



# First Nations Drum

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**Danny Beaton Awarded  
National Aboriginal  
Achievement Award  
for Protecting Mother  
Earth**

Photo by Rigel Rozanski

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**CANADA'S NATIONAL NATIVE NEWSPAPER**

# Danny Beaton recognized for his work to protect Mother Earth

By Dr. John Bacher

Given the name Ronkwetason (Spirit Man) by his colleagues in the Iroquois Confederacy, Danny Beaton was born in Ottawa on August 31, 1954. A Kahniakehaka (Mohawk) of the Turtle Clan, Danny has long admired Earth-protecting visionary Chief Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation. Danny has happy memories of the beautiful landscapes of his youth, and has seen it marred by urban sprawl. In his childhood, he could walk across most of the city and fish in its canal and rivers, catching suckers and carp to sell to a Chinese restaurant for pocket money. He has always loved the wild spaces and being out in the bush, and while living in Vancouver during his mid-thirties, Danny began campaigning for environmental protection.

It took time for Danny Beaton to become an environmentalist. Part of his life path was influenced by drug and alcohol addiction that resulted in criminal convictions and jail time. His journey toward personal healing began with a dream, a vision of the Orca crying out for help. While he struggled with his addictions during recovery, Danny began to study and read in earnest, learning altruistic healing and connecting to Mother Earth while he became clean. Like many Canadian Natives who champion Mother Earth, Danny overcame his personal problems by taking up a more important cause: protecting the Earth through nonviolent means. In a tense forum on the Oka Crisis, he pointed out to a skeptical audience that “Elijah Harper did not need a machine gun to kill the Meech Lake Accord.”

Danny Beaton believes that healing can come from action. Before a group of Natives and environmentalists in Montreal, he said, “Through our songs, dances, ceremonies, actions, and activities, we as human beings can heal ourselves, bring true strength to our families, and enhance the life-giving forces and cycles of life on our Sacred Mother Earth with all our relations. Native people must speak out now for justice in order to create a balance for harmony to continue.



Photo by Sharon Weatherall

The old elders are trying to maintain our culture but are not receiving the support they need to achieve success. This dominant culture here will soon see and feel the devastating effects of destroying Mother Earth more than ever, so we must continue our spiritual ways of oneness with the universe and the cosmos. Our children are crying inside from the abuse to creation and our neglect to create harmony. All spiritual people of the world must continue their struggle with the natural world with their wisdom and beauty.” In his struggle against Dump Site 41 Beaton was able to practice what he preached. His heartening success against Dump Site 41 brought to public light a project that would have contaminated the purest water in the world, and placed him among great Peace Keepers of our time like Gandhi, Chief Leon Shenandoah, Phillip Deer, Cornplanter, Handsome Lake, and Elijah Harper.

Beaton’s first environmental struggle took place over twenty years ago, when he sought to protect the old growth forest of Temagami from clear-cut logging. Working in solidarity with the Teme-Agme Nishnabie people, Beaton mobilized Toronto students to attend rallies, demonstrate, and write speeches to help defend Mother Earth. He journeyed to Bear Island in a fierce winter storm, though his old car broke down along the way, and met with the Ojibway Nation in its council house. He assisted the Innu in their ultimately successful struggle to end the military Low Level Test Flights that devastated the Innu traditional way of life. Danny documented and publicized how military activity disrupted migration and calving



Earth Ceremony, as Danny honours Mother Earth during Walk for Water to Stop Dump Site 41, Nov 2008 Tiny Township. Photo by Mary Rajapakse

among caribou herds and poisoned traditional fishing waters. Through interviews and powerful photography, Danny Beaton showed how the lives and homes of Innu elders had been flooded into oblivion by the rising waters hydropower dams.

In the past twenty years, Danny devoted his passion to protecting the roadless wild lands in the traditional territories of the Northern Cree, Inuit, and Innu of Quebec and Labrador, which support over a million free-ranging caribou. He worked tirelessly to ensure that these lands continue function as the Creator intended: forests that act as watersheds, carbon sinks, climate moderators, and wildlife havens. Danny is aware that development schemes threaten to turn the caribou commons of Northern Quebec and Labrador into fragmented habitats where a few ghost caribou would wander among the wastelands of hydro reservoirs and power lines, open pit mines, and clear-

cut forests that end up being tundra, much like they do in Northern Alberta in between tailings ponds for tar sands extraction.

