

# How Indigenous people are coping with COVID-19

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**T**he camping area is near a stand of tall birch along the shores of the McKenzie River in the Northwest Territories. Dene land-based arts educator Melaw Nakehk'o has set up her canvas tent right next to her mom and dad's wooden framed tent. In front is a common area where they cook over an open fire. By the cooking area, Nakehk'o has cleared a workspace where she will skin her hides: five caribou and three moose. Her mom and children will help.

Like many Indigenous peoples across the country, Nakehk'o has drawn on cultural strengths to weather the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Communities are finding ways to take care of each other, despite limited infrastructure for pandemic response in some places. Some Indigenous Canadians are staying connected using technology. Others have returned to the land as their ancestors did during plague outbreaks in the 1800s.

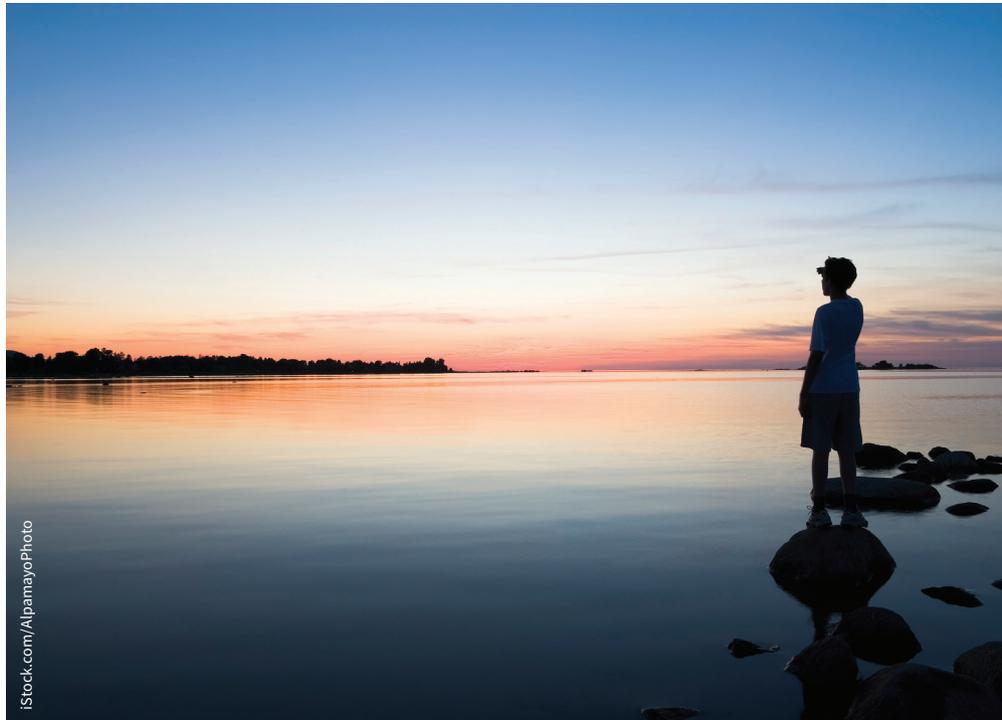
"We were told to go out to the land, stay away from town, and camp in family groups," Nakehk'o explains.

## Returning to the land

Feeling cooped up after the cancellation of her moose-hide tanning workshops, Nakehk'o set up a semi-permanent camp with her family about an hour's drive from Yellowknife. "I've always wanted to have more time to be on the land with my kids before they got too much older. But there's always timing, school, work projects — all these reasons to not be out in the bush," she says.

When her family is out exploring, Nakehk'o can see others camped out along the river. It gives her comfort, knowing she is not alone.

In northern Ontario, musician Adrian Sutherland headed into the bush as Canadian cases of COVID-19 began to rise.



Indigenous Canadians have drawn on cultural strengths to weather the pandemic.

Hailing from Attawapiskat First Nation, between the Attawapiskat River and James Bay, Sutherland is usually out on the land in the spring. But this year, he brought along his wife, children and grandchildren. Many people in his community did the same, planning to stay out for months instead of weeks.

Sutherland's family has four camps, and a big prospector tent for extra supplies — enough room for his entire family, including his brothers and their families, and his aunt and uncle and their grandchildren. They brought enough dry goods to last a few months, but their protein will come from this year's harvest of geese, waterfowl, fish and caribou.

"This is a very unique situation with COVID-19," says Sutherland. "It's sort of forcing some families to reconnect and

go back to the way it used to be." His experiences on the land have helped him to overcome fear and build courage in adversity, he adds. "No matter what's in front of you, you find a way to go around it, to get through it. It's always guided me."

## Help to stay home

In Whitesand First Nation, health coordinator Angela Nodin is doing her best to support members of her community who are self-isolating, including those who live off-reserve.

Nodin sent her children into the bush with her parents when she feared she had come into close contact with COVID-19 as a front-line worker. After that scare, the band council issued a notice to end social gatherings. Nodin took her van and

blocked off the road to the community and recorded a message urging members to stay home.

But Nodin felt she couldn't ask people to self-isolate, on or off the reserve, without also offering supports like food hampers and cleaning supplies. The band bought a cow and a pig to help see the community through. Nodin sent hunters to the land to catch moose, fishermen to Lake Nipigon, and medicine pickers to gather cedar, Labrador tea and other traditional medicines. "We've been able to send three shipments of fresh lake trout and whitefish to our members in Thunder Bay," Nodin says.

The band has also offered incentives for children to stay home, including by distributing craft supplies and hosting an online puppet show competition. Nodin reminds people to use 24-hour helplines and online supports and has talked with people about their concerns, sometimes until the early hours of the morning.

### New use for traditional arts

Across Canada, makers of traditional regalia and crafts have turned their skills to making thousands of non-medical masks featuring Indigenous designs.

When schools shut down in Timmins, artist Donna "Dolores" Gull received a letter listing ways to curb the spread of COVID-19, including by wearing a mask. "I didn't have a mask," Gull says. Searching the Web for sewing patterns, she came across the image of a 600-year-old plague doctor mask with a long beak.

"As doctors walked through town with dead bodies, they stuffed the beak [with herbs and spices] so they wouldn't have to smell death," which they thought caused illness, Gull explains. She was reminded of Cree ceremonial masks and created her own beaked face coverings stuffed with cedar and sage.

Gull has since made more than 60 masks for her community with the help of her daughter.

As the weather warmed, dancers across North America were excited to hit the pow wow trail, but lockdown measures have made that impossible. A young jingle dress dancer from the Navajo Nation in Arizona shared a dance on social media as an offer of prayer and healing. The video inspired others to post videos of themselves in traditional regalia.

Anishinaabe comedian Ryan McMahon saw an opportunity to revive an old comedic character, Clarence Two Toes, in a series of online videos touching on the current crisis. "Comedy and storytelling are doorways into perspectives and ideas that you may not have had," McMahon says. "Under COVID lockdown, we need to imagine and consider what is possible, and that's what I'm trying to do through humour online."

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# Why are Indigenous communities seeing so few cases of COVID-19?

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Like most people, Tania Cameron was watching the news intently as the first cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) were reported in Canada. A member of Niisaachewan First Nation and regional coordinator for Indigenous Sport and Wellness Ontario, she worried that no one was talking to Indigenous communities about the pandemic heading their way.

“When I called a couple of [personal protective equipment] supply companies, they told me, ‘We’re not allowed to announce it, but we’re sold out and if we do get any, priority goes to the hospital.’ So that to me was a warning,” Cameron says. She texted friends in the community, chiefs and council members to raise the alarm and offer help updating pandemic plans.

It wasn’t the first time Cameron has had to prepare for a public health crisis — she and a handful of local health directors developed her community’s first pandemic plan in response to the 2002 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome.

Then as now, many people feared that the virus could devastate communities already contending with the legacy of colonization — poverty, overcrowding, limited health infrastructure and poor access to clean water — ideal conditions for the spread of disease. But despite these challenges, Indigenous communities have fared better than the rest of Canada in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of Aug. 6, the percentage of people living on First Nations reserves who have tested positive for COVID-19 was one-quarter that of the general Canadian population. Of a total 422 cases of COVID-19 on reserves, more than 80% have recovered. Six people have died — a fatality rate one-fifth that of the general population. According to Indigenous

Services Canada, “First Nations communities are flattening the curve.”

British Columbia is a case in point — the province reported just 90 cases of COVID-19 among First Nations people in the first six months of 2020. Health officials attributed these low numbers to the “extraordinary” public health measures taken by Indigenous communities.

According to Dr. Nel Weiman, acting deputy chief medical officer for the First Nations Health Authority, the memory of past epidemics in which entire villages were nearly wiped out made people especially cautious about COVID-19. “Communities recognized the need to really take this seriously and install their own versions of public health measures,” says Weiman.

Indigenous people got creative to stay connected virtually, set up trailers for self-

isolation, and made roadblocks to control access to their communities. Now, as the rest of the province has reopened, many of these communities are fighting to remain closed. “Some people find it controversial, but I don’t think people can argue that by limiting access ... the communities have been able to keep themselves safe to a certain extent,” says Weiman.

The First Nations Health Authority also put out special public health messages specifically recognizing Indigenous strengths and the sacrifices made by communities during the lockdown. Many have put on hold or modified ceremonies, funerals, and rites of passage.

Robert Bonspiel, director of First Nations Paramedics, the only Indigenous private ambulance service in Quebec, attributes low infection rates among



Indigenous communities have fared better than the rest of Canada in the first wave of the pandemic despite facing major challenges to infectious disease control.

Indigenous people to communities taking a proactive approach to the pandemic.

As codirector of the emergency response unit for the Mohawk community of Kanehsatà:ke, Quebec, “we asked people to go back to their roots, to go back to the way it was years ago, to be caring about their neighbours like their family,” he says.

In addition to setting up roadblocks like in BC, the community encouraged people to stay at home by delivering food hampers, prescriptions, and meals for Elders. Keeping Elders at home may have been protective, given the high number of deaths in long-term care, Bonspiel adds. “If you look at the general Quebec population, their Elders are placed [in nursing homes.] In the Mohawk community, and First Nations communities, we don’t do that.”

For Inuit in Canada, fighting tuberculosis (TB) has prepared communities for COVID-19. “Inuit communities, unfortunately, have become adept at contact tracing and isolation for TB,” so pandemic measures were “not a new phenomenon,” says Deborah Van Dyk, senior policy director with Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the nonprofit representing over 60 000 Inuit in Canada.

“Strengths-based” strategies to mobilize communities, reduce poverty and implement Inuit-specific solutions to eliminate TB may also support the response to COVID-19, Van Dyk says. Inuit communities have also been working on building up their public health staff, “so it was a lot easier for that kind of staff to redeploy.”

Van Dyk says shutting down travel quickly may have helped to prevent the

spread of COVID-19 among Inuit people, but it’s still too early to say without any evaluations of the public health response. Meanwhile, “there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of impact ... around mental health, around businesses, education and that kind of thing,” she says.

Courtney Skye, a research fellow at the Yellowhead Institute, a First Nations–led think tank, cautions that COVID-19 data are not being collected in a granular way that would show which Indigenous communities are affected at what rates. Without those data, “we lose the ability to hold decision-makers responsible for the actions that they’re taking on behalf of the community.”

**Jolene Banning**, Fort William First Nation, Ont.