First Nations Public Libraries in Ontario: a primer for settlers and beginners (from a settler beginner)

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First Nations Libraries
in Ontario

a primer for settlers & beginners

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About FNPLs

(First Nations Public Libraries)

- There are 132 First Nations in Ontario
- 45 have Public Libraries (FNPLs); < 2 than 2004
- Ontario is the only province that recognizes & FUNDS First Nations Public Libraries

First Nations Public Libraries are like other libraries in that
- they provide access to information & collections
- they function as community centres, providing welcoming meeting places for all

First Nations Public Libraries are different in that the communities they serve have distinct information, cultural and materials needs
- many are geographically isolated
- language and cultural revitalization are strategic priorities
- most experience inadequate infrastructure & services *

This means that FNPLs
- are relatively more expensive to build & equip,
- isolation makes virtual services even more important
- play a key role in cultural and language revitalization
- are close to the oral traditions of their communities
- are often the only source of internet access in their community

- face limited finances that make meeting IT and other needs difficult *
- are governed by Band Councils, or community education departments (rather than independent governance bodies)
- typically receive in-kind contributions from Band Councils
First Nations in Ontario face severe infrastructure deficits like clean water, and housing, & lack adequate funding to meet other needs like education & health.

These result from lack of access to resources, & ongoing policies of neglect & violence perpetrated by settlers and our governments.

Libraries operate in this context and forced to compete with other priorities for scarce funding.

Provincial operating grants to FNPLS use a formula that guarantees chronic underfunding:

- Funding is calculated using a per capita formula that uses the 1998 census!!.
- The province then provides $1.50 per capita annually. Other public libraries receive $4.80 (in rural areas) and $4.08 (in urban areas) per household.

Other Challenges:
- Lack of Understanding of FNPLs’ Unique Role
- Training Barriers
- Collections and Technology Barriers
FNPL Priorities

First Nations Libraries have identified the following strategic priorities as their path forward:

- staffing

- Support "revitalization of First Nation languages and cultural resources and programming"

- advocacy and promotion

- facilities

- services

- Broadband internet

- Improved Funding

- Collections

- Improved Coordination & Advocacy
FNPLs Working Together

These are some initiatives to strengthen services and the voice of FNPLs:

- FN Public Library Week
  - since 2000
  - in every PL in Ontario
  - 4,000 posters sent out across Canada
  - raise awareness of FNPL resources, services
  - + celebrate cultural uniqueness

- FN Community Reads Awards
  - since 2003
  - chosen by indigenous librarians

Organizations advocating for First Nation Public Libraries:

- National Indigenous Knowledge & Language Alliance (NIKLA)
- Ontario Library Association Indigenous Task Group
- Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA)
- Indigenous Matters Committee
- Federation of Ontario Public Libraries Indigenous Library Partnership Working Group
- American Indian Library Association
You Say You Want to Help...

Here are some ideas:
- Promote and validate Indigenous culture through:
  - Book displays
  - Bibliographies
  - Readers Advisory
  - Displays
  - Book clubs
- Create welcoming spaces for Indigenous people:
  - signage
  - decor
  - Programs like Elders-in-residence
- Seek Partnerships with Friendship Centres & other agencies in your community serving Indigenous people
- Co-develop high-quality, appropriate services to Indigenous People living off-reserve
- Buy your books from goodminds.com, Indigenous owned First Nation Communities Read official wholesaler

No more saviours!!!

- Develop programming that supports Reconciliation & learning about Canada's colonial system
Explore establishing relationships with FNPLs. Markham and Hamilton partnered with Eabametoong First Nation, and Six Nations of the Thames respectively
  - both now share access to their online collections
  - both pursue opportunities for dialogue, learning and visits

**Useful Tips**

Whether you choose to pursue a relationship with a FNPL, a Friendship Centre, or an Indigenous community near you. Here are some useful starting points

- Listen
- Be flexible
- Consult before doing anything
- Do only what a community wants
- Take responsibility for your own learning: Read & Watch
- Take time to cultivate relationships & trust
- Respect Indigenous protocols
- Frame your work as part of ongoing Reconciliation & Decolonization work
- Recognize and compensate Indigenous knowledge keepers
The following is a partial selection of resources I referred to in creating this zine, as well as a few other we (settler learners) can use to continue to educate ourselves.


What will you do...

"Take it. It's yours. Do with it what you will. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now." —Thomas King

The truth about stories