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James P. Robson Dr

*Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba, umrobsoj@cc.umanitoba.ca*

Andrew J. Sinclair Dr.

*Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba, John.Sinclair@ad.umanitoba.ca*

Iain J. Davidson-Hunt Dr.

*Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba, Iain.Davidson-Hunt@ad.umanitoba.ca*

Alan P. Diduck Dr.

*Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences, University of Winnipeg, a.diduck@uwinnipeg.ca*

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# What's in a name? The search for 'common ground' in Kenora, Northwestern Ontario

## **Abstract**

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Kenora is a small city in northwestern Ontario, Canada. No longer a forestry centre of note, Kenora plans to develop a more diversified and sustainable economy, driven by local needs and local decision-making. Yet any collective desire to enjoy a prosperous future is set against a backdrop of historical conflict, discrimination and misunderstanding among local First Nation, Métis and Euro-Canadian populations. Using a range of qualitative data, we discuss whether the philosophy and vision behind *common ground*, a term used to front a collaborative land management initiative close to the city centre, has gained currency among the wider public. Charting the trajectory of its usage over the last decade, we discuss whether the powerful rhetoric invoked by *common ground* will likely be reflected in the forging of more equitable and productive relations among the multiple cultural groups that define life in this region.

## **Keywords**

Environmental planning, Deliberative democracy, Co-management, First Nations, Treaty Rights, Common Ground, Northwestern Ontario, Canada

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## INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural collaboration, whether focused on environmental planning and management, or some other issue, often makes use of specific words and concepts to reflect the vision and philosophy that underpin the collaborative process. This paper discusses one such example from northwestern Ontario, Canada, where the term *common ground* has been adopted to front a land management initiative that looks to bring together Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian populations. Kenora is a former resource town in social and economic transition, where the municipal government, Grand Council of Treaty #3 (Treaty 3 government) and local First Nations communities are striving to create new economic opportunities through sustainable development, whilst dealing with problems from the past and present. It is a scenario repeated in other parts of Canada (Chamberlain 2003; Eeyou Istchee Framework Agreement 2011; NSRCF Action Plan 2011).

Successful cross-cultural understanding and collaboration is associated with processes that are open, participatory and democratic (Steins and Edwards 1999; Meadowcroft 2004; Smiley et al. 2010), whereby the concerns, needs and values of those with a stake in management are incorporated into the planning process (Flannery and O' Cinneide 2012). This mirrors the paradigm shift evident among planning theoreticians who have moved from instrumental or rational forms of planning to champion more communicative and trans-active ones (Friedmann 1987; Healey 2006). Central to such developments are transparency and accountability (Pinkerton and Weinstein 1995; Conley and Moote 2003; Dietz and Stern 2009), of which active communication plays a key role (Kooiman 2003). This is particularly important in the case of planning for contested common land that holds a special identity to people and is also a local material resource (Rodgers et al. 2011). In cultural terms, such land is typically the site of multiple uses and connections.

Given the contestations that may exist among and between 'stakeholder'<sup>1</sup> groups (and thus potentially impede the collaborative process) in Kenora, we investigate what local actors currently involved in the above-mentioned land management initiative, as well as the wider public, understand by the term *common ground*.

For purposes of cross-cultural collaboration, there is significance in how key terms and ideas both circulate and aid or obstruct communication among collaborators (Poerksen 1991). Of course, the term *common ground* is not unique to Kenora, and has been used in multiple yet oft-unrelated contexts (for examples, see BBC News 2011; CBC Radio 2011; Penn and Hood 2010). Yet many of these

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<sup>1</sup> We use this term while acknowledging that local Anishinaabe are (or should be) equal partners under a Treaty-based relationship rather than just another 'stakeholder'.

same sources provide little clue as to what the term is supposed to connote or denote in such settings. With this in mind, we ask what *common ground* signifies in accordance with the ways in which it is being used in Kenora, if the wider community shares in those expressed visions and perspectives, and thus speculate on the degree to which the term may facilitate or hinder collaboration as decisions begin to be made around how the common ground land is administered.

Our rationale for structuring the study in this way is simple. By asking local people what they perceive of the ‘Common Ground’ initiative and what the term *common ground* means to them, we have opened a door to understanding the range of perspectives that could or should inform any deliberative processes used in the initiative. As well, since the initiative has yet to move forward in an operational sense – only a small number of individuals have been directly involved since its inception almost eight years ago – the understanding of the wider public has yet to be heard. The study, the findings of which have now been presented to the community at large, is important because it identifies local perspectives not only about the land, but also the possibilities for collaboration. By giving voice to those outside the process, we are hopeful that as planning gets underway all stakeholders will be invited to participate in, and contribute to any decisions made.

From a scholarly perspective, it is a study that brings together and contributes to our thinking on environmental planning, co-management, deliberative democracy and social learning.

## **STUDY SITE AND METHODS**

### **Historical and Present Context**

Kenora, northwestern Ontario (Figure 1.1), is located on the northern shores of Lake of the Woods, at the point where the lake flows into the Winnipeg River, and is at a crossroads of historic trade routes; north to south using the waterways (both pre- and post-contact) for trading fur and other natural resource products, and east to west over the past century or so, by means of the Trans-Canada Highway and the Canadian Pacific Railroad (Forest Capital Report 1999).



Figure 1.1 – Location of Kenora, northwestern Ontario, Canada

When Europeans first arrived in the Kenora area, they found that the local Ojibway and Cree were a prosperous and relatively unified presence (Freeman 2000). Indeed, through trade and negotiation, there was a period when both broad cultural groups co-existed and shared in what the land had to offer (Cameron 2011); mirroring a sense of inter-cultural accommodation reported elsewhere in the wider region (Berger 1999; White 1991). However, as the settler population grew and the British looked to open up the west of the country, they entered into treaties with Aboriginal people across Canada's central regions. Northwestern Ontario, in particular, was considered a key area as the gateway to fertile farming lands across the Prairies.

The story of treaty making has been well documented (Berger 1999; Ralston Saul 2008). Suffice it to say that Aboriginal signatories to the local treaty ('Treaty 3') believed that they were entering into an agreement to share the resources contained within their customary lands. History tells us that non-aboriginal industrial actors and labourers, backed by the British Crown, appropriated the local Ojibway's lands and waterways (Grand Council Treaty #3 2011), and introduced new forms of large-scale resource exploitation; namely mining and forestry (Davidson-Hunt 2003). Kenora, known then as Rat Portage,

acted as a regional hub (services and transportation) for these activities. What followed the signing of Treaty 3 in 1873 was over a century of traditional livelihood loss, the residential schools program, other attempts at cultural assimilation, and rising resentment and tension between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal (settler) groups (Freeman 2000). Although it is a story repeated across Canada (RCAP 1996), problems were particularly acute in this part of the world. During the 1970s, Kenora was considered one of the most racist towns in Canada, the “frontline for race relations and human rights” as local historian Cuyler Cotton recalls.

Fast-forwarding to the present-day, the town and region finds itself in a transitional period. From an economic standpoint, Kenora has lost its pre-eminence as a forestry town, with the town’s pulp and paper mill closing down in 2005. Demographics have also shifted, with many First Nations members from surrounding reserves moving into Kenora to live as urban aboriginals (UATF 2007; Wallace 2010). These processes have increased the ethnic diversity of Kenora over the past decade, as well as encouraging the diversification of local and regional economic activities (UATF 2007).

### **The ‘Common Ground’ Land Management Initiative**

The land management initiative in Kenora that takes *common ground* as both its name and guiding philosophy very much reflects these historical and present-day contexts. Its goal is to bring together Aboriginal and settler populations to collaboratively manage just over 400 acres of heritage lands that lie close to the heart of Kenora. Figure 1.2 shows their location along with four of the five ‘*Common Ground*’ partners; the City of Kenora and three adjacent First Nation communities – Wauzhusk Onigum, Obashkaandagaang and Ochiichagwe’baigo’ining – that have long standing links to these lands and surrounding waterways. The fifth partner is Grand Council of Treaty #3, historic government of the Anishinaabe Nation in Treaty #3 and political government for First Nations located in the treaty area, including the three partner communities listed above.

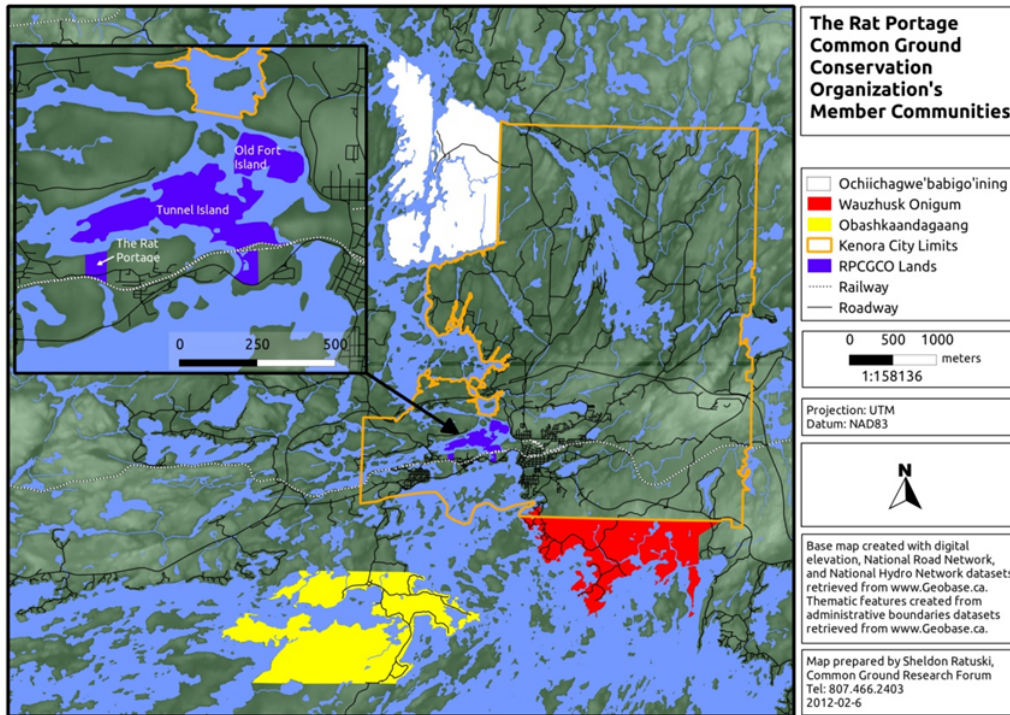


Figure 1.2 – Location of the ‘Common Ground’ Member Communities and the Rat Portage-Tunnel Island Lands (*Waa’ Say’ Gaa’ Bo*<sup>2</sup>).

Located at the bottle-neck between the Winnipeg River and Lake of the Woods, these lands incorporate Tunnel Island, Old Fort Island and Bigsby’s Rat Portage (inset, Figure 1.2), an ancient carrying place (the portage) and key link in the transportation routes of the Ojibway, French traders, the explorers, English and Scots traders, and finally the Canadians. The history of human activity in this area can be traced back to at least 6000 B.C.; thus covering the Palaeo-Indian, Archaic, Laurel, and Blackduck and Selkirk cultures, right up until the first European contact in the late 1600s (Forest Capital Report 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The name *Waa’ Say’ Gaa’ Bo*’ was revealed through ceremony to a Naotkamegwaning (Whitefish Bay) Elder, Ken Kakeeway, and is understood to refer to the spirit that guides the relationship central to the ‘Common Ground’ land management initiative. This spirit is embodied in the gift of the thunderbird feather that appears at all feasts and ceremonies associated with the initiative. The land falls under this relationship, and is therefore an important aspect of *Waa’ Say’ Gaa’ Bo*’, but the relationship exists irrespective of any physical place or locality. Another Ojibway name, *Kagapekeche* or “a place to stay over”, has been used to name Tunnel Island as a distinct locale for many years.

Of great cultural significance to local First Nations, these islands were resided upon and actively used by Aboriginal people up until the late 1960s, and continue to be used for occasional ceremonies and other spiritual activities. It was during the latter decades of the twentieth century that the larger and more accessible Tunnel Island began to be used widely by local City residents, predominantly as a place for hiking, dog walking, mountain biking, and other recreational purposes.

While such activities have increased markedly over the past ten to fifteen years, the lands have functioned more as a *de facto* commons since property rights for the land were, for a long time, held privately by the series of owners and operators of the nearby Kenora paper mill. When the last of these owners, Abitibi Consolidated, closed the mill in 2005, the private sale of assets on Tunnel Island and Old Fort Island was problematic because of their heritage status and increasing use by local residents. Consequently, Abitibi decided to gift the lands to the City of Kenora and Treaty 3 governments on the proviso that a joint management corporation be established and, once appointed, be given legal responsibility for administering both islands, as well as Bigsby's Rat Portage, on behalf of all First Nation and non-First Nation beneficiaries. Taking the name of Rat Portage Common Ground Conservation Organization (RPCGCO), the corporation was formed in 2008.<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, October 2013, the process of developing a vision and framework for collaboratively governing these lands remains in its formative stages.

Kenora's 'Common Ground' initiative thus constitutes something of a novel experiment in the Canadian context – a recreational space, shared lands, and political landscape in the heart of a community - where ideals of cross-cultural relations, collaboration, social cohesion and nature are set to be tried and tested. Given the planning process has been so slow in getting underway, with stakeholders yet to be engaged publically, we felt a study that asked local people about usage of the term *common ground* in Kenora, and their understanding as to its underlying meaning(s), would offer a line of inquiry into broader issues concerning the land, cross-cultural collaboration and governance – in other words, give voice to the range of local views that would necessarily need to be heard and negotiated as the 'Common Ground' initiative unfolded.

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<sup>3</sup> A working group was created in early 2006, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Abitibi, the City of Kenora and Grand Council of Treaty 3# in November 2006, Tunnel Island was transferred in March 2007, Old Fort in 2008, and the RPCGCO was formally created in 2008.



## Study Methods

Our study was designed to include both those intimately involved in the RPCGCO, others in the community not specifically involved in the initiative but with experience of cross-cultural issues and projects among the wider community, and, lastly, members of the general public. We did not carry out the research with an explicit sample size in mind, but rather intended to conduct a sufficient number of sit-down interviews and sidewalk surveys to allow us to gather data from both men and women who were representative (qualitatively-speaking) of both the above-mentioned categories and the broad ethnic groups that make up Kenora's population.

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted from June to September 2011. Respondents included: (i) active members in the 'Common Ground' land management initiative; (ii) councilors from Municipal and Treaty 3 governments; (iii) representatives from the partner First Nation communities; (iv) community development institutions; (v) educators; (vi) the business community; and, (vii) and local media (radio and newsprint). Twelve of the respondents were women, and 20 were men. Nine were members of First Nations, two identified as Métis, and 21 were Euro-Canadian in ethnic origin. Collectively, we termed these individuals as "**those in the know**", while aware that their understanding of, and involvement in, the 'Common Ground' initiative varied. Our questions centred on uncovering respondents' specific use and understanding of 'common ground', whether discussion had taken place with others about what the term meant, and how their understanding tallied with that of their colleagues and among the wider community.

Thirty-one "sidewalk interviews" were held with members of the **general public** at the end of September 2011. Eighteen of the respondents were women, 13 were men, seven were from First Nations, three identified as Métis, and 21 were Euro-Canadian. The line of questioning differed considerably from the sit-down interviews since the public's level of knowledge of the 'Common Ground' initiative was unknown. The language was simplified; a mix of open and closed-ended questions was used, with key topics covering not only people's understanding of *common ground*, but their more general opinion regarding cross-cultural collaboration, their knowledge about Treaty, and what Treaty meant in the context of life in Kenora.

The sit-down interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and these data coded for detailed analysis. Responses to the sidewalk interviews were recorded on a response form, and then both binary and qualitative responses were organized using Microsoft Excel.

## PERCEPTIONS OF ‘COMMON GROUND’

Interview data indicated that *common ground* was used in Kenora in reference to governance initiatives as early as 2000 and 2001. This usage pertained to talks between the City Mayor and Grand Chief of Grand Council of Treaty # 3, the purpose of which was to identify areas of mutual interest the two governments could work on together. Fewer than a quarter of “those in the know” were aware of this origin, and even among these individuals, nobody could identify who had first suggested using the term. Since that initial use of *common ground*, the term has been used to front several other (seemingly separate) initiatives<sup>4</sup> (see Table 1.1), including the emerging collaborative land management initiative that concerns Tunnel Island, Old Fort Island, and Bigsby’s Rat Portage.

Table 1.1 – Usage of the term *common ground* in local initiatives in Kenora

Year of use	Initiative	Context
2000-2001	‘Common Land, Common Ground’ inter-government discussions	A series of meetings between Treaty 3 and City of Kenora governments to identify areas of mutual interest.
2004-present	‘Rat Portage-Tunnel Island Common Ground’ project	Efforts to manage Rat Portage, Tunnel Island and Old Fort Island collaboratively as a shared resource.
2005-present	‘Common Ground Storytelling Series’	An annual storytelling event for citizens of Kenora to tell stories about place and people.
2006-present	Common Ground Feasts	Held each Spring and Fall on Tunnel Island. Open to the Public.
2010	‘Finding Common Ground through Creativity’	A collaborative project looking to bring Aboriginal and non-aboriginal people together through participatory art.
2010-present	‘Common Ground Research Forum’ (CGRF)	A university-community research alliance, developing research projects to aid the Rat Portage-Tunnel Island project.

<sup>4</sup> The six initiatives identified in Table 1.1 are those that were name-checked by multiple interviewees. One participant, however, believed that as many as eleven separate Kenora-based events or initiatives have used ‘Common Ground’ for their name and/or inspiration. Because others who were interviewed did not mention these additional usages, they are not included here.

The interviews made clear that despite its varied local adoption, there had been no widespread formal discussions as to what the term was meant to signify.

Given the term had been in use for over a decade, yet with no coordinated connotation or denotation with regards its meaning, interview participants were asked what *common ground* meant to them to help elucidate the various meanings in circulation. Table 1.2 provides a summary of responses.

Table 1.2 – Local people's understanding of *common ground*

<b>Category</b>	<b>“Those in the know”</b> (Positive responses from total number of interviewees)	<b>General public</b> (Positive responses from total number of interviewees)
Common ground as sharing of the land	9/32	10/31
Common ground as metaphor for building and developing relationships	8/32	7/31
Common ground as sharing of the land and metaphor for relationship-building	13/32	0/31
Other	1/32	7/31
Little or no understanding	1/32	7/31

One popular understanding of *common ground* focused on the physical, a place that is used and shared by many. This sense of the term is one that is interchangeable with what 'common (or shared) land' would mean to most people. It acts as a clear denotation of the term, explicitly describing the relationship between the words and how people relate to the lands at Rat Portage-Tunnel Island.

The second category refers to people's understanding of *common ground* as a metaphor for building and developing relationships. This is the 'big picture' connotation of the term, and one that is common to all six initiatives/events using 'Common Ground' in their name. A smaller number of people from each group of interviewees understood the term in this way, with variation in how this connotation was expressed.

The third category encapsulates an integrated understanding of the term; viewing *common ground* to be both about the land that people share or have common ties to, and the relationships between people, particularly across cultures, but not exclusively so. Most of those who understood *common ground* in this way were active members of the land management initiative, or those heavily involved in community development or one of the initiatives noted in Table 1.1. While this

understanding was shared by two-fifths of “those in the know”, not a single member of the general public explained the term in this way.

In order to better illustrate the diversity of people’s understanding of *common ground*, the following sections provide a sample of quotes from those interviewed, with responses grouped according to ethnicity.

### **Views of “those in the know”**

Some among this broad group had clearly taken time to think about what *common ground* meant to them, and provided well-developed and clear responses. It was among this group that the integrated view of *common ground* was most apparent. As one member explained, “[it’s a space] *where people can come together and have a feeling of comfort to engage in dialogue, resolve issues, make plans to move forward... a neutral comforting area that can facilitate conversation.*”

Beyond those heavily involved in ‘Common Ground’ initiatives, the level of understanding became less detailed. A number of interview participants suggested that this was partly explained by the lack of communication coming from those driving the initiatives. In terms of commonalities and differences along ethnic lines, a consistent theme to emerge among First Nation respondents was the linking of *common ground* to Treaty – “[it was] *originally based around the land, and it still is... it is about sharing land and resources, [which are] then the basis for relationship-building*” – and what they considered to be the original spirit and intent of that agreement between First Nation and non-First Nation signatories. As one First Nation respondent put it, “[*common ground is about*] *equality... that no one is left behind. Everyone is sharing something in other words. That no one is going to be left behind. It’s about equality and inclusivity*”. Her contention was driven by the belief that First Nations should be considered equal partners with respect to natural resource rights and resource sharing.

However, this is not to say that all First Nation interviewees provided a positive viewpoint. Some were suspicious and cynical about the ‘Common Ground’ initiatives. One saw the Tunnel Island project to be little more than a politically savvy land grab:

*“Common Ground would have been to all First Nations an area where you go in, make your camp, and leave it for the next person who comes by to use it. It’s a chain reaction of using the land as a portage. [Now it means] encroachment into our Treaty areas... it’s another way of sneaking in without going through the whole Treaty 3 assembly.”*

In addition to voicing concerns about the enclosure of traditional lands, another interviewee was clearly angered by how earlier decisions regarding

Tunnel Island had been made, *“It's just a name. You can call it what you want. I'm just interested in what's there and the question of what we are going to do with it. It's the principle of what took place and how it came to be what it is now.”*

While only two interview participants were Métis, it is worth noting that their understanding of *common ground* appeared to be the most personal of all. This was tied to their own sense of identity (or search for identity), and their responses to questions on *common ground* were among the most detailed of those interviewed:

*“A place that has meaning... [In thinking about her Métis background] ... it was like this whole world opened up. And from there, the whole question of this land and what this common ground means became far more important. Common ground is something that is really part of the very core of who I am.”*

Another interesting sub-group among “those in the know” was the local media, having reported on the different ‘Common Ground’ initiatives over the past 5-10 years. Their views on *common ground* were divergent. One journalist had a clearly defined sense of the term, believing that *common ground* began as a movement to improve relations, with the land management initiative having emerged as a concrete example of *common ground* “in action”. Another, however, was far less certain: *“quite frankly, [it doesn't mean] a whole lot. I don't know when they came up with 'common ground' but I just find the term confusing because there are a couple of common ground initiatives in town... and [they are] completely separate. So to me it just gets confusing”*.

### **Views of the General Public**

Because the general public has yet to be formally engaged in the ‘Common Ground’ land management initiative, this group constituted something of an ‘unknown quantity’ among the pool of interviewees. Given the primary connotation of *common ground* held by “those in the know”, which signifies sharing and inclusivity, we were interested to see how broadly this resonated among the general public. Our interviews had already shown that while a majority of public respondents (23 of 31) had heard of the term *common ground*, fewer than half knew anything about the ‘Common Ground’ initiative at Rat Portage-Tunnel Island.

With regards the public’s understanding of *common ground*, a selection of quotes from the interviews (Table 1.3) illustrate that while some were consistent with “those in the know”, many were not and, in general, illustrated a far less nuanced understanding. Responses either focused on denotations of the two words (‘common’ and ‘ground’) that make up the term, or expressed a diversity of

connotations – in contrast to the more consistent understanding of respondents involved in one or more of the ‘Common Ground’ initiatives. It should be noted, of course, that sidewalk interviews do require relatively quick, on-the-spot responses, while local people’s knowledge of the issues has been limited by a lack of communication (to date) between those involved in the ‘Common Ground’ initiatives and the general public.

