka Station, a demanding project that required a very high degree of trust among partners and that has become one of the largest Indigenous / non-Indigenous joint management collaborations in the area. For a BR like the MUWBR, working closely with an Indigenous community requires multi-tier cultural adjustments. For example, the MUWBR's hiring criteria for staff and directors included having the ability and the necessary knowledge to work with First Nations.

Science and culture

Due to its natural, cultural and socio-economic characteristics, the land included in the MUWBR has been of great interest to research organizations and institutions for a long time. However, the lack of university establishments in the area and infrastructure dedicated to supporting the work of researchers is a factor



Figure 4: View of the Manicouagan Reservoir from the highest peak of the Uapishka Mountains



Figure 5: Jean-Philippe L. Messier, DG, RMBMU; René Simon, Chief, Pessamit; Patrick Desbiens, President, RMBMU; and Raymond Rousselot, former elected councillor, Pessamit.

that has typically limited local ability to undertake scientific projects that address the issues inherent to the area. The Uapishka Station acts as a bridge of sorts between scientific research, university institutions and local needs.

In Quebec, research stations are generally university-implemented and operated infrastructures. The Uapishka Station is a prime example of the community taking charge of a project, but also an eloquent demonstration of what a UNESCO designation can mean for an area like the Manicouagan-Uapishka.

The alliance forged between an Indigenous community and a BR is an opportunity to establish research priorities and needs that concern Indigenous people, who are too often removed from the decision-making process when it comes to research. In a way, it's a re-appropriation of the land through the implementation of surveillance carried out by Pessamit land agents at the heart of the Nitassinan and through increased cooperation with MFFP agents. Additionally, it is a way of restoring access to the hinterland to the Innu, who don't necessarily have easy access to that area anymore.

Not only is the Uapishka Station a new source of logistical support and a stimulating tool for integrating knowledge through acquisition-based activities, it is a powerful vector for the current occupation of ancestral lands. The station acts as a land basis for reinforcing and promoting Indigenous identities and knowledge.

The scientific development approach designed at the Uapishka Station relies on the contribution of traditional knowledge as well as the preservation, advancement and dissemination of Innu traditional knowledge through a hitherto non-existent mechanism. Additionally, the project seeks to update and promote Indigenous know-how, as well as develop skills and foster socio-economic integration by relying, for installation operations purposes, on work teams made up of equal numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Meeting with otherness

By offering adventure and Indigenous tourism activities and outdoor recreation, the Uapishka Station contributes to cultural-based dialogue and interactions. This is due to the unique nature of the area: few other areas offer opportunities for interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, owing to the great distances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

The Uapishka Station hosted the "Co-construire la durabilité et la réconciliation" [building long-term relations and reconciliation together] event as part of the MUWBR's 10th anniversary celebrations. A delegation of Canadian BR representatives, First Nations representatives and other partners were invited to discover the Nitassinan and the Station's model.



Figure 6: Group of Innu youth in a nature immersion camp

On the site, an Indigenous camp is set up so that people can experience and share in the traditional Innu way of life. Several activities are organized, such as nature immersion camps for Innu youth and training related to land development and the preservation of ecosystem integrity.

The Uetshu socio-professional integration program has also been an opportunity to give youth a chance at atypical schooling paths, which has enabled them to experiment with tourism, land development and customer services. This initiation to the labour market through contact with the land fosters the development of a cultural identity and the current occupation of the land.



Figure 7: Traditional Innu camp

Moving forward

Research development, land re-appropriation, Indigenous tourism and nature—the co-governance of enterprises, though still in its infancy, is setting the tone and paving the way to a solid collaboration between the Manicouagan-Uapishka World Biosphere Reserve and the Pessamit Innu Council. In that respect, the Uapishka Station hopes to become an example of a structuring reconciliation project for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike.