



Sound Outlook – Part 5: Sowing the seeds for reconciliation at Kelso Beach

Sitting on the edge of the Owen Sound harbour is a picturesque stretch of land, set alongside the mouths of the Pottawatomi and Sydenham rivers. Here, waves lap gently at the shore while the towering willows flutter their leaves in the breeze sweeping across the water. Nowadays, we mainly know this place as Kelso Beach, home to Summerfolk, the Salmon Spectacular, the Good Cheer Splash Pad, and spectacular sunrises. The beach is closed but the trail and the splash pad are open. And while the warm waters of the

harbour may be shallow, the roots of this land run deep.

Once upon a time, before stories were written, the sun-soaked bay teemed with sturgeon. So plentiful were these massive fish that they gave way to the Ojibwe name, “Gitche Name Wikwedong”. Great Sturgeon Bay. The nearby river banks were the traditional hunting and fishing grounds of the Ojibwe people, with the sturgeon being of particular significance. Not only was the sturgeon an immense food source, but the Creation Story tells of Grandmother Sturgeon giving birth to the seven original clans. It is an animal woven into life and lore.

After the settlers arrived and larger-scale fishing operations became practice, sturgeons were all but wiped out from these waters. The massive fish were seen as interfering with the targeted trout, salmon, and whitefish. The sacred sturgeons were caught by the boatful and burned like logs on shore. At the same time, Indigenous populations across the country were being torn apart by the residential school system and other efforts to eradicate their cultures. It is a dark piece of our shared history and one that needs to be remembered.

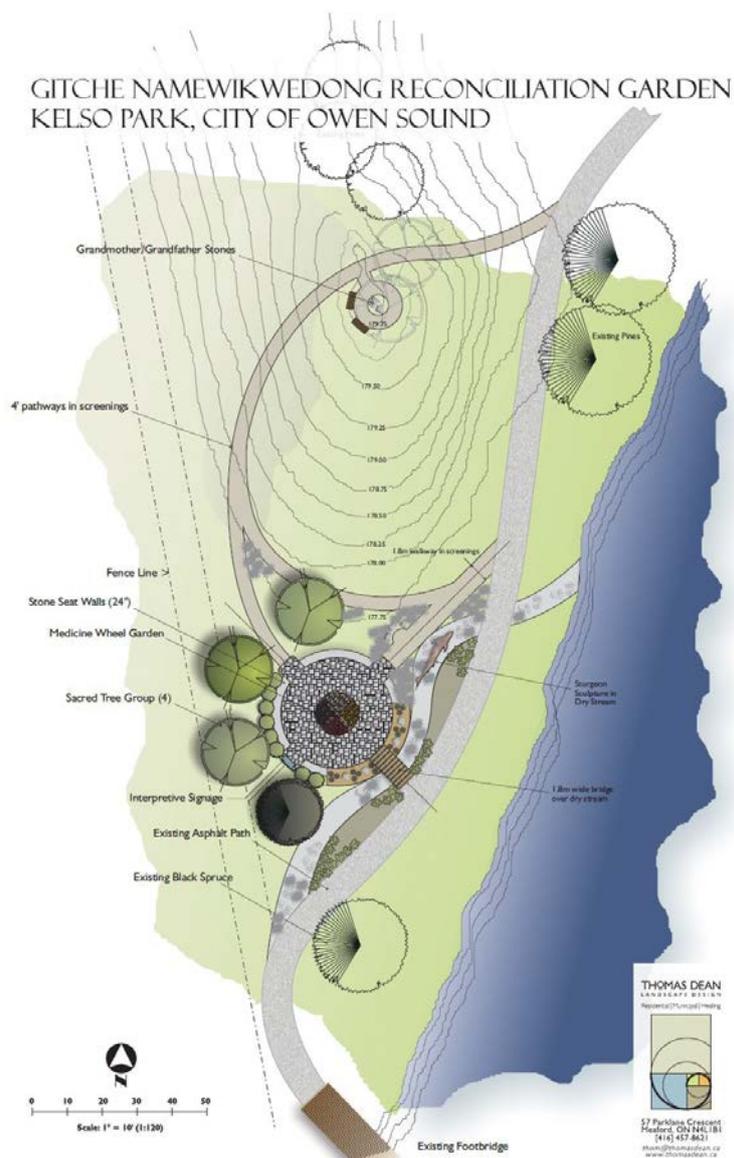
Recent years have seen a surge in reparative efforts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, reflected both in large-scale initiatives and small-scale projects. If you have walked through Kelso Beach Park in the last year, you will probably have noticed one such project that is taking shape at the south end of the park. In 2010 the City of Owen Sound began considerations for a reconciliation garden in order to provide a space for reflection and healing, as well as to honour the Indigenous history of this area. Knowledge keeper and project committee member, Paul Nadjiwan, explains, “We’re focusing on the cultural revitalization and retention.” Drawing on both the traditional name for this area and the importance of sturgeon in these waters, the Gitche Namewikwedong Reconciliation Garden began to grow.

The past couple of years have seen the garden taking shape. The city itself has provided the land on which to make this vision come to life, and a multitude of community organizations and institutions have come together to donate time, money, and resources. This summer’s continuation of the project will be a huge leap forward, with local limestone seating and terrace cover installed as the construction phase continues. It has been a long road from concept to reality, but the process has allowed the project committee, headed by Susan Staves, to be thoughtful about each item that will be incorporated.

With consultation from elders and knowledge keepers, landscape designer, Thomas Dean, has planned out a space that is rich in symbolism and meaning. Dean specializes in landscape design for healing purposes, and it's clear that this project is a labour of love. From the medicine wheel garden at its heart to the Grandmother and Grandfather stones that will sit atop the hill and watch over the great sturgeon, every detail has been drawn with intention. Four sacred trees are to be planted along the western edge – cedar, birch, ash, and black spruce. As Nadjiwan shares, these trees hold the potential for all of life's instruments. Even the stone seating will have the Seven Grandfather Teachings carved into it. And as a way of honouring the life-giving sturgeon, artists will be called on to submit designs for a sculpture of the fish. The chosen piece is hoped to be installed in the space next year, swimming in the dry stream by the water's edge.

With so many teachings woven into the garden, education is an important piece of this project. Indeed, as the name affirms, the Gitche Namewikwedong Reconciliation Garden is meant to be a place of learning and healing. "I think the first part of reconciliation has to be understanding," Dean acknowledges while speaking of the project's aim. Multilingual signage is planned to offer creation stories, cultural interpretations, and historical perspectives, providing an accessible site for everyone who wishes to learn. Even once the garden is complete, its role in the community will be dynamic. "We're hoping to make it a living, breathing space," says Dean. It has the potential to hold traditional ceremonies – such as water ceremonies – and its position on the Walking Together Tour provides a natural spot for pause and reflection.

Next time you're out enjoying a summer's day, take a stroll through Kelso and stop by the garden as it



unfolds. Listen to the timeless waves lapping against the shore. Breathe in the fragrance of sun-warmed sweetgrass and cedar. Feel the strength in the stones, carved from an ancient sea bed. We are all connected in this space, and with connection comes healing and growth.

Gitchi miigwetch to Paul Nadjiwan for sharing his knowledge and stories with me and allowing me to incorporate them into this article.

*To watch for updates on the garden, visit the project's Facebook page:
www.facebook.com/recociliationgardenproject/*

Written by Sarah Goldman