

# Commentary



SEPTEMBER 2022

## Majority of Indigenous peoples support resource development

Heather Exner-Pirot and John Desjarlais

### Introduction

In recent years, Indigenous communities have had their rights used to advance agendas related to resource development, both for and against. Rather than nations being able to determine for themselves, through their own informed deliberations, under what circumstances they will engage in resource development, external influences have often sought to shape Indigenous decision-making. More often than not, this has been directed at rejecting participation in projects altogether, due to their environmental impacts. Many journalists, activists and political leaders have turned this into a trope: that because Indigenous people are caretakers and stewards of the land, their natural position must be to stop resource development and be a last line of defence for protecting the earth.

This has had severe consequences on the economic prospects of First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples. All nations must find ways to achieve sustainable development, and modern lifestyles depend on resource extraction. Almost every First Nation, Métis or Inuit community is engaged in resource development in some capacity, from oil and gas to mining, and from forestry to commercial fishing; and certainly every Indigenous community uses products from those activities to meet their basic material needs. And yet

there has often been pressure to reject the benefits that arise from such development, even as it comes from their own territories. This despite the fact that Indigenous peoples have amongst the poorest socio-economic outcomes in Canada and are working to reduce their forced dependency on the federal government and regain the capacity to be self-determining.

For many, the media coverage of the Wet'suwet'en conflict over the Coastal GasLink pipeline epitomized the caricature of all Indigenous peoples being opposed to natural resource development. Those in favour – including the elected leadership of the 20 nations along the pipeline route, who had conducted their own engagement and consultation with their communities over several years – were routinely dismissed or ignored. Very little nuance of what was, and remains, a complex situation was presented, and outside political pressures effectively overwhelmed and displaced community processes for decision-making.

Believing through their own anecdotal experiences that the majority of Indigenous peoples support resource development where it provides social and economic benefits to their communities while mitigating environmental impacts, the Indigenous Resource Network sought to provide objective evidence of Indigenous people's attitudes towards natural resource development. The Indigenous Resource Network is an independent, non-partisan, Indigenous-led organization with a mandate to advance the interests and perspectives of Indigenous resource businesses and workers.

This commentary is a result of that effort and describes the findings of two surveys, conducted by a reputable third-party (EnviroNomics Research) in each of 2021 and 2022, that polled Indigenous people about natural resource development. While support was not universal, nor unconditional, the surveys confirmed that a majority (65 percent) of Indigenous people across Canada do support resource development, and that their support can be enhanced through environmentally and socially responsible practices.

## Polling Indigenous people

The polling firm EnviroNomics Research was commissioned for the surveys based on previous work they had conducted with Indigenous peoples, including with APTN (Aboriginal Peoples Television Network). There have been few opinion surveys of Indigenous people in Canada, despite what may be assumed to be strong public interest in their positions on various issues. At least part of the reason for this lack of data is that it is not easy to get representative samples. First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples represent approximately 4.9 percent of the population of Canada. The current standard for sampling is random telephone calling. As such, pollsters have to call 20 times as many phone numbers for an Indigenous-specific sample than for a typical Canadian sample. This greatly increases the time and cost to conduct such surveys.

To mitigate these challenges, it was decided to concentrate polling in geographic areas with significant Indigenous populations. In practice, this meant excluding large urban centres and focusing on rural areas. Because the survey was meant to gauge Indigenous attitudes towards resource development, this was deemed an appropriate compromise, as those living in rural areas and on reserve are much more likely to be impacted by such activities.

## Methodology

Two surveys were conducted by Environics, one in March-April 2021 and the second in January-February 2022. The same questions and wording were used wherever possible, although some additional questions focused on forestry were added for the latter (see Appendix I for the questions from the second survey). Natural resource development was defined as oil and gas, mining, commercial fisheries and forestry. In the first survey, all provinces and territories were included. In the second, areas without commercial forestry, including Prince Edward Island and all three territories, were excluded.