Danny Beaton is a modern warrior, whose goal to save the northern Caribou reminds us of the efforts of Mystic Warriors of the Plains like Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, who fought to safeguard the great Buffalo Commons of the 19th century from the assaults of the US Army. Instead of arrows and guns, Danny utilizes his artistry and communication skills affirm Native cultures through film, photography, music, writing, and teaching. He studied traditional Native flute music at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico with Professor Ed Wapp (Sac/Fox Commanche). He has performed and lectured in Japan, the UK, and across North America. His traditional music is available on a CD called Message From A Mohawk Child, and his photographs have appeared

in Nature Canada along with influential articles that contributed to the defeat of the James Bay Two Power project.

Although he did not prevent the Hydro Quebec scheme that diverted and destroyed the Rupert River, he carefully documented the struggles of the prophets of resistance, including Cree elder Diane Reid. At a 2003 press conference in Montreal, Danny said, "It was a great day for Mother Earth when Diane spoke for the remaining voices of native people trying to continue and restore values that keep in harmony with Creation. The plea and cry for Quebec's rivers was echoed in a peaceful, intelligent way by what I'd call one of the last strong, natural, beautiful, and potent voices for Traditional American Native justice. The Cree Nation should be proud to have a real spiritual leader among them that has been successful in defending their real culture and homeland for generations to come." He pointed out that the voice of Native women should be taken seriously in these times of chaos, strife, unrest, greed, and stupidity. The most important thing in our minds and hearts, he says, should be "our Sacred Mother Earth and her life-giving blood: rivers, lakes, streams, and oceans."

In addition to defending Canada's boreal forests, Danny has journeyed to South America to help protect the Sacred Amazon Rain Forests. There he saw bullet holes through the windows of environmental group offices in Ecuador; they had dared to challenge the power of oil corporations pillaging the Amazon rainforest. He went there to assist the Cofan Nation in their struggle to save Yasuni National Park from oil development. The park contains rare fresh water dolphins and the Giant Otter, and it is a treasure trove of diverse species. Danny exposed destructive practices of oil companies in the region, especially their failure to bury oil pipelines and the massive oil spills that polluted rivers. His remarkable work played an important role in the Cofan's victory against oil development in Yasuni National Park.

Since 1990, Danny Beaton has participated in gatherings of the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth, after being invited by Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons, Secretary of the Iroquois Confederacy. This grassroots coalition of spiritual elders from across North America gathers to maintain sacred ceremonies and traditional council. Through this involvement, Danny has worked with the Independent Seminole Nation in Florida to protect their sacred settlement remains. He also worked with the Apache Nation to protect sacred ceremonial lands on Mount Graham, which were threatened by a telescope project. The University of Toronto withdrew from this project as a result. In

1991 and 1992, Danny organized Indigenous Restoration events in Toronto, bringing together Native elders from across the Western hemisphere to highlight their struggles to defend Mother Earth. The gathering was made into a nationally televised film, and the events brought attention to the campaigns of the Haida and the Gwitch'in Nations to defend the ecology of their traditional territories. Despite enormous pressure from the State of Alaska and oil corporations, the Gwitch'in have defeated schemes to permit oil drilling in the caribou calving grounds of the Arctic National Refuge. At the Indigenous Restoration gathering, dedicated spokesperson Sarah James movingly performed the Caribou Skin Hot Dance.

The struggles of the Haida were celebrated in joyous dance and song, and Danny journeyed to Haida traditional territory to honor their culture and help their cause. Danny notes, "Sarah James has been trying to inform the public of her native land since 1988 when proposed oil drilling threatened the Porcupine Caribou herd and the






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Gwitch'in way of life. The Gwitch'in or Caribou People of Alaska depend on hunting, particularly the 130,000 strong Porcupine Caribou herd, for approximately 73% of their protein and calories as well as clothes, tools, and other life sustaining materials. For at least 10,000 years, the Gwitch'in have lived by hunting and conserving on a coastal plain bordering the Arctic Ocean, home to polar bears, rare birds, and musk ox, where caribou give birth to their young." The Gwitch'in's continuing struggle has allowed them to retain effective control of a vast traditional territory that straddles the border between the United States and Canada (an area the size of New England) despite repeated attempts by the US Congress to authorize drilling. For his devotion to the cause of protecting the environment, Danny Beaton was given the Canada 125 Award by the Governor-General of Canada in 1992.

