

Pikangikum Elders Work for Local Knowledge, Local Training for Local Forestry Jobs

Pikangikum First Nation is a small community with a big idea: Infuse indigenous knowledge and stewardship of northern Ontario forests into the forestry college curriculum, then teach that new curriculum to First Nations students so they can get good, sustainable jobs right in their home community.

The Whitefeather Forest is an expansive boreal forest situated within the ancestral lands of the people of Pikangikum. The Pikangikum First Nation is an Ojibwe community located some 100 kilometres north of Red Lake in the Kenora District.

Pikangikum First Nation has been working on the Whitefeather Forest Initiative since 1996.

With the help of a \$465,000 three year Future Fund Grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Pikangikum First Nation elders will work with Confederation College and other partners to – for the first time – develop and incorporate indigenous knowledge and forest stewardship into the Forest Eco-System Management Technician program. This will substantially change the way resource management is taught and carried out in northern Ontario.

The first of its kind, the “Whitefeather Forest Generative Curriculum Project” will train and qualify First Nation youth to work as forestry technicians in the Whitefeather Forest and in local forest products industry businesses. They could also choose to go beyond their diploma program to for a university forestry degree.

The initiative will provide qualified people to take on as many as to 300 forestry related jobs for Pikangikum and surrounding communities – much needed in an area where unemployment rates run around 70 per cent.

“We had been looking for someone to stand alongside us for this project, and we found Confederation College,” recalls Alex Peters, President of the Whitefeather Forest Management Corporation.

Area youth – or anyone from the south who wants to take the course in Pikangikum – will learn western science and indigenous teachings about forestry management in classes held in both English and Ojibwe, says Peters.

It’s a big project, one that will have a huge impact on local youth.

“Throughout the years we’ve had maybe two or three of our youth go on to university. But elders wanted our youth want to stay in the community. We plan to bring the college to the community and Con College obliged.”

“The elders are excited.”