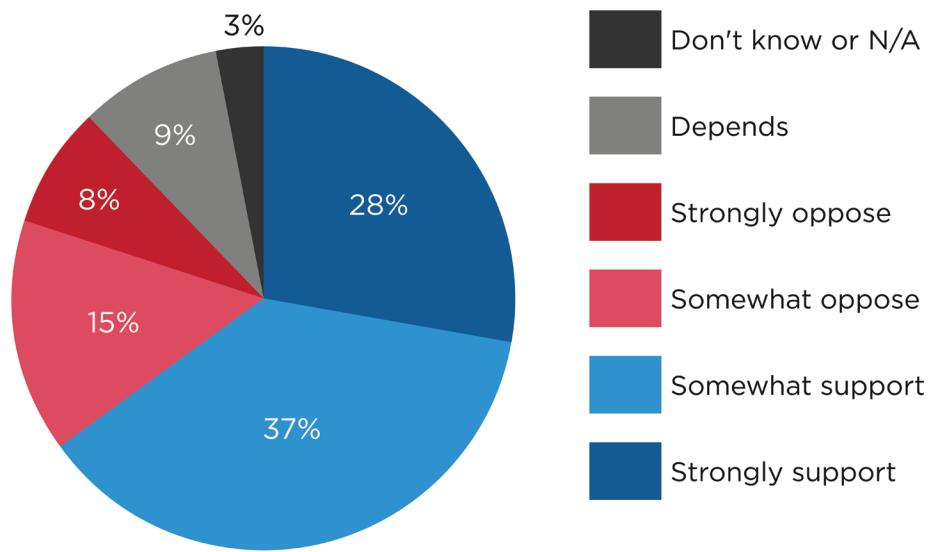
The first survey was based on telephone interviews conducted with 549 self-identified First Nations, Inuit or Métis adults living in a rural area (56 percent) or on a reserve (44 percent), and the second with 510 respondents with the same on-off reserve split. The margin of sampling error was virtually identical: for a sample of 549 non-urban Indigenous people it was +/- 4.2 percent, 19 times in 20; and for 510 it was 4.3 percent. The results for the same questions on both surveys were all within the sampling error margin, indicating that they were not outliers. Indeed, the survey results were replicated. Results from both are presented below; 2021 results are generally selected as they include results from all across Canada, though results specific to forestry are selected from the 2022 survey.

## Results

The main hypothesis – that despite how media and many politicians often portray Indigenous peoples, the majority of them do indeed support resource development – was confirmed in the survey results. When asked if they support or oppose natural resource development, 65 percent of respondents indicated they support or strongly supported it, and 23 percent said they oppose or strongly oppose it. Another 9 percent said it depends, and 3 percent said they didn't know (Figure 1).

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**Figure 1: In general, do you support or oppose natural resource development?**



Respondents were also asked about specific sectors, including oil and gas, mining, commercial fisheries and forestry.

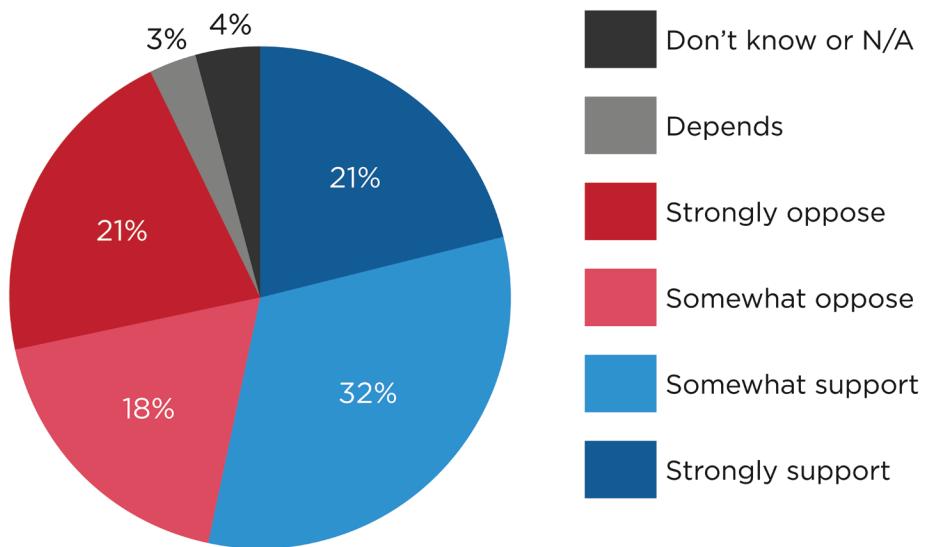
Not surprisingly, forestry and commercial fisheries had higher support than oil and gas, and mining. Indigenous peoples have always used the forest, oceans, lakes and rivers to sustain themselves physically and spiritually, and have direct experience with their management, which can be done at smaller scales. Mining and oil and gas are non-renewable activities, without historical Indigenous precedence, and require significant capital and industry involvement.

Nonetheless, majorities of Indigenous people supported all four sectors.

Support was at the upper end of the spectrum for forestry (62 percent support, 29 percent strongly) and commercial fisheries (62 percent support, 30 percent strongly). The level of support softened with oil and gas (53 percent support, 21 percent strongly) and mining (51 percent support, 20 percent strongly) projects (see Figures 2-5). However, support still outweighed opposition by a significant factor.

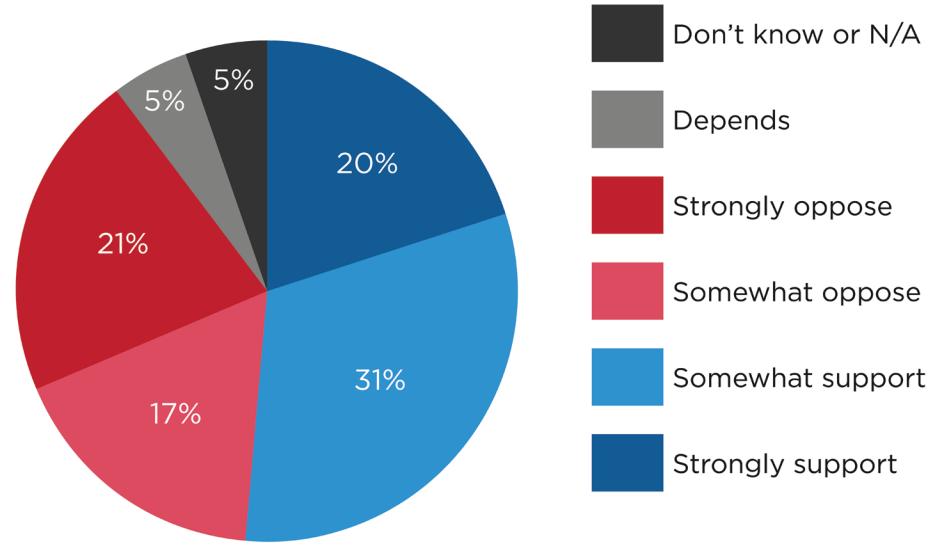
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**Figure 2: Support for oil and gas**



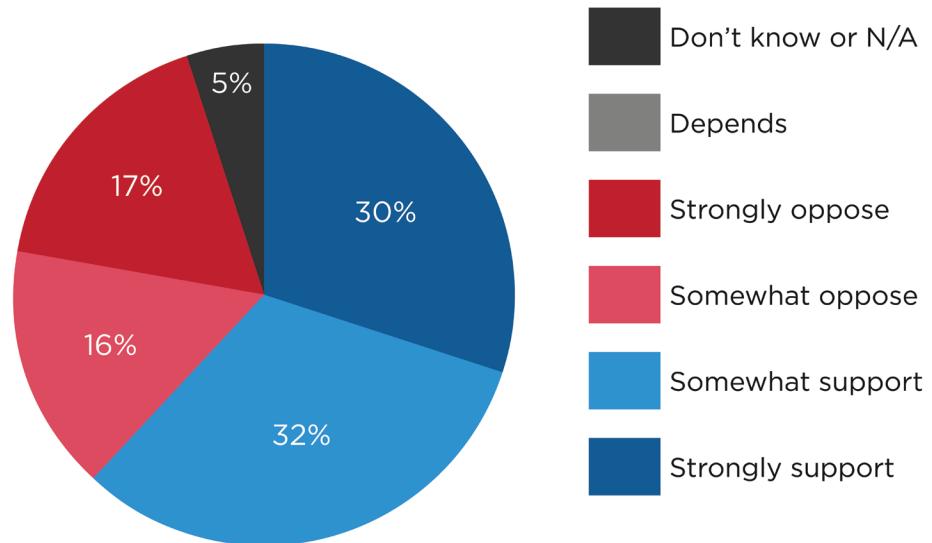
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**Figure 3: Support for mining**



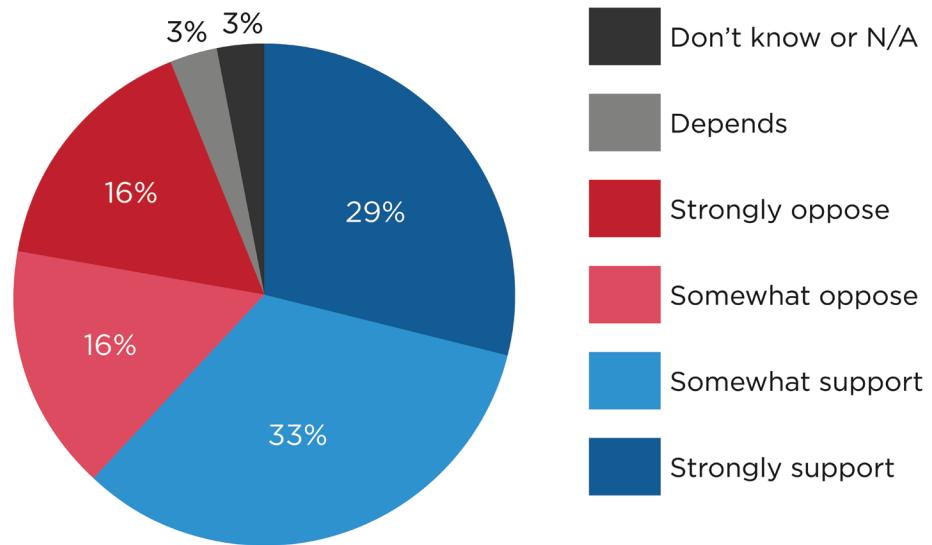
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**Figure 4: Support for commercial fisheries**



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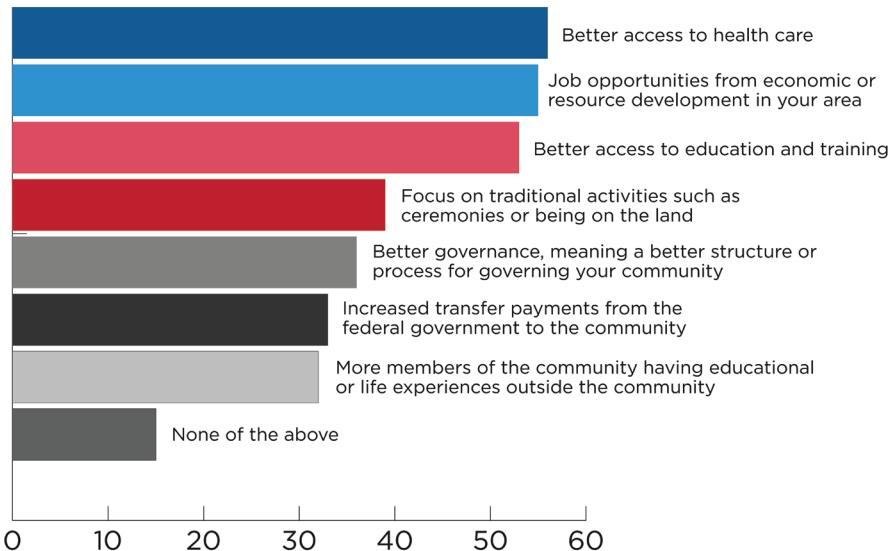
**Figure 5: Support for forestry**



The reasons for the support for natural resource development can be linked to the importance that resource development has for jobs in rural and reserve areas. Respondents placed the creation of job opportunities from economic or resource development in the area (55 percent) within the top three urgent priorities for improving quality of life in their communities. This was on par with better access to health care (56 percent) and better access to education and training (53 percent) (Figure 6).

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**Figure 6: How much of a priority is each of the following to improving the quality of life in your community?**



Interestingly, support was slightly higher for resource development in the abstract than for actual projects. For those respondents that indicated there were actual resource projects taking place in or near their community, 59 percent supported it compared to 39 percent that opposed it. Support was also more conditional for projects proposed in or near respondents' community. While 54 percent said they would support such a project, a significant proportion (17 percent) said it would depend.

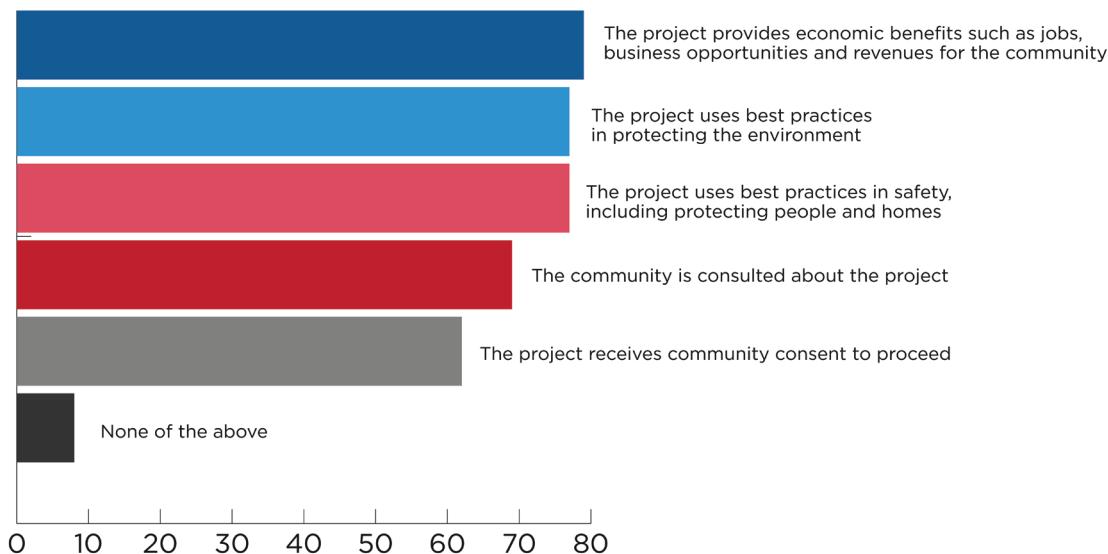
#### *Factors that improve acceptance*

It is understood that most Indigenous peoples and communities are not universally opposed to natural resource development, but rather reserve their support for those projects that align with their values. In order to gauge which characteristics of natural resource development were most important to securing their support, respondents were asked whether the following features made them more or less likely to support an activity (Figure 7).

