

## *RAD Story Lodge | Episode 6*

# “Nature has always held the solutions.” - Val Courtois

**Randi:** Oki and hello. Welcome to the RAD Story Lodge, a place where you will hear stories from the land and learn from Indigenous communities who are advancing regenerative economies and reshaping the way we think about conservation.

Today’s episode features a conversation with Valérie Courtois and Amberly Quakegesic. Valérie is the Executive Director of the Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI). She’s also a leading expert on the national movement of Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship building across Canada.

With that I’d like to welcome today’s host, Amberly.

**Amberly:** Aaniin! Nimkii N’Gwagan Kwe Indishnikaaze. I’m Amberly and I’m excited to be here with Val!

I've had the privilege of getting to know Valerie through my work as a Guardian, where I learned she's not only a brilliant national advocate, she's also an amazing person to be on the land with: down to earth, kind and *incredibly* capable. Valerie's the kind of person who can give an inspirational speech to hundreds of people, and then moments later is pulling the float plane into the bay or doing a history tour while driving a zodiac in the George River. I think that is just such a rare and powerful combo for a political leader.

In this conversation, Val talks about responsibility to land, the role of Guardians and why Indigenous leadership is essential when shaping meaningful nature-based solutions. Let's jump in.

**Amberly:** Welcome. Can you start with an introduction, please?

**Val:** Sure. My name is Valérie Courtois. I am the Executive Director of the Indigenous Leadership Initiative, which is a national nationhood supporting initiative to help nations express their responsibilities through conservation and stewardship. I'm a member of the community of Mashteuiatsh, which is the western most Innu community in what is now known as Quebec. And I've lived

and established my home in Goose Bay, Labrador in the western extent of our home territory called Nitassinan. Yeah. And I'm a mom and a grandma, and all those things.

**Amberly:** What motivates you to do what you do?

**Val:** Oh my gosh. anything, you know, I'm of the adage and I believe this kind of old concept that, you know, your job in the world is to leave it a better place than when you arrived. And it sounds simple, but I really do believe that, and it's part of what motivates me in doing this work.

It's not easy work. Like people, they see the accolades, but they don't see the slogging at 5:00 AM through airports and being away from home to do this work. But, I know that I've been, I've got a responsibility and a gift to use what I have to advance this, and I hope that when people see me that they see that ethic of service. That we can do.

And I've seen how guardianship transforms lives. I've had friends who are here today because of their work in conservation and stewardship, and I really wish that opportunity for all of our youth to find hope and to do that, not only in our traditions, but also within the modern wage economy and participating in shaping our common futures.

**Amberly:** Yeah. You said something along the lines of, so I feel like you were just, you were saying you wanna leave the place better than when you left it. Right. So what might that look like? What's the vision? How is it gonna be better? How can we make it better?

**Val:** Yeah. I, you know, I have a particular background. I didn't grow up on the reserve. My father was an RCMP officer and so was stationed in a number of provinces, and so I've had a disconnected reality in my, I've only learned more about my own Indigeneity, the full breadth of it – I've always known I was Innu – but the full breadth of what that means, later on in life after I went to school and all that.

But in those travels I was exposed to many communities and many realities, and what I saw was, you know, people struggling more than others. I saw the impact of colonialism. I, you know, I saw and certainly personally felt the realities of intergenerational trauma from residential school. My father is a survivor of one of the, the last residential school that was opened in Quebec.

And honestly, if I had grown on reserve I probably would've had to attend that school, in my younger years. And, but I didn't. And I, I don't have that same experience of trauma, but I certainly understand it and have experienced it. And, I think what will help our communities emerge from those dark ages and the dark period of colonialism and imposed governance and that whole genocidal experience, is when we can figure out how to rise up ourselves out of that. And seeing guardians who didn't have connection, reconnect with their communities. And, I speak Innu-aimun more than my father does. Like, to me that's a mark of success. And the more youth who can learn the language and understand the nature of that relationship with lands, I think the better we'll be in everything in societies and in governance and how we treat each other.

I also really believe that Canada as a country can do better. We're really young as a kind of a modern country, a hundred and 50 some odd years old. And there's a lot of lessons to be learned, and I really truly believe that when Canada as a country figures out that it is built upon the backs of all of these Indigenous nations who have complex, sophisticated governance and legal systems and all of these things, that the country could be much stronger if it recognized that and just made the most of that reality.

We can participate to every level of government, every economic initiative. And because we come with this ethic of sustainability, we're amongst the most sustainable societies that are left in the globe. Surely we have something to offer to building a better Canada. And I think, I'm hopeful that the work that we're doing around nationhood is also contributing to that.