Table 1.3 – Understanding of ‘common ground’ among the general public

Interviewee	Responses to question: What does common ground mean to you?
Euro-Canadians	<p><i>“It’s a common place, an area that is accessible to everybody.”</i></p> <p><i>“Making something more of a well-known public area.”</i></p> <p><i>“It’s about the natives in the city, something to do with that... it’s been in the papers.”</i></p> <p><i>“First Nations and Kenora-ites trying to have peace between each other... to share and not squabble.”</i></p>
Métis	<p><i>“Common for everyone, to benefit the whole community”</i></p>
First Nation	<p><i>“Different cultures of the area... the idea that people who come from different parts of the world, that everyone has a story. Native people have been here for a long time but have been pushed out of the way. It’s about rectifying that.”</i></p> <p><i>“Exactly what it says, land shared by all”</i></p> <p><i>“Dealing with social division, setting the boundaries of community in terms of property”</i></p>

Regarding differences in people’s broad understanding along ethnic lines, while a majority of Euro-Canadians couched their responses in terms of access to and development of a physical piece of land, the views of First Nation participants often carried a clearer social dimension.

In order to delve more deeply into the public consciousness regarding the *common ground* vision, a series of more general questions were asked. These concerned the virtues of cross-cultural collaboration in Kenora and what ‘Treaty’ meant to members of the public in Kenora. It was important to ask these questions because improvement in cross-cultural relations and understanding lay at the heart of the *common ground* connotation held by “those in the know”, while a number among this group also identified *common ground* with Treaty, in terms of respect for the “original intent and spirit” of those agreements.

### Views on cross-cultural collaboration among the general public

When asked about cross-cultural collaboration, roughly three-quarters of the respondents were positive about the idea of the different cultures in Kenora working together and improving relations. Among the Euro-Canadians, a significant number were very enthusiastic, often making reference to “*not wanting to go back to how things were*” and “*there has not been enough of that in the past*”.

However, for all the positive rhetoric associated with the idea of cross-cultural collaboration, there was trepidation for other respondents: “*It will be good if it works out, but there is always a danger it could cause more problems*”. This pointed to the difficulties inherent in bringing a previously divided community together, a fact that came out in the interviews via some more discriminatory views: “*That’s great if they want to share things. But it involves give and take and I’m sceptical about how it would work out here*”.

Such a mix of responses points to the work still needed to convince many of the value of enhancing cross-cultural relations. This is perhaps best summed up by quotes from two Métis respondents. While one thought that it was “[an] *excellent idea to embrace diversity and have information about different cultural beliefs... to better our understanding of different cultures and histories*”, another highlighted just how far Kenora still had to go: “*the racism here is incredible, the animosity between the three groups [First Nations, Métis, Euro-Canadians] is beyond belief, and goes in every direction*”.

### Understanding of ‘Treaty’ among the general public

Half of the people that participated in the sidewalk survey knew that Treaty 3 was the Treaty area that Kenora is part of, and less than a quarter exhibited a reasonably complete grasp (as they understood it) of what the Treaties were. With regards to the public’s understanding of Treaty, responses were not homogenous. Among the Euro-Canadians surveyed, while a small number felt clear about its meaning, “[It’s a] *legal and binding agreement signed between Government of Canada and First Nations... about what our Government would do for them in exchange for land. We are responsible for upholding these rights for native people in the Treaty 3 area*”, others were less certain: “[It’s a] *lawful agreement between our government and minority groups. It’s about land I think but I’m not really sure*”.

Aboriginal interview participants provided a perspective on Treaty that was clearly distinct from that of the Euro-Canadians participants:

*“[It’s] an agreement between two different parties about using the land. We have control over ours and they have control over theirs”.*

*“That we all have the right to be here. We are all Treaty. But I have an understanding... most Caucasians don’t have an understanding... they think that we [native people] are all hankers, looking for something”.*

In looking at the responses of Métis and First Nation informants, their understanding of Treaty focuses more squarely on relationships between people, including the idea that we are all ‘treaty people’. In contrast, for Euro-Canadians, there was a tendency to conceptualise Treaty as a contract between the federal government and Aboriginal groups, rather than anything that involves them personally as individuals.

## **DISCUSSION**

Locally, ‘Common Ground’ has become a kind of umbrella term or vision manifest in an assortment of practical initiatives in Kenora. Yet it has never been publically advertised or articulated as such. Rather, people have been left to make up their own mind about what this vision entails.