Best practices in protecting the environment were the most important factor, whereas community consent was the least. This is somewhat counterintuitive, as consent is a very common discussion point in legal and rights-based narratives. It may be grounded in the distrust some Indigenous peoples have in their governing institutions. However, there were no follow-up questions in the poll itself to determine such motivations.

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**Figure 7: Which of the following makes you more likely or less likely to support resource development, or does it make no difference?**



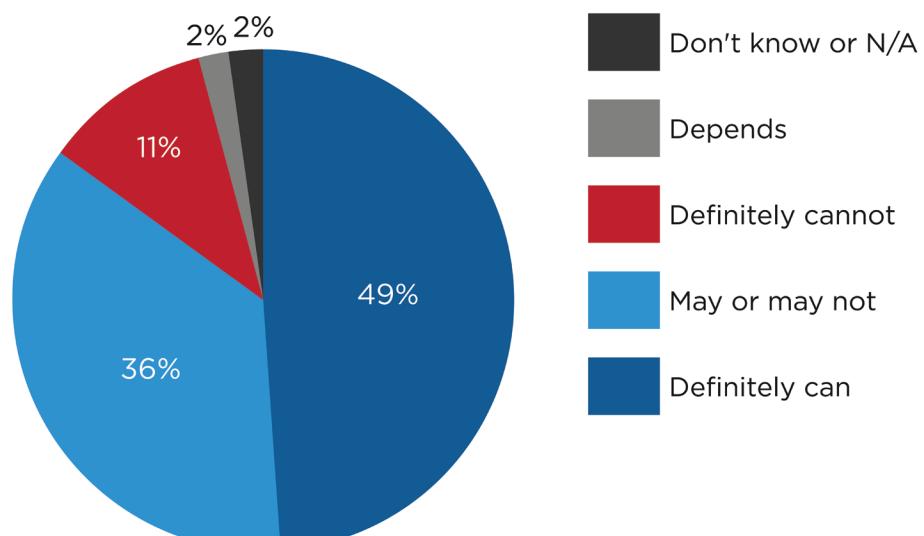
In addition, the more informed a respondent felt about the topic of natural resource development, the more likely he or she was to support it. Overall, 30 percent of respondents felt very or well-informed, 38 percent felt somewhat informed, and 30 percent felt not very or not at all informed. Among those that felt well-informed, 75 percent supported resource development, versus only 54 percent support from those who felt not informed. This indicates that more education and awareness about resource development practices and impacts would positively affect support.

### *Respecting the land*

Given the importance of environmental protection to Indigenous peoples and their worldviews, the survey sought to determine whether respondents thought resource development could be done while respecting the land and environment. Half thought it could, while only 11 percent thought that it definitely could not (Figure 8).

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**Figure 8: To what extent do you believe that resource development can be done while respecting the land and the environment?**



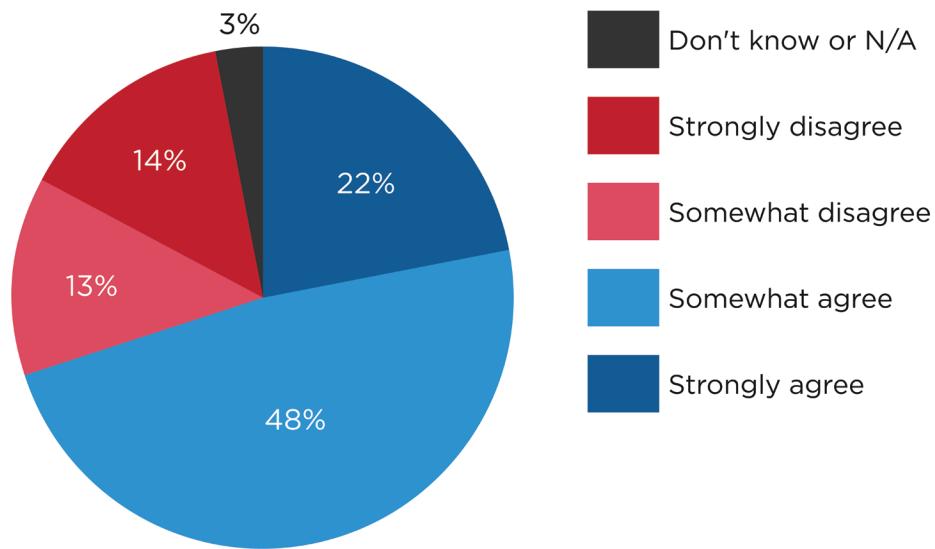
## Forestry

In addition to replicating most of the 2021 survey to test its robustness, the 2022 survey added questions about forestry. About 70 percent of Indigenous communities in Canada are located in forested areas,<sup>1</sup> and they have relied on the forest for food, medicine, cultural practices and their economic prosperity for millennia. As Indigenous peoples reclaim management over forestry in ever larger areas, and as the controversy over old growth logging in BC coupled with a spike in lumber prices directed more attention to Indigenous-led forestry, a survey dedicated to the topic was deemed necessary.

