# Westbank First Nation:

# Research Project

# IED 373

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# The Westbank First Nation is one of the 7 Canadian member bands of the Okanagan Nation. The Nation covers traditional land in the Interior of British Columbia and down in to Northern parts of Washington State which consists of 12 bands represented by the Colville Confederated Tribes. The land belonging to the Okanagan Nation, both in British Columbia and Washington totals over 18million acres (Okanagan First Peoples (i), 2007); from Mica Creek in the north, to Wilbur, Washington in the south, and from the Nicola Valley in the west to the Kootenay Lakes in the east (Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2004) [appendix A]. The Nation is part of the Interior Salish language family, and the language is Nsyilxcən. The Westbank First Nation (WFN) is a progressive band, having achieved the right to self-governance in 2005 (Westbank First Nation [WFN] (i), 2012). This agreement ensures the Westbank First Nation Peoples have ownership and jurisdiction over their traditional land; that they can exercise their powers through an appointed council and they are given full rights to govern themselves, their land and their people under section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982 (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2005).

# The Westbank First Nation, now no longer considered a band within the Okanagan Nation Alliance, although still associated, consists of Tsinstikeptum Indian Reserve No. 9, Tsinstikeptum Indian Reserve No. 10, Medicine Hill Indian Reserve No. 11, Medicine Creek Indian Reserve No. 12, and Mission Creek Indian Reserve No. 8. These 5 reserves border the Okanagan Lake, between Kelowna and the municipality of West Kelowna. The membership for the Westbank First Nation totals 647, with approximately 95% of members living on reserve land. Furthermore, an additional 8500 non-members also reside on the land (WFN, 2012).

# Since the frontier of colonization brought settlers into the lavish, desirable Okanagan Valley, there has been an almost unstoppable demand for land. As the Hudson’s Bay Company moved in to the area looking for trade with the aboriginal people, the influx soon shifted to agricultural farming, and permanent settlers. As more people arrived, more land was needed; and to find the land the current aboriginal population had to be moved elsewhere. Already losing their land to the settlers, the Okanagan youth were then taken from their homes and forced in to industrial and residential schools. It was at these schools in cities like Cranbrook and Kamloops that their cultural practices, language and traditional customs were abolished (Okanagan First Peoples (ii), 2007). The total censorship of traditional language was so great that Nsyilxcən was, and is still, in danger of total eradication.

In the Westbank First Nation, of 664 recorded band members, a mere 34 are thought to be fluent speakers of the Okanagan language. A further 170 are able to somewhat understand or speak the language and only 47 are listed as learning to speak it (First Peoples’ Heritage, Language and Culture Council, 2012). Of 664, that means only 251 members of the Westbank First Nation are able to speak or understand their traditional language. Within the Canadian portion of the Okanagan Nation Alliance, there are thought to be just 144 fluent speakers (First Peoples’ Heritage, Language and Culture Council, 2012) of the language that has been a part of the Okanagan culture since time began.

Despite the struggles to keep the language alive, there are revitalization programmes taking place throughout the Okanagan Nation. In Westbank, for example, the band school, called Sənsísyustən (JK – grade 6), offers aboriginal children the opportunity to complete the standard curriculum while being immersed in the Okanagan culture and language. Learning includes daily culture and language classes, meetings with Elders, instruction from certified teachers and attendance at cultural events. Each school day is welcomed with the traditional Okanagan prayer. Sənsísyustən also offers the Westbank Child Development Centre intended to foster pride, self-esteem and traditional values while attaining the stepping stones of healthy child development (Westbank First Nation [WFN] (ii), 2012). The local high school, Mount Boucherie Secondary School, grades 10 – 12 and open to all, offers First Nations 12, and provides social and spiritual refuge and guidance for aboriginal students within the school.

The land of the Westbank First Nation, especially on the west side of Lake Okanagan, is prime property, both for housing in proximity to the lake, and industry in proximity to the highway. The majority of the land is broken in to lots, with size being determined by intended use, and then leased out for a period of 15 – 99 years (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002). There are commercialised lots that straddle the highway corridor, and these are occupied by large businesses such as Home Depot, Walmart, Zellers and McDonalds, as well as aboriginal owned and small business driven occupancies. The number of shopping and business hubs has continued to increase. Westbank and Kelowna are hot spots for tourists, retirees and new comers because of their location and access to amenities; consequently, even during the economic downturn, there has continued to be a stream of people looking for housing that the Westbank First Nation Department of Planning and Development are only too happy to design. “Between January 2006 and July 2011, Westbank First Nation (WFN) issued more than $247 million dollars in building permits of which approximately $100 million dollars was for commercial development, $142 million dollars  for residential development and $5 million dollars for institutional development. The residential development consisted of more than 600 units of new housing” (WFN (iii), 2012).

Traditionally, the Westbank First Nation, along with the Okanagan People, were hunters; men would track deer, bear, mountain goat and elk, along with fishing for salmon during the yearly runs. Women would spend their time gathering edible roots and berries for winter food stores and daily diet requirements (McMillan, 1988, 157). Trade relations were well developed among the Salish people, and this demonstrates the strong connections between the many bands and Nations in the interior and beyond (McMillan, 1988, 159-160).

The Okanagan People believe in the creator, and in Coyote, who was sent to “put the world in order” (McMillan, 1988, 161). The Okanagan People widely believe in spiritual powers, guardian spirits and religious ceremonies. They have always held ceremonies and said prayers of thanks for the berries and first salmon; they honoured life stages and widely practiced the guardian spirit dance (McMillan, 1988, 161). Today, many of the Okanagan Peoples religious beliefs have become intertwined with European beliefs, but the culture, language and learning is still associated with the dances and ceremonies performed throughout the year. Everything that the Okanagan People do is about respect (Okanagan First Peoples (iii), 2007). The hope of the Elders and educators is that, slowly, there will be an increase in pride for the culture, language and religion; that with time, the traditional ways can be re-established and the threat of cultural elimination erased (WFN (ii), 2012).

As a teacher in this area, it would be important to understand the critical cultural points, and not try to dampen the teaching offered in another setting. It would be important, especially with the scope and proximity of the Westbank First Nation, to connect with the community, share stories and integrate teachings into the classroom. One example might be using stories relating to Coyote, the trickster depicted in numerous tales (Hines, 1976) and in rocky landmarks and features in the local area (McMillan, 1988, 161). Knowing that language is so tenuous I would consider ways to encourage and integrate the language at all levels. I would discover more about the ceremonies and dances that take place, and encourage mutual learning for myself and the students. The greatest impact would be through respect, I for them, and they for I.

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Appendix A: Okanagan Nation Territory. Retrieved from http://www.wfn.ca/docs/onamap.jpg