**Amberly:** Wow. Very beautiful and very full. In the beginning you were talking to a bit about like maybe there was something empowering that might have happened in your life that helped you to reconnect and I feel like I've, like in my experience too, like somebody shared with me that can be both a gift and a burden to walk those two paths, but there's an importance in sharing that with people.

And I think, I'm just curious if you have advice for people who have not reconnected and are nervous to maybe. Or those who are struggling, like are there things you think that they can do?

**Val:** Yeah, I think there's lots that they can do. I also think there's lots that our communities could do to better receive those folks who are making that effort.

It's in our interest as nations to have strongly connected members of those nations who really understand the root and the history and how we got here and

where we're going. So we do have to create a space that allows that. It's fraught though because we all know there are issues in this country with people who are asserting baseless claims or, who are taking up spaces.

And that is fraught, kind of navigating that. But it doesn't mean we shouldn't do it. I really think, yeah, we can do better on that. I think too as individuals like it's it, you know, this Amberly, this, it does take a certain personal commitment to that path to learning and certainly it takes a lot of humility.

And if you don't have humility, you're gonna have it very shortly in your journey, in learning that. And that's not a bad thing. You know, we could, as societies, we could use a little more humility, and I think we would be better off for it. So be open to that and, it's not an easy road, but the gifts that you get through that journey are totally worth it.

It also takes commitment. I have a very busy job. I've got, we've got staff and there's expectations like people are depending on me to raise funds so that things can happen. But I also have to create space for that other side of me.

And so I spend, Amberly, you had the benefit of coming to my camp at George River this summer. I spend a number of weeks there. I don't go there for just a couple days to get a, in French, we'd call it a *saucette* like you're, you just dip your toe into that experience. You have to be there for long enough, like it takes a while for you to untune from urban realities and noise to be able to hear that land.

And you have to be in that right space. And sometimes that takes a few days. And so creating that space is important and no one else is gonna do it for you. You have to kind of decide that you're gonna do that and be brave. And there may be financial consequences to that. There may be job opportunity consequences to that, but in the end, if you're a whole person as a result of that journey, then it absolutely is important to do.

And I think the job sector is learning that more and more. I hear of more and more organizations recognizing the value of that. Creating things like cultural leave opportunities and things so that people can do that. I'm an Innu woman. We are a caribou people. Caribou, they can run far. It takes a long time for us to chase them and have that relationship and eat them and love them. And, so yeah, it takes that time and dedication and making the choice to do that.

**Amberly:** Beautiful. And I agree completely. And I feel like when we were up there in your territory, I got to see another side of Val that I knew was there, but

seeing it in person and like, yeah, you're the one pulling out the boat and like driving the boat and, you know, it just, it was you in your element and a whole nother element.

**Val:** Yeah. Actually, that's the real Val, by the way. Like I feel like what you saw on the land – that's my true essence. In many ways, what I do for a job is I'm doing my best, but like where I can feel like I can express myself fully is driving the zodiac and sharing why I love being in that space and helping people feel the spirituality of the space and understand the history and why we're there in the moment of time that we're there for. And yeah, that's my favorite job is to just get on the zodiac and, get out and show what we have and how rich we are as people.

Because, part of the vocation that we do on that site is we welcome not only Innu and Cree Naskapi who have always had a relationship with that place, but other Quebecois and other Canadians and other folks, because we want them to see us at our best. We do unfortunately, with colonialism, with racism, with everything that comes with that, sometimes we face an uphill battle to address the stereotypes. And, my people are very much aware of a stereotype of laziness, of non conformance of non partnership. And I think that's BS and that's because most people don't see us in our element. And it's normal. I mean, our traditional territory, it's far, you know, Amberly, you had to travel for days to get there and I get it.

But once they're there and they see us at our best, I think that can, that'll do more for breaking down those stereotypes than, I don't know, some community conference or something. Or like, you know, when they see us when we're not at our best in urban centers with struggling, et cetera.

So that's why I do that. But, yeah, it's, yeah.

**Amberly:** I love that. The land needs Guardians, but I feel like you're speaking to how the Guardians need the land too.

**Val:** Exactly. Exactly. It's a reciprocal relationship

**Amberly:** So you're connected with RAD, right? What's your connection there?

**Val:** Yeah, so we are one of the founding partners of the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership from which RAD emerged. And, and you know, David is our representative on the, as the ILI on the steering committee for RAD.