Likely owing to the deep expertise, symbiosis and historical management of forest resources by Indigenous communities, respondents were very confident in the ability of their communities to benefit from forestry.

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**Figure 9: My community has adequate capacity, including the knowledge, skills, policies and planning in place, to benefit from forestry**



Respondents were also asked about various forestry activities (Figure 9). Over half of respondents (58 percent) knew of a current forestry project proposed or underway in or near their community. Among this group, majorities said the project involved harvesting (75 percent), hauling (71 percent), manual or mechanical stand tending with brush cutter (68 percent), tree planting (62 percent), and site preparation (57 percent), while relatively few were aware of chemical stand tending with herbicide application (24 percent). This was asked in particular because a lot of opposition or concern with forestry projects has been in regards to herbicide application. However, it seems to not be an issue of which the average Indigenous resident is aware.

Respondents were more optimistic about the ability to conduct forestry activities sustainably than with natural resource development generally, as polled in the 2021 survey. A little over half (54 percent) believed forestry can definitely be done while respecting the land and the environment, while one-in-five (18 percent) believed it was definitely not possible to achieve both: a ratio of 3:1. Another quarter (25 percent) were more circumspect, saying it may or may not be possible.

#### *Geographic, gender and age differences*

In general, those living in rural areas were more supportive and optimistic about resource development than those living on reserve; older (> 35 years) respondents were more supportive than younger (18-34 years) ones; and Métis were more supportive than First Nations. For instance, three-quarters of rural residents (75 percent) said they supported resource development in

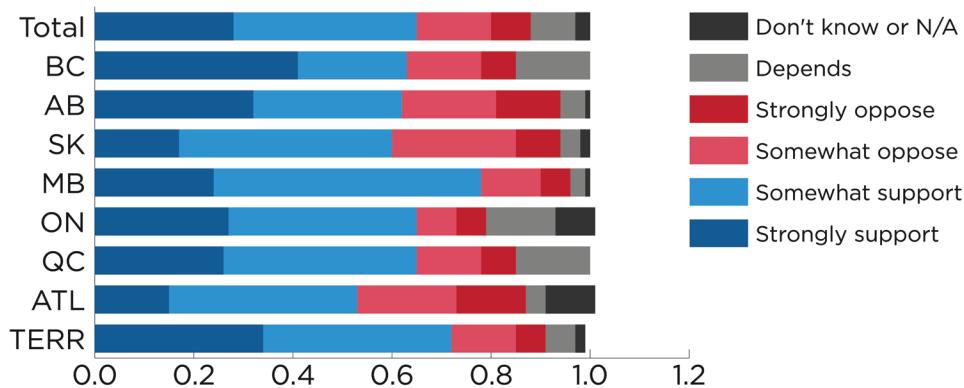
general, compared to just half (50 percent) of reserve residents. (The number of Inuit polled was not sufficient to comprise a representative sample.)

While there were some gender differences, with men slightly more likely to support resource development across the categories of questions, they were not stark. With regards to support for natural resource development, for example, 65 percent of men and 61 percent of females supported it, a difference that lied within the margin of error.

Figure 10 shows support for natural resource development amongst Indigenous respondents by province/region/territory. The sample sizes at the geographic level are too small to be considered statistically significant. As such, these results are shown only for informational purposes. The highest support was in Manitoba and the territories. The lowest support was in Saskatchewan and Atlantic Canada.

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**Figure 10: Indigenous support for natural resource development, by region**



## Conclusions

Despite its essential role in our lives and our economy, natural resource development has become a very polarized topic in Canada. While Indigenous opposition to resource projects has been highlighted and even celebrated in the media, the issue is not as divisive in real life as may be assumed. A significant majority (65 percent) of Indigenous people living in rural Canada support natural resource development, outweighing those opposed by a ratio of 2:1.

These results are not intended to indicate or suggest that Indigenous support for resource projects in their territories is unconditional. Rather it is meant to provide objective evidence, in what is usually a topic rife with personal bias, that First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities are open to participating in and granting consent to resource development in their territories. Hopefully these survey results encourage more Indigenous and industry partners to work together to develop projects in a good way.

# About the author



**Heather Exner-Pirot** has fifteen years of experience in Indigenous and northern economic development, governance, health, and post-secondary education. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. She also serves as a research advisor part-time for the Indigenous Resource Network. She has published and/or presented on Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations, urban reserves, telehealth, Indigenous workforce development, First Nations taxation and own source revenues, distributed & distance education, Indigenous health care, Arctic human security, regional Arctic governance, Indigenous engagement in the Arctic Council, and Arctic innovation.