As such, *common ground* is a term that has no precise definition locally despite its widespread use. This certainly limits its significance as a definition-bearing concept, and raises concerns that, as a powerful signifier (open to both denotation and multiple connotations), the term is being used to drive a discourse of cross-cultural collaboration that is not readily understood by a representative sample of the local populace. As with all connotations, images and associations are socially constructed and thus reflect the degree of involvement people have had in developing such meanings. This resonates with Poerksen’s (1991) thesis that language and words shape reality as much as reflect it. His work focused on the small number of words that migrate from the vernacular into the realms of science, where they pick up very specific meanings, before returning to the vernacular to quickly become fashionable and command attention, and “merge with the everyday and soon seem commonsense”. However, with no definitive reference point by which to identify them, these words can become “instruments of manipulation” that generate “blueprints of a new reality” (Poerksen 1991, p. 48).

In Kenora, the term’s adoption by a small number of well-intentioned people has resulted in it taking centre stage in promoting an ideology of collaboration that, as our sidewalk survey and interviews show, is not always recognizable to many among the general public. While there is a presumption that



people will share in what *common ground* is understood to mean, our findings show its multiple uses locally have resulted in differences in comprehension – a variation that is weakly associated with ethnicity. Of course, the question this raises is whether any of it matters in terms of collaboration for environmental planning and (eventual) management? Findings from studies conducted elsewhere suggest that it does; highlighting the need for deliberative democratic process and transparency in communication (e.g., Meadowcroft 2004; Wilding 2011), where stakeholders are aware of others' perspectives and conceptualizations (e.g., Dietz and Stern 2009; Steins and Edwards 1999).

Such lessons infer that when a term like *common ground* begins to circulate and is wielded to accomplish goals, it is important to be clear about what people understand by it and the intention inherent in its use. When there is ambiguity in meaning, then a danger exists that activities could be “commons-washed” if and when the term gains broader currency. In other words, the term could be ‘spun’ or used deceptively (after Poerksen 1991) to promote the perception that a certain practice truly reflects the ethic or philosophy of *common ground*, when, in actual fact, its meaning has been either watered down, co-opted or used as cheap moral posture. Without going so far as to say that such occurrences typify the Kenora experience, what this study does show clearly is that the ‘Common Ground’ initiative at Rat Portage-Tunnel Island is yet to become a broadly citizen-led process. Wight (2005) has shown how planning that fails to pay heed to the cultural context, or the social construction of meaning, is restricted in its ability to shape the building of cross-cultural relations and discourse. Further, it limits the way in which local ‘institutional capacity’ of the site is ‘built up’ via discussion of alternative interpretations of reality (Healey 2006). Finally, without wider public engagement in that planning process, the possibilities for social learning (Sinclair et al. 2008; Blackmore 2007; Keen et al. 2003) about place and community are limited to a small group of people rather than the public at large.

Our findings, for example, point to a critical distinction in people’s conceptualisation of *common ground* as beginning or end point. In other words, is *common ground* to be considered the foundation needed for successful collaboration (i.e., a basis of mutual interest or agreement), or is it something to work towards? If we understand it as a foundation, then one can question Kenora’s current level of preparedness given the divergence in people’s visioning and a clear lack of public involvement in constructing the ‘Common Ground’ discourse and dialogue. Or perhaps there is a third conception, a more fluid one, in which *common ground* is sought, discovered, and used as a stepping off point, before being sought again and rediscovered down the line; that it is through the ‘doing’ that you build relationships and trust. This falls in line with lessons from other places that show how substantial time and effort is necessary to build

respect among partners in collaboration, as well as for jointly agreeing upon and elaborating initial frameworks and procedures (Reid et al. 2006; Singleton 2000).

Which of the above best captures *common ground*, as understood in Kenora, has not been openly discussed. Interview data show that while there are commonalities in people's views of what the concept is about, there is also difference and cynicism. Consequently, more than one respondent felt that there was an obvious risk in making the land management initiative "*Kenora's great stab at cross-cultural collaboration*". The concern being that, upon building up hopes, any sense of failure would leave the community in a worse-off position. Others, however, were keen to push matters along, in a belief that things "*will fall into place*". Yet such a strategy – backed by rhetoric of inclusivity, democratic deliberation and transparency – runs the risk, in the absence of widespread community involvement and dialogue, of failure.

It is worth noting how members of some cultural and interest groups have expressed displeasure about how the 'Common Ground' land management initiative has unfolded thus far. For example, a number of First Nations interviewees were unhappy with how early decisions regarding the future use of Rat Portage, Tunnel Island and Old Fort Island were taken. This, they claimed, was far from being an inclusive process. While some interview respondents felt that "*we have to forget the past and move on together*" others were adamant that "*we have to remember the past, admit to our mistakes, and then move on together*". Similarly, the Métis community in Kenora is still upset at having been left out of much of the decision-making to date. Regular recreational users of the Tunnel Island site form another concerned interest group to have felt excluded from early planning discussions.