Danny got involved in the struggle to save the world's purest water after doing some family camping on Georgian Bay, one of the most beautiful places he had ever encountered in his life. He spoke to elders about the wonders of Georgian Bay and the various threats it faces from ecological abuse. Wilmer Nadjiwon, former chief of the Chippewas of the Nawash, explained to him the fragility of the bay, noting that fisheries were mysteriously devastated one year, likely from the impact of leaking dumps. A Native fisherman, Andrew Akiwenzie, told him, "We used to have short haired algae; now it's long and slippery, [a kind] that the fish can't set their eggs

into. That change happened in the past 25 years. [This year we have] foam and bubbles on the water that was never here before; it's some form of pollution, and it goes on for miles. Its serious, yet nobody has done anything to clean it up."

In the summer of 2008, Danny Beaton became interested in the threat to Georgian Bay when Simcoe County made plans to build a dump on top of the world's purest water, which is used as a test sample for measuring water contamination. The unusual purity of this water, which Danny gathered from a roadside artesian well for his family, was not disputed. It was claimed that excavation for Dump Site 41 would cause no harm, though it was to be proceeded by pumping the water out. Although Simcoe County had abundant space in a number of landfills, it required every municipality within its jurisdiction to have a dump at the time. Danny wrote to the Ministry of the Environment requesting that they deny the permit to pump the water, but he was unsuccessful. This appeared to be the end of a 22-year struggle to stop Dump Site 41. Simcoe County said it was a done deal.

Aware of the importance of publicity to environmental victories around the world, Danny took action to increase media coverage of the issue. He organized a protest walk to Queen's Park from the dump site, modeled on his participation at Walk For The Water in Atlanta Georgia. As the first 75 walkers began the 8-day protest journey, a flock of 100 Canadian Geese flew overhead in V-formation along the course of

MacDonald Creek, which connects to the Wye Marsh, an important wildlife sanctuary.

Along the way, Danny Beaton and three remaining hikers encountered a fierce winter storm. He led the small party through the blizzard with the feathers on his sacred eagle staff blowing in the wind. During this time, he took heart upon seeing a Red Tailed Hawk, and the arrival of his partner Alicja Rozanska lifted his spirits. The protesters had marched along the Alliston Aquifer and the bedrock channel of the former St. Lawrence River both flowing underground from Elmvale to Barrie and into Toronto. The Alliston Aquifer was created by the sands of the vanished ancient Sunnybrook Lake, and provides fresh water to many communities along its length. Danny stopped to speak at Cardinal Carter High School in Aurora along the route, where waters from the Alliston Aquifer replenish the water tower next to the school. When the march finally reached the dump site, Danny reverently kissed the ground, expressing his love for Mother Earth and its waters beneath.

The Walk For Water did generate some publicity, including excellent CBC French television coverage of the 300-person rally at the end of the march, but it was not widely viewed. Danny took another step, organizing a press conference with Maude Barlow and Elizabeth May, two high profile environmentalists who would join Danny to protect the waters of Georgian Bay. In January 2009, Danny launched an online petition against Dump Site 41, reaching even more people and holding another press conference in March at Queens Park with native spiritual leaders, including Arnold Thomas (Shoshone from Utah) and Robertjohn Knapp (Seneca-Tobattaloma from California). Beaton pleaded for more Natives to join in the struggle, and on May 8th, five Ojibway women (led by their spokesperson Vicki Monague) launched a peaceful protest camp vigil across the road from the proposed dump site. Here, Danny camped out with the Ojibway, Métis, Wendat, Huron, Cree, Algonquin, Mohawk, and others who had come to join the cause. This symbolic presence, supported by local farmers and local citizens who gave help with their machinery, later turned into the peaceful blockade of Dump Site 41.

After a month of blockade and three months of peaceful occupation, the rape of the Alliston Aquifer was stopped thanks to the participation of Natives and non-Natives alike under the guidance of Danny Beaton. He has spent twenty years defending life and Mother Earth while giving students, teachers, elders, and the public a chance to unify for a greater good through rallies, concerts, films, speeches, articles, campaigns, demonstrations, and ceremonies. For these reasons, we honour his work and life as a Mohawk environmentalist, a Native activist, and a Human Being with this well-deserved Aboriginal

Achievement Award.

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