**John Desjarlais Jr.** is Nehinaw (Cree)-Métis from Kaministikominahikoskak (Cumberland House), Saskatchewan with proud ties in Treaty 4. John started his career in 2001 in the mining industry and worked in a variety of roles including environment and safety, maintenance, and reliability engineering management. During this time, he also completed an undergrad in Mechanical Engineering, and a Master's in Business Administration. John now proudly serves as the General Manager of Great Plains Contracting, an Industrial construction company whose primary owner is FHQ Developments. John proudly makes time for community and serves as the Chair of the Indigenous Resource Network, President of his engineering and geoscience regulator (APEGS), and as Director/Chair in areas of Safety (Saskatchewan Construction Safety Association), Indigenous outreach/development/and engagement (CIAC-AISES, IRN) and Post-Secondary (Sask Poly). John is also in the home stretch to complete his master's in Governance and Entrepreneurship in Northern and Indigenous Areas (GENI) through the University of Saskatchewan.

# Appendix I: Draft questionnaire for 2022 survey

## **Indigenous Resource Network: 2022 Survey on Indigenous Attitudes Towards Forestry**

*7-minute telephone survey with a representative sample of 500 Indigenous people living on reserves or in rural areas across Canada (excluding territories and PEI)*

### **DRAFT Questionnaire**

#### **Introduction**

Good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am calling from Environics Research. We are conducting a survey with First Nations, Inuit and Métis who are 18 years of age and older about important issues facing their communities.

We are not selling or soliciting anything. Your opinion is important to us and your answers will be kept strictly anonymous. This survey is registered with the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) research verification system.

Do you live in this household? IF NO, ASK TO SPEAK TO SOMEONE WHO DOES

IF ASKED: The survey will take about 7 minutes to complete

IF ASKED: The results of the survey will be used to understand what Indigenous peoples think about resource development.

IF ASKED: I can provide you with contact information at the end of the survey.

IF ASKED: The registration system has been created by the Canadian survey research industry to allow the public to verify that a survey is legitimate, get information about the survey industry, or register a complaint. The registration system is online at [www.canadianresearchinsights council.ca/rvs/home/](http://www.canadianresearchinsights council.ca/rvs/home/)

CONFIRM WHETHER RESPONDENT WOULD LIKE TO BE INTERVIEWED IN ENGLISH OR FRENCH

## **Respondent Selection**

1. Which of the following best describes you? Are you...?

IN PROVINCES, READ LIST IN ORDER SHOWN.

IN NORTH, START WITH CODE 3, FOLLOWED BY CODES 1, 2 AND 4

01 - First Nations

03 - Inuk

02 - Métis

04 - or, a non-Indigenous person

VOLUNTEERED

05 - Inuit

06 - Inuvialuit

98 - Other (SPECIFY \_\_\_\_\_)

99 - REFUSE

*ASK Q.2 IF NON-INDIGENOUS OR REFUSE AT Q.1. – OTHERWISE SKIP TO Q.3.*

2. IN PROVINCES: Is there anyone else living in this household who is First Nations, Inuk or Métis?

IN NORTH: Is there anyone else living in this household who is Inuk, First Nations or Métis?

01 – Yes        *ASK TO SPEAK TO THE PERSON; RE-INTRODUCE AND START AT Q.1*

02 – No        *THANK AND END SURVEY*

03 - DK/NA      *THANK AND END SURVEY*

3. (IN THE PROVINCES) Are you currently living on a First Nations reserve or somewhere else?

01 - On reserve

02 - Somewhere else

03 - DK/NA

4. And to confirm that you are 18 years of age or older, could you please tell me in what year were you born?

\_\_\_\_\_ Year

VOLUNTEERED

97 - Refuse/NA

*IF UNDER 18; ASK TO SPEAK TO SOMEONE IN HOUSEHOLD 18 AND OVER*

*IF REACH ANOTHER INDIVIDUAL, REINTRODUCE SURVEY AND START WITH Q.1*

RECORD (DO NOT ASK)

5. GENDER

01 - Male

02 – Female

#### **Attitudes Towards Resource Development**

6. Natural resource development includes oil & gas, mining, forestry and commercial fishing. In general, do you support or oppose natural resource development? Would you say you...?

**READ**

01 – Strongly support it

02 – Somewhat support it

03 – Somewhat oppose it

04 – Strongly oppose it

VOLUNTEERED

05 – Depends

99 – DK/NA

7. Using the same scale, to what extent do you support or oppose each of the following?

**READ AND RANDOMIZE. REPEAT SCALE ONLY AS NECESSARY.**

a. Oil and gas development

b. Mining development

c. Forestry

d. Commercial fisheries

01 – Strongly support

02 – Somewhat support

03 – Somewhat oppose

04 – Strongly oppose

VOLUNTEERED

05 – Depends

99 – DK/NA

8. Thinking specifically of the forestry sector in Canada, do you feel you have a really good understanding of how it works, a pretty good understanding, a limited understanding or would you say you don't know much about it?