All such cases point to the potential for conflict when dialogue either does not take place, or fails to include all those with a legitimate interest in matters under discussion. Rather, if these different groups were engaged from the beginning – and thus involved in developing the primary connotation of *common ground* – then any dialogue about inequalities and past injustices, amongst other issues, could help to construct a shared meaning in spite of difference. When this does not happen, then the term simply reifies an ideal set of social relations employed by those in a position of power, with the everyday experience of people living in Kenora unable to find a meaningful voice. It is of no great surprise that a recent community survey in Kenora, focusing on local socio-economic issues, found that 'Common Ground' lagged behind other community projects in terms of citizen awareness, especially among low income and First Nation residents (Making Kenora Home Community Change Survey 2011).

This finding simply reinforces the belief that far more public participation is required for the 'Common Ground' land management initiative to be congruent with calls for deliberative democratic engagement in governance (Meadowcroft

2004). It is also through greater and more meaningful public participation, via a combination of communicative planning (Friedmann 1987; Healey 2006) and social learning processes (Blackmore 2007; Keen et al. 2005; Maarleveld and Dangbegnon 1999), that the crucial relationship between what Eames (2005) calls bonding social capital (shared interests and networks that hold cultural groups together) and bridging social capital (those shared interests that exist between cultural groups) could be strengthened.

And such engagement appears to be entirely practicable in the Kenora area. Our findings show that for the general public, the philosophy of *common ground* does have a broader relevancy. Its use to front multiple initiatives may confound its meaning in many ways, yet all such usages do share one thing in common – a wish to improve relations among the cultures that inhabit the Kenora area. Indeed, the dominant strand that connects people's understanding of *common ground* concerns this powerful idea of sharing and inclusivity, about which there was a great deal of positivity among interview and sidewalk survey respondents alike. This would suggest a strong platform on which to build.

## CONCLUSION

Canada is coming to grips with the “economic, demographic and moral imperative to fix [the country's] troubled 500-year relationship with Aboriginals” (CBC's *The 8<sup>th</sup> Fire*, 2011; Ralston Saul 2008; RCAP 1996). The 'Common Ground' initiatives in Kenora, northwestern Ontario, provide localized examples of this. In particular, Tunnel Island, Old Fort Island and Bigsby's Rat Portage offer a useful focal point for such efforts given their status as multifunctional resource, where the interests of different user-groups make the land one of both contest and possibility. Historical access rights for First Nations, enhanced accessibility for City residents, and both differentiated and shared processes of creation have endowed these lands with special significance. The 'Common Ground' land management initiative in Kenora is an attempt to bring environmental stewardship, community benefit, and cultural cohesion together under a single vision. It is what Shiva (2005:1) would see as an example of Earth Democracy, a “political movement for peace, justice and sustainability”.

As David Bollier (2011) has stated, recent thinking on the commons concerns new ways to express a very old idea – that some forms of wealth belong to all of us, and that these community resources must be protected and managed for the good of all. A commons embodies social relations based on interdependence and cooperation. Such thinking, however, involves a very different narrative to the conventional, and our study has shown there remains something of a fuzzy and complex storyline in Kenora. In investigating local people's understanding of the term *common ground*, one finds a narrative that

consists of multiple locally-rooted examples. While often connected, these perspectives can also differ in their own way. The Aboriginal and non-aboriginal ‘stakeholders’ of today are the inheritors of a complex cultural legacy, and while the ‘Common Ground’ land management initiative requires them to negotiate diverse and sometimes conflicting objectives in their pursuit of a potentially unifying goal, tensions still exist between people’s views, interests and values regarding nature, economic development, property rights, cross-cultural relations, recreational land use, and spirituality.

Our study points to the potential danger in using a powerful and value-laden term such as *common ground* when discourse has not been broadly constructed; where the intention inherent in its use is not recognised by all. This is perhaps inevitable when planning of a public domain issue takes the form of a private process – local discourse surrounding *common ground* having been developed and driven by a small group of concerned citizens and government players and not the community at large. Rather, for a broad-based ‘Common Ground’ to become reality, planning needs to enter an arena of creativity and communication (Wight 2005), and become a clear example of deliberative democracy and environmental governance in action. This would enable the images, associations and meanings attached to *common ground* to emerge and shift through public dialogue, such that they are able to hold connotative as well as denotative power. In this way, the necessary range of public values can be communicated and thereby motivate local people as to the relevance and importance of such initiatives, from both individual and community perspectives.

Unfortunately, without that full and frank discussion of what *common ground* means in practice, there is a risk that Kenora will be left with little more than ‘middle ground’, a place associated with false compromise, where no party emerges happy. Under such conditions, any collaborative advantage will be lost and the City, Treaty 3 and a culturally diverse population base will remain some way short of the cohesive and prosperous future for which many yearn.

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