And, we're really excited about, not only thinking through how Indigenous peoples can contribute and understand the challenges around carbon management, but how that can help augment our overall approaches to increasing the number of Guardians and to the Western society recognizing the value of ecosystems beyond their trees or beyond, kind of, the main resource that exists there. So I'm excited about that work.

I really hope that we do better in thinking through things like the role of fire and how fire in itself and the management of fire can be an incredible tool for us in not only, you know, mitigating climate change and impacts, but also thinking through adaptation of those impacts.

And so I'm excited about the role of RAD and I look forward to partnering as much as we can. ILI is more of an advocacy organization as opposed to kind of a, doing the work on the ground kind of organization and having a partner that like RAD that can do more of that on the groundwork is exciting.

**Amberly:** When you hear “nature-based climate solutions”, what comes to mind?

**Val:** A few things. A of course, they exist and of course, the planet does this and it, yeah. It's fascinating that for many folks, it's a new concept to me.

But also a little concern kind of washes through me because we know that there's, we are here in this state around our climate change and around the destruction of biodiversity because of the monetization of nature. And so this is another way of thinking through the monetization of nature.

That being said, if we're in the driver's seat, then that brings me much more comfort. The monetization and the exploitation of our resources occurred because it was based on kind of a, you know, a western value system. And if we can have a leadership role and bring in our sustainability ethics, our responsibility ethics are, you know, we-are-not-superior kind of ethics to the question, then maybe we can do that.

I also think that, speaking of fire, Canada last year was the fourth largest emitter in the world as a result of our wildfires, after China, India, and the United States. We have to take our responsibilities as a country and thinking through what that looks like and could there be Guardians and other First Nations who are helping think through the response and how we manage this. It's not like, you know, people say, oh my God, that was a huge year. Actually that's

probably the least year that you're gonna face in the next 20 of these fires. What we're gonna see is we're gonna see more and more of these kind of fire events.

More and more unpredictability. You know, fire seasons normally are kind of like end of April to like, end of September, October. Now they're extending year long. These are realities that we have to face and I think we should be smart about how we do that. And if there's a country in this world that can make sure that the nature-based climate solutions kind of environment proceeds in the right way, it's this one.

And hopefully, we could be an example to other parts of the world. Second largest country in the world. We have the largest, longest coastline in the world. We have the largest intact forest in the world. It absorbs twice as much carbon per hectare as tropical forests. You know, people think of the Amazon as the lungs of the earth.

Actually the boreal is the lungs of the earth. Actually the oceans, let's be clear, they absorb most carbon. But, in terms of terrestrial ecosystems, it's the boreal. We have a fourth of the world's wetlands. And of course we know that wetlands have a strong role in mitigating and storing carbon and their release.

We have a fifth of the world's remaining fresh water. Like those are, those are, some people would see that as power, but I actually see that as responsibility. And so how do we implement that in the right way and do it in a way that will keep us Innu in Anishinabe and Dene and all of the beautiful nations that exist here.

**Amberly:** You're speaking a little bit about carbon, Sometimes I feel like that can be an intimidating topic to approach if people aren't familiar with it. Can you tell us about carbon rights and what that could mean for nations and the land?

**Val:** Yeah. we, the existence of Indigenous led carbon management systems is an exception to the rule in this country. There are some great examples. You know, if you look at Coastal First Nations in British Columbia and the work that they're doing selling their carbon credits, which helps fund their stewardship activities, that's great and awesome. But there are many nations who don't have access to that kind of market or who are outside of the kind of the commercially managed forest, which is part of our conditions to participating into the regulated climate market.

And in many of those regions, the provinces assert that jurisdiction. You know, we have section 90 something, 92 in the Constitution, and then we have Section 35 and those don't always jive. We also have a mix of land claims and rights recognition realities. You know, between, like the province of Quebec, which still has a policy of not recognizing rights that it doesn't negotiate, that makes it hard for a nation that isn't in the process of negotiation to claim and assert those rights, and the province will come up.

I think it's not an either or, however. The solution space is an inclusion solution space and a creativity one. And so there we can, we certainly can do that. And people, the Taxpayer Federation and other folks will say, Oh my God, the Indigenous, like the Department of Indigenous Services and Affairs, they have the largest budget of the Crown government other than Treasury Board. And it's costing us a lot. Like we know that too. We don't, it's not like we enjoy being seen as a cost to the taxpayer. Which, by the way, is like such a false premise and we could probably have a whole podcast episode on that. But, but we also, we wanna be a part of the solutions. Those things.

