

National Mentorship Brings Connections and Benefits to Communities

“The mentorship is all about helping me learn and get better,” says Irene Gonneau of her time thus far as a research mentee at the National Indigenous Fisheries Institute (the Institute). “I am very grateful for the experience.”

Gonneau, a member of the Métis Nation of Ontario, says the mentorship is great because it is flexible and built around her abilities. With a Master’s degree in social work and strong research and analytical skills, she is also receiving assignments that are strengthening areas where she had little to no experience.

“When I first started, I didn’t know anything about fisheries, so it was a steep learning curve,” says Gonneau who is now a Junior Communications Writer and Research Assistant mentee at the Institute. While she felt out of her depth in the beginning, the mentorship has provided the encouragement and support to be able to become a valuable contributor. “The Institute welcomed my ideas and opinions that come from my ‘fresh set of eyes.’”

The National Indigenous Fisheries Institute promotes national consistency and standards across programs and practises related to fisheries, oceans, aquaculture, habitat and aquatic resource management. Its work is focused on maximizing the benefits of these programs and related activities for Indigenous communities across Canada.

“One way the members of our communities can benefit from fisheries and oceans programs is to have opportunities to learn about the issues and to work in real-life environments, under the guidance of persons with many years of experience,” says John G. Paul, Chair of the Institute’s Board of Directors. “Our mentorship program is one such opportunity.”

Participants in the mentorship work remotely, a challenge that is overcome with frequent communication and clear direction from the Institute’s mentor and the freedom for mentees to work independently. The flexibility of this working

arrangement is appealing to Gonneau, as is working remotely with people across the country. “That is really nice,” she says. “I find we all have in common a passion for Indigenous peoples and communities and the important role they play in our fisheries and oceans.”

The Institute’s mentorship has been an eye-opening experience in many respects says Keshia Moffat, a member of Ugpi’ganjig First Nation, which is located near the mouth of the Eel River on Chaleur Bay in northern New Brunswick. Moffat said she wasn’t aware how many First Nations communities there were in Canada. “BC alone has over 200 compared to 15 in New Brunswick.” She has also learned about the priorities of other Indigenous communities.

Moffat, who majored in science in university, is also the full-time Economic Development Officer for the Ugpi’ganjig. She did not have a lot of knowledge about



fisheries and oceans issues before the mentorship but thanks to the Institute’s resources and guidance from the mentor, Moffat has been able to dive in and learn what other communities are doing. This includes learning how to navigate government programs and their sometimes-confusing jargon, she says.

“My mentorship is helping my community become more aware of the programs available and I can now explain what they mean,” adds Moffat. “Giving back to my community is very important to me.”

For example, during her mentorship Moffat has learned about a community’s succession plan for fishery guardians and other Indigenous-led guardian programs that are empowering communities to manage ancestral lands according to traditional laws and values. Ugpi'ganjig has fishery guardians who make sure community members follow the proper protocols when fishing, as well as monitoring and weighing the catch. However, many of these guardians are ready to retire and there’s a need to help young people take their place. Based on this experience, Moffat now has a plan to bring to her Council. “What I really like is that my community job and my Institute mentorship are working hand in hand.”

The skills she is learning through the mentorship are also very transferrable to other areas of work. “I feel more confident now when doing any kind of research,” says Moffat.

“It’s a great experience.”

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