

Community News

## Peskotomuhkati Nation chief discusses reconciliation

SAINT ANDREWS – Chief Hugh Akagi is not fond of so-called buzzwords.

The Peskotomuhkati Nation chief has concerns that reconciliation is just another buzzword people toss around and talk about to make themselves feel good but do nothing about.

“It’s a pretty good buzzword right now,” he said.



Akagi made a statement very early in our discussion that bears mentioning: “I won’t lie to you. One lie just means you have to use another lie. And that’s just something I will never do.”

That concept of truth and the need for it is consistent throughout all the discussions *The Courier* has had around the topic of reconciliation.

When it comes to words like reconciliation, Akagi says his first step is to go to the dictionary. He often finds a disconnect between a dictionary definition and a legal or governmental definition.

“It takes a while (to come up with the definitions) because (the government is) trying to interpret them under Canadian law,” he continued.

Many of the definitions of reconciliation consider a relationship between parties of equal status. Where it concerns Indigenous Peoples, the parties are not equal and one has been subjugated by the other for generations. Akagi pointed out that Canada has existed for a little over 150 years but his people have a history dating back more than 14,000 years.

“Reconciliation is a word they can live with because it doesn’t impact Canadian law,” said Akagi. “For Canada, it’s a very convenient word.”

The reference to the impact on Canadian law is relevant because the treaties signed between Canada and Indigenous nations are embedded in the Constitution. Any words or definitions of words that affected Canadian law and the existing treaties would require opening the Constitution. For Akagi, reconciliation is an inconvenient truth for the rest of Canada. He referenced Thomas King and his book *The Inconvenient Indian*, which was a meditation on Indigenous-white relations since colonists first landed on Turtle Island (North America).

Akagi’s concern is that the idea of reconciliation remains just a word and nothing fruitful comes of it, that there is no real change that takes place and no actual reconciliation. He is concerned the past will be forgotten in an effort to gloss over historic wrongs and simply start anew. That doesn’t work with him. The idea that if we say the word enough or write it enough times things will magically change, like Dorothy clicking her heels in *The Wizard of Oz*, is not one that Akagi accepts.

Starting from now and ignoring the past isn’t acceptable for Akagi because he and his people are products of the past.

“I am a product of the past,” he said. “My people and our situation is a product of the past. Our path of if you call it evolution, was hijacked. It included extermination of Indigenous Peoples.”

Crimes were committed and when there are crimes, there’s punishment.

“Once punishment is meted out, then you can move forward,” he stated plainly.

That’s how Akagi sees the process of reconciliation. What that punishment looks like is the process of discussion and the path to righting the wrongs of the past.

“Are they going to return the land? Are they going to return the creatures? Are they going to put trees in the woods? Are they going to restore us as Indigenous Peoples with our own territory and language? Are they going to recognize us nation to nation?” are all questions Akagi has about the process.

“How can you restore something that’s no longer there? And that’s the extent of the destruction we’re facing.”

Akagi shares offices with the North Atlantic Fisherman’s Association.

“They’ve done very well,” he said matter-of-factly. “All the fish species in my territory,” have mostly been extinguished, he went on.

Akagi referenced pollock. The Peskotomuhkati are people of pollock.

“But there are no more pollock,” said Akagi, his voice trailing off.

Akagi is concerned about the idea of reconciliation also because of who is telling the stories, the concept of history being written by the victor playing a dominant role of what and how the history of Indigenous Peoples is told to current generations. It misses the truth component that is integral to any path toward reconciliation, because in accepting that truth there is necessarily an admission that wrongs were done. Crimes committed, as Akagi plainly puts it.

He notes the damage continues today.

“There’s so much destruction going on as we speak and I haven’t even gone to the forest. I haven’t talked about the release of chemicals and heavy metals into the (water) system. I haven’t talked about the use of chemicals, whether it’s agriculture or whether it’s deforestation.”

A small measure of impatience crept in as he spoke of how slow progress is on so many things impacting the environment, which, in turn, impacts reconciliation and restoration of what his people had before. Akagi used the mako shark as an example, which was established as an endangered species in 2019.

“He was in trouble 17 years ago,” said Akagi. “Why hasn’t somebody helped him? Why are we still talking about it?”

His questions rhetorical, yet not.

He weaved the concept of the Earth Mother into the conversation around reconciliation as well and the point being how can there be true reconciliation when there is so much damage being done to something so fundamental to the Indigenous world view. He explained that the idea of the Earth Mother is not just the landscape, ecology or the climate. To Akagi and his people, the Earth Mother is a living, evolving creature and includes things sentient and not, living and not, because Indigenous Peoples have respect for all things that came from the womb of the Earth Mother and believe there are things to be learned from all aspects of what exists around us.

Akagi does see some bright spots. He referenced a program that was taught at St. Thomas University in Indigenous studies and history. He also noted the Indigenous Studies certificate program at St. Stephen’s University (SSU) as an example of positive developments in allowing people to learn about Indigenous history.

“I have a lot of respect for that little university,” said Akagi in regard to SSU.

Akagi spoke of the difficulty with reconciliation when those responsible may be less than entirely genuine, when their actions don’t match with their words or when the words aren’t clear. He came back to the history and who writes it. There is so little taught in schools about Indigenous history because of history being written by the victors. Even after intensive efforts to speak with the government and change the curriculum, virtually nothing happened.

“The government is responsible for our history,” he said.

The unspoken question was: How can there be a reconciliation when the people responsible for reconciling don’t recognize the truth of the history?

“Nothing about us without us is for us,” he said.

Nothing, he says, can be achieved in terms of reconciliation if those who were harmed aren’t part of the process and if those who caused the harm are unwilling to even admit to the wrongs.

“We have a footprint here of 14,000 years. The folks that have been here 400 years going back to 1604, they’re the winners who are dictating the rules and who have rewritten history.”