We want our communities to thrive. We have a lower standard of living than the average Canadian. Our education system is underfunded. Our opportunities are lower than the average Canadians. We have some of the worst health indicator risks and all of those things. We also wanna solve those problems, and part of it is figuring out other revenue sources than simply receiving government program funds or transfers. And some of that is in things like the market.

But we have to be smart and organized about it. This is not necessarily something we can explore one nation at a time. And we've all experienced what that does, that's what enables the divide and conquer. That's what enables all of those things. So as Indigenous peoples, we need to organize more, to create the pressure that is needed to accessing those revenue sources. And I think there are other places that we can explore. You know, people are talking about not only nature-based climate solutions, but the valuing of nature or ecosystem services and things, which also makes me hugely nervous, but I do see opportunity there if we are able to best organize and align and be focused to doing this work.

**Amberly:** I agree. I love what you're saying and I feel like when you speak a little bit about schools being like underfunded and stuff like that, I think a lot of the times we just grow up accepting that this is how it goes, this is the best way to do it, and we're kind of in a box. And I think what you're saying is we have to think outside of that box. And do you have any advice on encouraging people how to like, try to reimagine this new future?

**Val:** Yeah, we need to stop fighting amongst ourselves. You know, we have common battles, common solutions, but we also have a common basis for our values and relationship with the land.

And we need to start to uplift each other. Like the success of my Cree neighbors is also my success and we should be cheering that on and, and not, you know, not doing this. In our communities there's a lot of jealousy and a lot of inter battles. And that's normal. That is what trauma does. That is a result of that experience. But the way out of it is to kind of get, to kind of work together and say, look, you depend on me and I depend on you, and recognizing that reality.

And then the last thing I'll say is we have to be, you know, we have a choice.

I was part of a television program in the United States that was called a Brief History of the Future. And the host made a really great point in that, you know, we're at a moment of time in our kind of civilization where we've had, we're the most educated, there's more money in the system, technology advances are incredible. We're connected. I know what's happening in the Solomon Islands and in Australia and in all kinds of places. So we have a choice. We can either use all that and build the future we want and do that proactively, or we can wait and see what comes at us. I'm of the mind that we have, we should be building that as opposed to just waiting and letting it happen, personally.

And that's what we need to do as Indigenous peoples, not only here in what is now known as Canada, but right across Turtle Island and beyond.

**Amberly:** Agreed, proactive versus reactive.

This has been great. I really appreciate everything that you've shared and your wise words. Do you have anything else you'd like to share that just, yeah, in case anything you might have missed or?

**Val:** No, I think, I bristle when people say “wise words” or your experience and things. I'm still relatively young in the system. And, I make a thousand mistakes a day and learn all the time. And, you know, when we think about the new generation of leaders and, A, I'd love to figure out how to support that even more, as someone who has this kind of leadership privilege, reality, and position.

But also just to think through, yeah, how we can organize that better. I really believe we should be on a lifelong learning journey, and none of us are perfect. And it's great to have feedback and criticisms and understandings and, we just

need to be more honest and open with each other and genuinely tackling these issues and problems.

And I have a lot of sympathy for our leadership and everything that they're faced with. And, you know, I've worked with a lot of chiefs and councils and I've sat next to the chief's cell phones. Usually there's five or six of them who never stop ringing. And they have to deal with everything from negotiating with very large mining global companies on development proposals to fixing the window in every single house on the, you know, in the band or whatever issue comes up. Arrant dogs that people have to walk with, sticks to keep away and all of these things. And I'm like, my God, that's an impossible job.

So I have a lot of sympathy and I think we, as kind of citizens of our nations, we could support leadership more. We certainly should demand good governance and all of those things. But I do think that our leaders are sometimes underappreciated and it's an incredibly challenging job. So more to uplift those positions.

And that's what I think is great about the Guardians. 'Cause the guardians, to me, my mind, part of their responsibility is to make leadership easier, to make those decisions easier. When they're in the room with that very large mining company and they're sitting around a table and everybody makes a million bucks or more, and they're, you know, they're worried about how many people are sleeping in their houses, on the rez, that's a really tough dynamic for them. And, and I have a lot of sympathy and understanding, but I also have a lot of hope in those positions and as citizens we need to rally and do better.

**Randi:** Thank you for joining us in the RAD Story Lodge. We hope you enjoyed today's episode. To learn more, visit [radnetwork.ca](http://radnetwork.ca), follow us on Instagram and LinkedIn, and be sure to subscribe to the podcast to stay connected and reach out if you have a story to share.

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