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## Guardians from across the North gather in Yellowknife

Caitrin Pilkington, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter Cabin Radio  
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Guardians from the N.W.T., Nunavut and Yukon have met in Yellowknife to share experiences, collaborate, and discuss the future of Indigenous stewardship in the North.

The event, hosted at the Explorer Hotel by the Northern Indigenous Stewardship Circle, offered a chance to celebrate achievements and develop future programming ideas and funding opportunities.

Momentum to create a national Canadian Guardians program has been growing.

Studies in 2019 and 2022 reported that areas managed by Indigenous governments are healthier and have higher rates of biodiversity. The federal government has pledged increasing sums toward Guardian programs, culminating in a recent announcement of \$800 million for four Indigenous-led conservation projects in Ontario, British Columbia, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

This week, representatives of northern Guardian programs said they hoped a national framework could offer not just symbolic significance, but practical support.

Finding consistent funding for stewardship programs can take up a significant chunk of smaller communities' limited capacity.

Jessica Jumbo runs a Guardian program in Sambaa K'e. In her community of 80 people, when someone gets sick for a week, she said that can throw off project timelines and jeopardize funding commitments.

"Between applications and ongoing financial reporting, it's a lot," added Ashley Menicoche, the Fort Simpson community coordinator for the Edézhíé protected area.

"Simplifying the process and being able to go through one funder would really help us."

In 10 years, the number of Canadian Guardian programs has grown from 20 to more than 170.

Advocates like the Indigenous Leadership Initiative believe knitting these disparate programs into an effective national movement will require regional hubs, such as BC's Coastal Stewardship Network.

This week's meetings have focused on creating a unified northern branch of Guardians that can support and rely on one another.

"Work in the North is unique to the North," said Amos Scott, project director for the Northern Indigenous Stewardship Circle and organizer of the sessions.

"The programs here often are small, only one or two people working. And then there's also a few more established Guardian programs in northern Canada.

"But they can find, amongst themselves, similar challenges and similar ways to overcome challenges in their work. And that's the point of having people here at a sharing circle, is to be to have that safe and open space to talk about those things."

In the North, guardianship ranges from processing land use applications and regulatory operations to hosting hide-tanning workshops and harvesting programs for Elders.

Examples of existing N.W.T. guardianship efforts include caribou protection, the Dehcho Guardians' work monitoring permafrost conditions at Scotty Creek, and the K'asho Got'ine Guardians' partnership with the University of British Columbia to install trail cameras and acoustic recorders across Ts'udé Niljné Tuyeta.

This week, program leaders discussed an area that still requires legal clarity: the contention that for programming to have results, Guardian programs need authority to enforce behaviour on the land.

"Long-term solutions will be needed to ensure we support this kind of work," said Scott.

"But it's so important. It provides employment, we're seeing healthier communities ... it's an Indigenous-led effort to meet the challenges we're facing with our environment."

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