01 – Really good understanding

02 – Pretty good understanding

03 – Limited understanding

04 – Don't know much about it

VOLUNTEERED

99 – DK/NA

9. To the best of your knowledge, are there any forestry activities currently underway near your community or in your traditional territory?

01 – Yes

02 – No

*SKIP TO Q.11*

VOLUNTEERED

03 – Project proposed but not underway      *SKIP TO Q.11*

99 – DK/NA      *SKIP TO Q.11*

10. [IF Q9=YES] From what you know or have heard, which of the following forestry activities are currently underway?

RANDOMIZE

- a. Harvesting, including road building
- b. Hauling
- c. Site preparation
- d. Tree planting
- e. Manual or mechanical stand tending with brush cutter
- f. Chemical stand tending with herbicide application

01 – Yes

02 – No

99 – DK/NA

11. [IF Q9=YES] Do you support or oppose the forestry activities currently underway near your community or in your traditional territory? Is that strongly or somewhat [support/oppose]?

- 01 – Strongly support
- 02 – Somewhat support
- 03 – Somewhat oppose
- 04 – Strongly oppose

VOLUNTEERED

- 05 – Depends
- 99 – DK/NA

**ASK ALL**

12. I'm going to read a list of features of responsible forestry. Please tell me if each of the following makes you more likely or less likely to support forestry, or does it make no difference.

**READ AND RANDOMIZE. KEEP D/E TOGETHER IN ORDER SHOWN**

- a. It uses best practices in protecting the environment
- b. It uses best practices in respecting Indigenous cultural sites
- c. It uses best practices in ensuring workers' safety
- d. The community is consulted about the forest management plan
- e. It provides economic benefits such as jobs, business opportunities and revenues for the community

01 – More likely to support

02 – No difference

03 – Less likely to support

VOLUNTEERED

- 05 – Depends
- 99 – DK/NA

13. To what extent do you believe that forestry can be done while respecting the land and the environment? Would you say it...?

**READ**

01 – Definitely can

02 – May or may not

03 – Definitely cannot

**VOLUNTEERED**

04 – Depends

99 – DK/NA

14. If your community negotiated a new forestry agreement to provide jobs and economic benefits, how confident are you that the forest company would deliver on its promises to provide jobs and business opportunities for people in your community?

**READ**

01 – Very confident

02 – Somewhat confident

03 – Not very confident

04 – Not at all confident

**VOLUNTEERED**

99 – DK/NA

15. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

My community has adequate capacity, including the knowledge, skills, policies and planning in place, to benefit from forestry.

01 – Strongly agree

02 – Somewhat agree

03 – Somewhat disagree

04 – Strongly disagree

**VOLUNTEERED**

99 – DK/NA

This completes the survey. Thank you very much for your participation.

*IF RESPONDENT ASKS FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THIS SURVEY: You can get more information about this survey by contacting Sarah Roberton at Environics by e-mail: sarah.roberton@environics.ca*

**THANK AND END SURVEY**

RECORD:

16. LANGUAGE OF INTERVIEW

01 – English

02 – French

17. PROVINCE/TERRITORY

01 - British Columbia

02 - Alberta

03 - Saskatchewan

04 - Manitoba

05 - Ontario

06 - Quebec

07 - Newfoundland and Labrador

08 - Nova Scotia

09 - New Brunswick

~~10 - Prince Edward Island~~

~~11 - Nunavut~~

~~12 - Northwest Territories~~

~~13 - Yukon~~

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### The Right Honourable Paul Martin

I want to congratulate the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** for 10 years of excellent service to Canada. The Institute's commitment to public policy innovation has put them on the cutting edge of many of the country's most pressing policy debates. The Institute works in a persistent and constructive way to present new and insightful ideas about how to best achieve Canada's potential and to produce a better and more just country. Canada is better for the forward-thinking, research-based perspectives that the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** brings to our most critical issues.

### The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has been active in the field of Indigenous public policy, building a fine tradition of working with Indigenous organizations, promoting Indigenous thinkers and encouraging innovative, Indigenous-led solutions to the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada. I congratulate **MLI** on its 10 productive and constructive years and look forward to continuing to learn more about the Institute's fine work in the field.

### The Honourable Irwin Cotler

May I congratulate **MLI** for a decade of exemplary leadership on national and international issues. Through high-quality research and analysis, **MLI** has made a significant contribution to Canadian public discourse and policy development. With the global resurgence of authoritarianism and illiberal populism, such work is as timely as it is important. I wish you continued success in the years to come.

### The Honourable Pierre Poilievre

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has produced countless works of scholarship that solve today's problems with the wisdom of our political ancestors. If we listen to the **Institute's** advice, we can fulfill Laurier's dream of a country where freedom is its nationality.

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